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## Special Education as Spiritual Warfare

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## Special Education as Spiritual Warfare

### Abstract

This article reflects on a theology of exceptionalities and the hermeneutics of special education, and develops the notion that there is an aspect of special education which can be understood as spiritual warfare. The main thesis is that providing access to an appropriate and least restrictive education for people with disabilities involves “demolishing strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4): removing barriers of ignorance, prejudice, stereotype, cultural mythology, and misconception as to disability and the personal worth surrounding individuals who have disabilities. The discussion is situated within the context of Nicholas Wolterstorff’s work on teaching for shalom (2002, 2004). After defining the biblical concept of shalom and its relationship to education, the Christian’s involvement in spiritual warfare is examined. Special education is then expressed as an aspect of spiritual warfare with implications drawn regarding inclusive programs and practices that promote reconciliation and recognition of interdependence, thereby encouraging shalom in the educational community.

## Special Education as Spiritual Warfare

David Anderson

**Summary:** This article reflects on a theology of exceptionalities and the hermeneutics of special education, and develops the notion that there is an aspect of special education which can be understood as spiritual warfare. The main thesis is that providing access to an appropriate and least restrictive education for people with disabilities involves “demolishing strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4): removing barriers of ignorance, prejudice, stereotype, cultural mythology, and misconception as to disability and the personal worth surrounding individuals who have disabilities. The discussion is situated within the context of Nicholas Wolterstorff’s work on teaching for shalom (2002, 2004). After defining the biblical concept of shalom and its relationship to education, the Christian’s involvement in spiritual warfare is examined. Special education is then expressed as an aspect of spiritual warfare with implications drawn regarding inclusive programs and practices that promote reconciliation and recognition of interdependence, thereby encouraging shalom in the educational community.

### Background: Teaching for Shalom

#### 1

The Stapleford Centre’s 2006 Annual Theory of Education Conference had as its theme “Teaching for Shalom,” in response to the writings of Nicholas Wolterstorff (2002, 2004) who posited shalom as the goal of Christian education. Shalom, often narrowly understood to mean ‘peace’ in the sense of absence of conflict, is a very rich biblical concept descriptive of completeness or wholeness – a well-being characterized by right, or harmonious, relationships with God, oneself, others, and all of creation (cf. Conn & Ortiz, 2001; Schaefer, 1996; Wolterstorff, 2002, 2004). Shalom reflects the wholeness and togetherness which God intended (Graham, 2003). The significance of the biblical term is heightened in the psalms and prophetic writings of the Old Testament, where shalom expresses “the fulfillment that comes to human beings when they experience God’s presence” (Richards, 1991, p.

479). The New Testament equivalent of shalom, *eirene*, carries a similar richness of meaning, especially connoting restoration and relationship as barriers which separate us from God and each other are replaced with unity in and through Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:14-17; 1 Corinthians 14:33; Colossians 3:12-15).

Whether or not we agree that shalom provides an adequate foundation to, or goal of education that is Christian, we can probably all agree with Harro Van Brummelen’s (2002) assertion that schools ought to be about nurturing shalom: “the biblical peace, justice, and righteousness that heals and restores broken relations with God, with other humans, with self, with other creatures, and with nature” (p. 62). He continued:

To experience shalom schools seek to replace abuse, racism, sexism, and bullying with love and justice. They honor all students and teachers for their gifts and roles. They replace selfishness and faith in the autonomy of the individual with self-sacrifice, humility, and servanthood. (p. 62)

To Van Brummelen’s list of what needs to be replaced we need to add handicapism – “the assumptions and practices that promote the unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental, or behavioral differences” (Smart, 2001, pp. 144-145). This has led to disabled persons being devalued and segregated, and often to an attitude of social benevolence in which those who are temporarily able-bodied view the disabled as objects of pity rather than individuals to be respected.

We live in times when shalom is missing from our lives, families, nations, the world as a whole – even from many churches. Many look to education for the answer to the problems of living in the 21st century. Christians, however, would be quick to say that answers – and shalom – can only come through Christ,

making Christ-centered education crucial, and making it essential that educators who are Christian act as peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) to promote shalom in the individual classroom and throughout the school community: the lives of the administrators, board members, teachers, staff, students, and their collective families.

## Spiritual Warfare

Understanding spiritual warfare is necessary before we can explore its connection with special education. Although Christians acknowledge that sin is the reason for the absence of shalom, many evangelical Christians, especially in Western culture, focus more prominently on the individual, and the need for each person to “get right with God” through confession and repentance. Without denying the need for accepting Christ into one’s life, to focus solely on an individual’s personal salvation causes us to lose sight of the spiritual conflict that continues to exist in the world. While we may recognize that some problems in our individual lives may be attributable to Satan (“the devil made me do it”), many do not understand the reality of spiritual conflict nor appreciate the Christian’s role in that battle. To speak of spiritual warfare conjures up for many Western Christians ideas of demonization and exorcism. In fact, these are but a small part of the cosmic conflict between God and satanic forces that has filled history since Satan was cast out of heaven (Isaiah 14:12-15). Tony Evans (1998) defined spiritual warfare as “that conflict being waged in the invisible, spiritual realm that is being manifest in the visible, physical realm” (p. 18); a battle that affects all of us. He described the impact of spiritual warfare as something seen and felt in individual lives, families, culture, and even churches. While it is important that we avoid “spiritualistic reductionism” (Chan, 1998), which would suggest a demonic explanation behind every problem, it is equally important that Christians maintain an awareness that, as followers of Jesus, we are caught up in that spiritual battle.

Satan’s basic warfare strategy is deception. This is seen in his interaction with Eve in the Garden of Eden: “Did God say . . .? Did God really say . . .?” Through his deception, he is able to confuse and cause us to question – in the case of Eve, to question God’s motivation: “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your

eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4-5). Then Eve “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom” (Genesis 3:6).

In Ephesians 6:11, Paul said that the devil uses ‘schemes’ to deceive us. The Greek word is *methodeia*, literally meaning ‘traveling over’ – one gets the image of trampling upon something with the intent to damage or destroy. The word connotes travesty or treachery; purpose behind the devil’s actions. Paul warns that we must not allow Satan to outwit us since “we are not unaware of his schemes” (2 Corinthians 2:11). Here Paul uses a different Greek word, *noema*, variously translated as schemes, devices, or thoughts, clearly conveying motivation or intentionality in Satan’s actions.

Satan operates today in essentially the same fashion as with Eve: twisting God’s words to confuse or delude; questioning the meaning of, or motivation behind God’s words; getting us to focus on what we do not have, or to ask the often unanswerable question “why?” Satan does not hold to the truth, we are told, for there is no truth in him: “When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). We learn from the Bible that Satan is a master of deception, out to deceive the entire world (Revelation 12:9). Indeed, we are told that “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). The counterfeit views of truth that Satan encourages include atheism, relativism, materialism, pantheism, animism, scientific-rationalism, humanism, and individualism. Following the lie, people determine their own self-image, their own meaning, their own value – often at the expense of others, leading to racism, ethnocentrism, “superior-ism,” and handicapism wherein they also assign meaning and value (or the lack thereof) to others.

Jesus asserted that the thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). Satan, the consummate thief, seeks to destroy the perfection which God created – to keep things in a chaotic state, like the “without form and void” of Genesis 1:1, words which refer to a wasteland, worthless confusion, emptiness, or indistinguishable ruin. Satan seeks to destroy God’s image by “stealing” our mind and body; to kill our spirit and soul; to hold us captive unto himself as part of a rival kingdom he seeks to establish. Satan seeks to kill or destroy our

spirit, our hope, or any semblance of shalom (spiritual or otherwise) we enjoy. It is in this light that Jesus announced the purpose of his ministry in Luke 4: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (vv. 18-19).

Writing extensively about the cosmic warfare motif found in the Bible, Greg Boyd (1997) pointed out that nearly everything that we read in the New Testament about Jesus and the early church revolves around “the central conviction that the world is caught in the crossfire of a cosmic battle between the Lord and his angelic army and Satan and his demonic army” (p. 72). Ephesians 6:10-20, perhaps the most well known passage regarding our “struggle” against the devil’s schemes, is understood by many as primarily defensive: donning God’s armor in order to “stand” against Satan’s attacks. But I believe our commission also involves offensive action: Spiritual warfare is something in which we are to be actively engaged, reclaiming in the name of Jesus territory which Satan has occupied.

Paul said, “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

The weapons with which we fight are God’s weapons: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer (Ephesians 6:14-18), all wielded with love and compassion in the name of Jesus Christ. These weapons, brandished through right doctrine and right living, have divine might; literally, they are “mighty through God.” The power by which we wage this military conflict is not our own, but God’s. And through it, we pull down – we destroy or extinguish – “strongholds” that the spiritual forces of evil have helped people to erect: castles or fortresses in which people have become entrenched, mind sets that hold people hostage believing that they are “hopelessly locked in a situation,” powerless to change (Evans, 1998, p. 71). The strongholds to be demolished include thought patterns or ideas that cloud people’s reasoning, leading some to believe themselves to be above God, or

to a self-centered lifestyle, or to become entrenched in feelings of hopelessness. The most dangerous strongholds are “those which are so hidden in our thinking patterns that we do not recognize them nor identify them as evil” (Frangipane, 1989, p. 32). Many of these develop as a result of information and experiences of everyday life, the conclusions we draw from them, or the interpretation which we and others assign to them. Ephesians 2:1-3 describes unregenerate life as “following the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air” and “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” – or in the words of Chan (1998), the world (sin around us), the devil (sin beyond us), and the flesh (sin within us). Francis Frangipane (1989) simply identified the strongholds which keep people captive as “the lies the devil has sown into our thought processes which, as we accepted and believed them, became reality to us” (p. 100) leading people to define reality from their own perspective and their own “truth,” rather than God’s. Demolishing and removing these old ways of thinking amounts to pulling down strongholds.

### **Special Education as Spiritual Warfare**

How does this relate to special education? Satan’s greatest lie is that God does not care. He attacks God’s love, justice, caring, compassion, and integrity – just as he did when speaking with Eve. He encourages the mythological and superstitious thinking about disability and disabled persons that is common among people in developing nations, and often lies beneath the surface in the thinking of people in more advanced nations. He convinces people that weakness is just ‘the way things are’ or that disability must be the result of a curse or one’s sin or the sin of one’s parents. Or he causes people to view those with disabilities as insignificant, less than human, “throwaway” people. He even convinces disabled persons to see themselves this way, especially in cultures which overly emphasize strength, ability, achievement, beauty, and youth. Satan would rather our focus remain on the disability, the limitations caused by the handicapping condition, that which the individual cannot do or do well. This keeps individuals with the disability “bound” in negativity, both in their own self-understanding and in society’s view of them as individuals in need of pity. Satan stands against Christ; he is “anti-love, anti-forgiveness, anti-reconciliation” (Frangipane, 1989). He is anti-shalom. His desire is that humankind wallows in indi-

vidualism, competitiveness, and separation; trapped in feelings of insignificance, weakness, envy, or depression. Satan wants us to remain captive in his lies and deception. But in Jesus there is light and truth, life and freedom. His focus is on what God desires: community, interdependence, relationship, and connectedness: shalom, with God, ourselves, and others.

Efforts to promote disability awareness and ministry in churches, and to provide access to an appropriate education for people with disabilities, is engaging in spiritual warfare with the goal of freeing the captives and releasing the oppressed. Jesus said in Mark 3:27, “no one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man.” With even greater emphasis, Jesus stated in Luke 11:21-22, “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils.” Jesus has entered the strong man’s (Satan’s) house and has overpowered and bound him. Christian special educators are now among those commissioned by the Lord to plunder the strong man’s possessions. Ours is a rescue mission authorized by Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). But to see that rescue mission as simply “saving souls” reflects a limited view of Jesus’ mission and the task with which his followers are charged: to do our part to create a God-centered community that offers salvation, health, physical care, nurturing, economic support, reconciliation, restoration – in short, shalom.

Redemption and reconciliation are among Satan’s worst fears. He seeks to frustrate God’s work, to prevent salvation from occurring, to make believers ineffective – all with the goal of keeping people in bondage. Jesus came to destroy the work of the devil (I John 3:8). Those who seek to bring about redemption and reconciliation, who play a role in God’s restoration of all things to that which he originally intended, are Satan’s enemies. As God has sent Jesus, so he sends us (John 20:21): with the same purpose as stated in the Luke 4 passage referred to above. Our mission, as individual Christians and as a body of believers, is to further the work of restoration which Jesus began and has authorized and empowered us to do (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). As Christian special educators, we break down the walls that separate people from Christ, from one another, from society, from becoming

“whole” through Christ. We seek to restore people whom society and even families have cast aside. We seek to bring shalom – wholeness and well-being; healing in the biblical sense which brings reconciliation with God, with others, and with one’s self. We work with people who have been dispossessed of the truth as to who they are, and may have become convinced that they are worthless or that God is either powerless to help or does not care about them. In our work with disabled children and youth, with their families, with their peers in the classroom, and with our colleagues in education our goal is to promote shalom.

Even if done only for humanitarian reasons, special education still has elements of spiritual warfare in that it challenges the “darkness” of societal ignorance and prejudice that keeps disabled individuals in bondage to the limited views – of others and of themselves – as to who they are and what they may become. But as Christian special educators, we do not work solely from a humanistic or social agenda. Rather, we do what we do because of the conviction that people with disabilities are fully human beings, created in the image of God and loved by God just as are those who are temporarily able-bodied. Our calling to be special educators is based on biblical teaching regarding the image of God, sin, love, reconciliation, and relationships. These teachings both help us in understanding human needs and behavior and guide us in structuring classrooms which can promote among students – disabled and non disabled – a feeling of being valued, safe, connected, and cared for (Anderson, 2005).

### **Implications for Practice**

Understanding special education as spiritual warfare does not imply that our approach to children and youth who have disabilities should be characterized by prayer for divine healing or casting out demons. Nor does this view necessarily open doors to new approaches or strategies for teaching. But viewing the work of the special educator within the framework of spiritual warfare contributes to a hermeneutic of special education and a theology of exceptionality. It places special education firmly within the realm of Christian ministry, even if done in a secular school where direct presentation of the gospel message is prohibited. The integration of faith and practice, and a biblical rationale for certain practices – inclusion, for example – become clearer. The classroom is rec-

ognized as a battlefield in which we seek to demolish “strongholds” of ignorance, intolerance, and inaccurate and demeaning stereotypes related to disability and disabled persons. These attitudinal barriers can be more difficult to eliminate than architectural impediments to independence and access for people with disabilities. Such strongholds can hold a person who is disabled in deeper bondage than the crippling effect of severe cerebral palsy or spinal cord injury, and necessitate efforts on the part of the Christian special educator to help the individual reconfigure his or her self-understanding as fully human and as having infinite worth as one who is the image of the Creator, loved and redeemed by Jesus, regardless of being disabled. I will briefly highlight three implications of this view of special education: peacemaking, reconciliation, and interdependence. The interrelatedness of the three should be readily apparent.

### **Peacemaking**

Jillian Lederhouse (1999) posited that the opposite of peace is not war, but fear. To become a peacemaker, therefore, teachers must create a classroom and school community in which the child’s experience is one of safety and security. Children and youth with disabilities may face many fears: Will I be accepted or teased? How will I be viewed by the teacher and my peers? Will I be able to succeed, academically and socially? Will I be able to maintain some degree of “control” in this situation? Will I be embarrassed or humiliated by my teacher, my peers, or my disability? Can I keep my disability hidden, thus protecting what little self-worth I feel?

To some extent, we all – disabled or temporarily able-bodied – have experienced similar feelings in our own schooling; perhaps still, every time we enter a new situation. But for students with a clearly visible disabling condition, how they are seen and treated by their non disabled peers and teachers, and how they perceive themselves in the classroom, can lead to fear-filled days. To promote shalom, the teachers must structure the classroom in a way that it neither reflects nor endorses a culture of individualism, thus fostering a competitive spirit which can disrupt shalom. Instead, they must promote a culture of community which fosters a sense of belonging, a major part of which is shalom.

### **Reconciliation**

Clifford DeYoung (1997), speaking within the context of racial relationships, suggested three elements to the meaning of reconciliation: (a) being put into friendship with God and each other, (b) radical change and transformation of a relationship, and (c) restoration of harmony. This clearly relates to shalom as defined in this paper. Elsewhere (Anderson, 2003), I have explored the theme of special education as reconciliation. I will not reproduce that discussion here, but only repeat the point that reconciliation is needed between the person with the disability and his or her family, peers, and society in general if the classroom (and the world) is to promote true inclusivity. Roadblocks which lead to marginalization of persons with disabilities in school and society (including churches) must be removed. “Through reconciliation and acceptance of all people within the classroom, comes restoration of right relationships. From this comes resurrection of the spirit, leading to hope in place of exclusion, and a feeling of being valued rather than rejected” (Anderson, 2003, p. 33).

### **Interdependence**

A “theology of interdependence” provides insight into the inclusive culture which we wish to establish in the classroom (Anderson, 2006). A school culture based on a theology of interdependence builds on the concept of reconciliation in which disabled and non disabled persons are brought together in true community. The basic idea is that we need one another; that we can learn from one another, regardless of ability or disability; and that what each person does will have an affect on the lives of others, particularly within more close-knit communities such as families and classrooms.

A theology of interdependence honors the value of all individuals, not by what they do, but by who they are, recognizing that each and every person contributes to the community by being, not by doing. Interdependence acknowledges not only our dependence on God and one another, but also God’s dependence on us to be agents of God’s healing compassion in the world. (Black, 1996, p. 42)

Creating a classroom which models a theology of interdependence requires rethinking what it means to be a human being and the concepts of normalcy, commu-

nity, and belonging. Seeing students with disabilities as “outsiders” who need to be brought in underscores difference and raises thoughts of dependency, inadequacy, and unworthiness. A theology of interdependence helps us see difference as an ordinary ingredient of our world and allows us to abandon the idea that students must become “normal,” or earn their way into the regular classroom. When we speak of inclusion, we mean more than simply creating a space for the student who has a disability. Rather, we mean creating a community in which all the students feel valued, safe, connected, and cared for; in other words, a community of shalom.

## Conclusion

The logical implications of the biblical view espoused in this paper lend strength to what we currently accept as best practice in special education. Such approaches as collaborative teaching, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, and focusing on strengths and needs of all students take on new meaning within the context of spiritual warfare and shalom.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy but Jesus came that we may have life “to the full” (John 10:10). Christian special educators are Jesus’ hands and feet and voice in bringing hope to the students they serve. Spiritual warfare is a lifestyle. The battles will be many, but the ultimate victory is assured. We go with confidence that the strong man has been bound as we plunder his house, demolish strongholds, and set the captives free in the power of Christ. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon (1989) held that Christians are to be “examples of God’s determination to bring the world back into a right relation to its Creator – which finally is what peace is all about” (p. 66). This seems particularly applicable to Christian special educators.

Donovan Graham (2003) suggested several ways in which our behavior as redeemed image bearers should make a difference in our world: healing – physical illness, psychological suffering, social isolation, etc.; reconciliation – seeking to remove enmity and promote harmony; renewal; deliverance – from things which hold power over people such as drugs, poverty, and various forms of oppression; justice – in the way people deal with one another; and peace – dwelling in harmony with God, others, self, and the world; the wholeness and togetherness which God intended. “Our

calling,” he concluded, “is to demonstrate our citizenship in the kingdom of God while existing in a place where Satan is still at work even though his defeat has already been assured” (Graham, 2003, p. 114). Special education is spiritual warfare, the essence of which deals with the question “who will define reality?” (Frangipane, 1989). To make shalom present in the classroom – to bring shalom into the lives of the disabled students we teach – means challenging the world’s concept of “reality,” in this case, the reality of disability and the ability of those who are disabled.

## Endnotes

1 Held at The Hayes Christian Conference Centre, Swanick, Derbyshire, England, January 6-8, 2006.

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