

INTRODUCTION: OLD SCRATCH

On Monday nights you'll find me in prison.

From 6:30 to 8:30 every Monday evening, my friend Herb Patterson and I lead a Bible study for about fifty inmates at the maximum-security French-Robertson Unit, just north of Abilene, Texas. After greeting the “Men in White” (inmates in Texas prisons wear all white) with hugs and small talk, during which I get to practice rudimentary Spanish greetings with the Hispanic men, we start the study with a prayer. Herb usually leads it.

A few years ago in the middle of his prayer Herb made a petition. “And Lord, protect us from Old Scratch . . .”

This caught my attention. Old Scratch? Who was Old Scratch? What was Herb talking about?

As soon as the prayer ended and we all lifted our heads, I asked aloud, “Herb, who is Old Scratch?”

Herb was incredulous. How was it possible that I didn't know who Old Scratch was? But looking around the room, none of the men in the study seemed to know who Old Scratch was either. We were all in the dark.

So Herb explained, “Old Scratch is the Devil.”

I later learned that Old Scratch, as a colloquialism for the Devil, was a nickname that originated in England and was common in the last century in New England and the Southern United States.

Herb is a generation older than I am, and he grew up in the South, so during his childhood he regularly heard the Devil called “Old Scratch.” Some think that the name Old Scratch originated from the Old Norse word *skratte* referring to a wizard or goblin. Attentive readers of literature might recall encountering Old Scratch in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Aunt Polly describes Tom Sawyer as being “full of the Old Scratch” because of Tom’s rebellious and mischievous ways. And in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, during the visions of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Scrooge overhears a conversation describing his death: “Old Scratch has got his own at last.”

This is a book about Old Scratch. More specifically, this is a book about what some Christians call “spiritual warfare,” about what it might mean to “do battle” with the Devil. As we know, the Bible is full of admonitions about how to deal with Old Scratch:

“Get behind me, Satan!”

“Resist the Devil and he will flee from you.”

“Watch out! Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

“Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.”

And in what is perhaps ground zero for all spiritual warfare talk, the Book of Ephesians, chapter six and verse twelve, in the grand tones of the King James Version:

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

So watch out for Old Scratch!

Which is why Herb prayed the prayer that he did.

But here’s the problem: the Devil has fallen on hard times. Not in TV shows or Hollywood movies—our screens are still filled with stories of the Devil and demon possession. From the classic *The Exorcist* to the recent spat of *Paranormal Activity* films, as a cultural icon Old Scratch is still very much with us.

But the Devil as an object of belief? Not so much. More and more, Christians, to say nothing about our increasingly secular society, just don't believe in the Devil, at least not in any personal or literal sense.

For example, a 2009 survey conducted by the Barna Group found that 40 percent of the Christians surveyed strongly agreed with the statement that the Devil "is not a living being but is a symbol of evil." That's right, four out of ten Christians don't believe in the Devil. And an additional two of ten Christians surveyed said that they "somewhat agree" that the Devil isn't a literal being. Another 8 percent said they weren't sure.¹

If you're keeping score, those results suggest that the *majority* of Christians don't believe in the literal existence of the Devil.

What's happened to Old Scratch?

The reasons, I think, are pretty obvious.

We're living in an increasingly modern, scientific, technological, and therefore more *skeptical* age. Faith is harder for us. Doubt fills our pews. And books about living with doubt fill the shelves of Christian bookstores. Many Christians are losing their belief in God, so when you look at the To-Do List of Belief, endorsing the existence of the Prince of Darkness seems pretty far down the list. To say nothing about spooky things like demon possession. When it comes to faith, we've got bigger fish to fry.

And talking about the Devil is more and more awkward and embarrassing these days—talking about demons around the workplace water-cooler is like telling a story about ghosts, alien abductions, or Bigfoot. It sounds crazy.

We're living in what Charles Taylor calls a "secular age," and this secular age is "disenchanted."² Our ancestors, by contrast, lived

1. "Most American Christians Do Not Believe That Satan or the Holy Spirit Exist." Barna Group. Web. 11 Dec. 2015.

2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2007).

in an “enchanted” world—and this was the world of the Bible—a world filled with magic, spirits, and supernatural powers. The Devil makes sense in an enchanted world.

But less so in our world. Science, technology, and electrical lighting have illuminated the dark, superstitious corners of our world, banishing all that was occult and spooky. Our secular age is *dis*-enchanted—full of wonder and awe, to be sure, but no longer spooky. Like the surveys point out, it’s harder for us to believe in Old Scratch.

Doubt and disenchantment isn’t the only problem with talking about Old Scratch. We also worry about harm. Many liberal and progressive Christians, from the mainline Protestant traditions to post-fundamentalist Christians, have left the church of their youth in search of a more loving, inclusive, and intellectually respectable Christianity. And they worry about the potential for abuse and demonization when Christians talk about the Devil and demons. People have been psychologically scarred by abusive deliverance ministries or by churches where deliverance and exorcism are regularly practiced. It can mess with your head to be told you’ve been possessed by demons, and far too often the language of spiritual warfare has been used to demonize other human beings.

The trouble with the Devil is that we see him in the faces of those we hate, justifying our violence toward them. We don’t need to rehash this long and dark history, for we all know how the Devil has been used to scapegoat despised and marginalized groups. We always smell sulfur around those we wish to kill.

Having seen “spiritual warfare” used over and over as a tool of hatred and abuse, we want to put as much distance between ourselves and Old Scratch as possible. In the hands of human beings, talk about the Devil or spiritual warfare is just too dangerous. So let’s keep our focus on the love, mercy, and grace of God, we think. When it comes to the Devil, prudence and the weight of Christian history suggest that it’s best to just keep our mouths shut.

And lastly, to put the point rather bluntly, given our doubts and disenchantment the Devil just seems irrelevant to many of us, especially if our main job is to love other people. You don't need to believe in demon possession to practice the Golden Rule. You don't need to believe in spooky stuff to be a good person, let alone a good Christian.

And so you can, perhaps, appreciate the predicament of this book. Here is a book about Old Scratch for an audience who doesn't believe in the Devil and who thinks it would be best to avoid any talk about him.

And yet, here we are. This *is* a book about Old Scratch, and unapologetically so, a book about spiritual warfare written for a skeptical and worried audience. That's because I think it is absolutely essential that doubting and disenchanted Christians recover and invest in a theology of spiritual warfare. We need to talk more about Old Scratch. A lot more. I hope to show you why. But we've lost the ability to talk about the Devil. Or never had it in the first place. So introductions seem to be in order.

I'd like to introduce you to Old Scratch.

Now to be fair, doubting and disenchanted Christians haven't wholly ignored the Devil or the topic of spiritual warfare. We all know how often the Bible talks about the Devil. And while that spooky stuff might make the Bible awkward in light of our doubts, we feel obligated to do *something* with all that talk about the Devil and demons in Scripture. Consequently, in Part 1 of this book I will describe how many Christians have tended to approach the subject of spiritual warfare in light of their doubts and worries. These Christians, and I count myself among them, tend to create a very justice-oriented and politicized vision of spiritual warfare, all with good biblical justification. Our battle, to quote Ephesians 6 again, is against "the principalities and powers," and we take these powers to be the systemic forces of oppression and injustice in the world. In the hands of many doubting and disenchanted Christians, *spiritual warfare*—battling against the forces of darkness in the world—is synonymous with *social justice*.

And these insights will be critically important for readers who *do* believe in Old Scratch but who think about spiritual warfare almost exclusively terms of demon possession and exorcism. As I hope to show you, that narrow focus on possession and exorcism misses the heart of our battle with the Devil as it is described in the Bible.

There's a whole lot in the Bible that backs up the connection between spiritual warfare and social justice. And yet, there are problems here as well. When spiritual warfare is reduced to a political struggle for justice, a whole lot of other stuff gets left out. A lot of very important stuff. For example, a purely political vision of spiritual warfare often winds up in a very dark place. When we're fighting against oppressors in the world we have to remember the famous warning from Friedrich Nietzsche: "Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster." That's some of the irony with doubting and disenchanted Christians who refuse to talk about spiritual warfare because they worry it leads to dehumanization. Because Old Scratch, he's a slippery one! Dehumanization isn't so easy to avoid. As the Bible says, the Devil comes to us as an angel of light.

So in Part 2 we'll talk about all the reasons that a purely political vision of spiritual warfare is inadequate and often dangerous. I'll point out all the reasons why we need to start talking more about Old Scratch.

And that will bring us to Part 3, where I will (re-)introduce you to Old Scratch. I'll sketch out a way of talking about the Devil that will widen the view of those who do believe in the Devil as well as help doubting and disenchanted Christians get over our awkwardness in talking about Old Scratch. Because in our disenchanted age, getting over this awkwardness about the Devil seems to be our biggest obstacle, which is why I started this book with a story about the prison.

I learned to get over my awkwardness in talking about the Devil out at the prison. Caring as I do about injustices such as mass incarceration, capital punishment, and all the other problems related to our criminal justice system, my concerns about social justice brought

me to the prison. But once I was *inside* the prison I quickly discovered that my disenchanted worldview clashed with the spirituality of the inmates who spoke about the Devil and demons all the time. Behind prison bars, Old Scratch is real as can be. And I had to figure out a way to make sense of it all.

The same thing happened to me when I joined Freedom Fellowship. Freedom is a faith community in one of the poorest parts of my town. We feed the hungry and share life on the margins of society. Members at Freedom are very poor, often homeless. Many struggle with psychiatric illness or cognitive disabilities. Many are fighting a battle with addiction, bouncing back and forth from rehab. And you often find members at Freedom wearing ankle monitors because they are on parole.

From the outside, the demographics of Freedom tell a grim story. But on the inside? Inside the walls of Freedom I've encountered a life-giving, joy-filled, charismatic, and Spirit-filled faith community. At Freedom we dance in the aisles, anoint with oil, and raise hands in worship. And we talk a whole lot about Old Scratch.

It's the exact same thing that happened to me out at the prison. I was attracted to Freedom because of my passion for social justice: I wanted to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. And we do all those things at Freedom. But just like out at the prison, I encountered a charismatic spirituality at Freedom that didn't ignore the Devil. There I was, a doubting and disenchanted Christian, surrounded by talk of Old Scratch.

At Freedom and out at the prison I still struggle with my doubts, but if I wanted to share life there on the margins of my town, I knew I had to figure out a way to talk and think about the Devil in a way that wasn't ironic or fake. I didn't want to talk about Old Scratch with a knowing wink and my fingers crossed. And if you want to share life on the margins, you're going to have to figure this out as well.

My ambition for this book is very simple. I want to reintroduce you to Old Scratch. In our secular age we've lost our ability to talk about the Devil, and lots of things have been lost or gone wrong

because of that. Despite all our doubts, we need to recover a vision of spiritual warfare.

We're all a bit skeptical, and our doubts and disenchantment won't wholly go away, but it's my hope that by the end of this book you could join me for prayer out at the prison on Monday nights. My hope is that you'd be able to sit among the Men in White to listen to Herb pray—"And Lord, protect us from Old Scratch"—and respond with a sincere and passionate "Amen!"