

Confronting the Devil

by Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator



I watched a lot of television as a teenager in the 1970s—some would say too much! One program I remember quite well was *The Flip Wilson Show*. One of Wilson’s best-known characters was Geraldine Jones. Whenever Geraldine would confess a transgression, she would excuse herself with the phrase, “The Devil made me do it!” It always brought a big laugh. It seems the Devil kept quite busy with Geraldine.

What’s your view of Satan? C.S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters*, states:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight. (p. 17)

The New Testament seems to take the concept very seriously. Luke Timothy Johnson explains,

The New Testament’s extensive language concerning malevolent spiritual forces is never humorous. The terminology varies – some texts speak of the Devil or Satan, others of demons or unclean spirits, of powers and principalities, the Ruler of the Power of the Air, the Dragon and Ancient Serpent – but taken together, these terms point to a conviction, broadly shared by the writers of the New Testament, that a cosmic power, lesser than God but greater than humans alone, inhabited the world and worked against human good in a manner that was anything but comic or quaint. (Commonweal, 9/26/2011)

Unlike Geraldine, I don’t blame the Devil when I say a bad word or eat an extra cookie. I don’t think the Devil is responsible for my poor decisions on a daily basis. But I do find myself drawn to texts such as Ephesians 6:12, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the

authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

How else can you explain the African slave trade, the Trail of Tears, and the Holocaust? Yes, greedy, sinful human beings were complicit and responsible, but when thousands cooperate to execute evil on such a scale, something else must be going on. As Johnson explains, “there exist powers, at work in and through humans yet commanding a superhuman blind energy, that labor not for the good, but for the destruction of humans and of all human beauty and grace.”

I see the “powers and principalities” at work today in racism, sexism, corporate greed, and mass gun violence. I see the Devil creating conditions of violence and poverty that cause people to leave their homes and migrate to places where they are not welcome. I see the Evil One at work creating addictions to drugs, alcohol, gambling, and sex.

How do we confront the Devil? First, we’ve got to admit the Devil is real. There are malevolent powers at work in the world, stronger than human beings, actively opposing the will and ways of our good and gracious God. Second, we must work together to oppose these powers, to attack them not only where they strike individuals, but also in the institutions and structures that support them, including, when appropriate, our own churches.

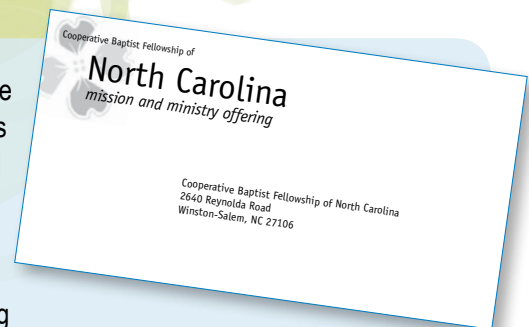
To do this work, we need super-human resources. Ephesians 6 describes these resources as “the whole armor of God.” Ultimately, only the power of the Holy Spirit harnessed through the courageous, collective efforts of the people of God can defeat the Devil and stop oppression, injustice, and violence.

Harnessing that power begins with prayer and issues forth in courageous action. May God give us eyes to see and courage to act.

The stakes are too high for us not to confront the Devil. It’s no laughing matter.

Mission & Ministry Offering Envelopes

While church budget support provides the bulk of the resources to finance CBFNC’s ministries, individual contributions are a vital source of funding. Envelopes are provided in this issue of *the gathering*. Please consider giving to CBFNC’s annual *Mission and Ministry Offering*, either by mailing a check in this envelope, or via credit card on our website, www.cbfnc.org. We are grateful for all gifts regardless of the amount.



To order additional envelopes to distribute in your church, call (888) 822-1944.