

Spiritual Discernment

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“HOW CAN I EXERCISE SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT ABOUT SPIRITUAL WARFARE AS I RELATE TO FRIENDS OF OTHER FAITHS?”

As followers of Jesus, we reflect His initiative when we move into the life of someone trapped in spiritual darkness. But we must do so with wisdom and dependence upon His powerful Spirit to protect us from spiritual dangers.

God’s Word teaches that Satan is the “ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:1-2). He has for a time been granted influence and authority on earth (Lk. 4:5-7). The Apostle Paul described Satan as “the god of this age [who] has blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Cor. 4:4).

The possibility of demonic influence is very real in other religions. But we need to void two extreme responses to this potential danger. The first is fearfully shunning all contact with people of other faiths. The second is underestimating the fierce spiritual battle for their souls. New Testament scholar Clinton E. Arnold summarizes this perspective:

“Spiritual warfare is an integral part of the entire Christian experience. To think that a Christian could avoid spiritual warfare is like imagining that a gardener could avoid dealing with weeds. Our goal should be rather to gain an accurate

and sober-minded understanding of spiritual warfare—not a view tainted by frightening experiences and odd practices.”

All outreach involves entering the world of another—just as Jesus left heaven to come into our world. Because He is greater than all evil spirits, we don't live in fear (1 Jn. 4:4). But we do exercise caution because we are not on spiritually “neutral” ground. Our initiative should include three important elements: prayer, caution, and teamwork.

GO IN PRAYER

Our friendships with unbelievers must be saturated with prayer. We need to ask God for discernment because we're entering unfamiliar territory, for protection from demonic influences, and for grace to respond as Paul did in Acts 17. Though he was “greatly distressed” by the spiritual darkness he saw, Paul still reasoned with the people (Acts 17:16-17). Because we may encounter spiritual warfare, we need to ask God to help us recognize demonic influence. Clinton E. Arnold's *Three Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Baker) is an excellent primer on this subject.

GO WITH CAUTION

Our friendships with people of other faiths may lead to situations

in which it's unclear what to do. For example, if a Hindu coworker agrees to come to church with us, should we go to her temple? Should we go with a friend to offer incense before a statue of the Buddha? How are we to discern what's acceptable and what isn't? In my years of travel overseas, I have identified an important principle that helps me answer such questions: The degree to which I enter my neighbor's world must never compromise my commitment to worship and serve the Lord God exclusively. Two areas of religious expression in particular deserve our attention: prayer and worship.

PRAYER. We should exercise special caution in prayer. For example, Hindus often chant mantras: a specific word repeated over and over in meditative prayer. These words might seem harmless, but some mantras are actually the names of Hindu deities. Chanting them invites demonic influence. Never recite mantras or other any prayers you cannot understand.

WORSHIP. A second area of caution pertains to worship. I can go with my friend to his mosque, but I can't affirm that "Mohammed is the prophet of God." That phrase sets Mohammed above Jesus Christ. I can act respectfully in a Hindu temple, but I never bow or light incense, which are acts of worship. When we have questions about a certain religious

practice, we need to ask ourselves, “Does this practice constitute worship?” If so, we must decline participation politely and respectfully. But we should also be quick to extend grace to non-Christian friends who refuse our invitations because of similar religious convictions.

GO WITH OTHERS

Finally, evangelizing people of other faiths is not a job for lone rangers. When we enter another religious context, we enter a world of conflict. At best, we’ll find theological conflict. At worst, we’re stepping into a place occupied by demonic spirits. We need the support of our believing friends. Such support might be as simple as asking someone to pray for wisdom, discernment, and protection as you have a nonbeliever over for dinner. Or invite a believing friend to join you. Together, you can ask questions and gain understanding. Whether you actually go with someone or have a friend praying for you elsewhere, teamwork offers important spiritual protection.

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