

## Commodity or Right? Going On Offensive for Health Care

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Reading the pep talk at the end of Ephesians, one could get the impression that the Christian game plan is all defense.

The writer (or writers) of this epistle, penned in the name of the Apostle Paul, tells members of the company of Christ that they should put on the "whole armor of God" and then adds "so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

Sounds like a defensive strategy to me.

And that's confirmed by most of the rest of this concluding section of the letter. (See Ephesians 6:10-17) There's reference, for example, to putting on the breastplate of righteousness, fastening the belt of truth as well as using the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation.

One can suppose that the defensive tactic being proposed here is specific to the particular battle being fought: not, on this occasion, by the enemies made of flesh and blood, which in Jesus' ministry were real and serious enough, but "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of the present evil age, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12)

Against these enemies an offensive strategy won't work. Just rely on defense in these circumstances.

Doesn't that resonate in some ways with our contemporary circumstances?

OK, I grant that in the current health care debate we are, in the end, talking about the enemies of "flesh and blood" – that is, about what kind of health care system and its financing will allow us to fight the forces of disease, the enemies that are as real as the H1N1 flu virus that could kill millions of human beings across the globe, including our own country, before the end of this year.

And yet it is hard to avoid the conclusion that something larger, more powerful and systemic, almost cosmic and spiritual, is at stake.

At issue fundamentally is whether the flesh-and-blood matters of health and health care are to be treated as commodities upon which corporate profits are to be gained, even if the supposed commodity of health can't be secured by all, or can't be secured by millions of people.

Or, alternatively, are the flesh-and-blood matters of health and health care to be treated as something so essential that all human beings must have it as a necessary condition of their very humanity and their participation in the human community.

That seems to me to be pretty systemic (having to do with rules and rulers, with authority and authorities) and maybe even cosmic. Depending on which side you come down on, there are understandings of the reality of evil itself at stake.

Sadly, from my own Christian perspective at least, most of the debate going on right now is not between those who understand health to be a commodity that can be bought and sold for financial gain versus those who understand health to be an essential dimension of human existence whatever the cost.

Rather, the current debate seems to be largely taking place among those who have already chosen to treat health as a commodity, with the contending issues confined to what limitations ought to apply to the profit-making so that more health consumers can purchase the health care commodity.

The question, then, if I've got the terms of the current debate right, is whether the defensive strategy outlined at the end of Ephesians is sufficient.

Can Christians simply engage in a strategy of self-protection against the spiritual forces of evil operating in our current age? Or have I not done justice to the passage from Ephesians?

There is, after all, reference to putting on shoes that will make Christians ready "to proclaim the gospel of peace." (Ephesians 6:15) And just two verses later, we are told to take up "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Ephesians 6:17)

To be sure, running to proclaim a gospel of peace seems to be in tension with wielding a sword of the Spirit, but that gospel of peace has its grounding in the word of God – a word, a truth, a reality about a God who is not self-protective or defensive, but goes on offense to love and care for, to reconcile and redeem, a divided and diseased and dying world.

That's more than sufficient to make me believe that a defensive strategy is not enough for the company of Christ today. Against all of those who continue to believe spiritually that health is a commodity to be bartered, it's time for us, with the sword of the Spirit, to go on the offensive.

Perhaps, when it comes to contesting the forces of evil arrayed against our humanity and our relationship with God and one another, when it comes not only to our own flesh-and-blood matters, but to those of our fellows as well, especially the weaker among them, we need to be on the offensive, even at the risk of being offensive.