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A CRITIQUE OF THE SPIRITUAL WARFARE MOVEMENT

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1. Introduction

Today's subject of spiritual warfare is not new.[1] As early as 1974, it had received Evangelical endorsement by the inclusion of an article entitled "Spiritual Conflict" in the Lausanne Covenant of the Lausanne Congress, 1974. Part of the said article read as follows:

> We believe that we are engaged in constant spiritual warfare with the principalities and powers of evil, who are seeking to overthrow the church and frustrate its task of world evangelization. We know our need to equip ourselves with God's armor and to fight this battle with the spiritual weapons of truth and prayer.[2]

In Malaysia, spiritual warfare has cut across denominational boundaries. For example, in a 1993 *SWN (Spiritual Warfare Network) Report*, news reports of SWN activities included items from Methodist, Anglican and Assemblies of God churches.[3] And when a seminar was

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[1] A book by A. Sims which was published some decades ago (before the subject of "Spiritual Warfare" became so widespread) was entitled *Prayer Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.)

[2] "The Lausanne Covenant, 1974" reproduced in *Mission Trends No. 2: Evangelization*, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 239-248 (246).

[3] *SWN Report*, September 1993. This report is a one-sheet bulletin given out during Wagner's seminar in Kuala Lumpur. There is no writer identified. As far as I know, that was the only issue, although it is possible that I may have missed other issues.

organized in that same year in Kuala Lumpur by the Malaysian National SWN Committee with Peter Wagner as the main speaker, there was overwhelming response with over 500 participants coming from all denominations. This interest in spiritual warfare has also been taken up by local Malaysian writers.[4]

This paper will attempt to describe the concept of spiritual warfare and examine its theological and practical legitimacy within the church.

2. Spiritual Warfare as a Movement

The spiritual warfare movement is closely aligned with neo-Charismatics. It is mainly the "Third Wavers" who have given prominence to spiritual warfare and made it more than a symbolic reference to the Christian struggle. Through the writings of prominent "Third-Wavers" like Peter Wagner, this symbol has come to be recognized as a movement of sorts. Its success may be attributed to its populist, pragmatic and triumphalistic approaches.

2.1 Popular

The main strength of the movement has been its appeal to the masses. Its main proponents are masters in communicating to the popular masses. The popular novels of Frank Peretti are recognized as important thresholds in the development of the spiritual warfare movement.[5] Peter Wagner, with his popular literary style, is another case in point.

2.2 Pragmatic

The analytical-pragmatic approach of Peter Wagner represents the movement's methodology.[6] Most of Peter Wagner's books on spiritual

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[4] David Ramayah, *The Warrior* (Shah Alam, Malaysia: Grace Church, 1991).

[5] Robert A. Guelich, "Jesus, Paul and Peretti," *Pneuma* 13:1 (Spring 1991), pp. 33-64.

[6] C. Peter Wagner, *Warfare Prayer* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993), p. 13 speaks of Argentina as his "principal laboratory for testing these [spiritual warfare] theories."

warfare are "how to" books.[7] Field data is collected from mission fields to strengthen and verify spiritual warfare theories. Methods that work in a particular field are often translated into standard, textbook techniques for doing spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare "has a bias toward theories that work."[8]

2.3 Triumphalistic

The triumphalism of the praise and worship movement has become part and parcel of the spiritual warfare movement. Praise marches and pageantry in worship is regarded as weapons of spiritual warfare.[9]

However, even though these characteristics of being popular, pragmatic and positive may be appealing to many, they cannot be the yardsticks for sound theology. Sound Christian theology must be firmly based on the Bible. It is not all the time that the Bible can be popular and triumphalistic. Not all theology can be verified on the basis of field data. Biblical theology may sometimes seem outmoded and non-relevant but it must remain faithful to the word of God.

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[7] C. Peter Wagner, *Warfare Prayer: How to Seek God's Power and Protection in the Battle to Build His Kingdom* (Ventura: Regal, 1992); *Breaking Stronghold in Your City: How to use Spiritual Mapping to Make Your Prayer More Strategic, Effective and Targetted* (Ventura: Regal, 1993); *Churches That Prays: How Prayer Can Help Revitalize Your Congregation and Break down the Walls between Your Church and Your Community* (Ventura: Regal, 1993); *Prayer Shield: How to Intercede for Pastors, Christian Leaders and Others on the Spiritual Warfare Frontlines* (Ventura: Regal, 1992); and *Confronting the Powers: How the New Testament Church Experienced the Power of Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura: Regal, 1996).

[8] Wagner, *Warfare Prayer*, p. 13.

[9] Peter Wagner refers to praise as one of the "weapons of spiritual warfare." He quotes the incident of Paul's and Silas' imprisonment (Acts 16:25-28) to support this point. Seminar notes from "Prayer Seminar: Building Your Church through Prayer" (Kuala Lumpur, Sept 8-9, 1993). At the same seminar, Wagner publicized the efforts of Graham Kendrick (a popular worship leader) who had organized praise marches and prayer rallies all over the world.

3. Spiritual Warfare as a Theology

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines warfare as "making war; condition of being at war or fighting."[10] When warfare has to do with spiritual matters or if it takes place in the spiritual realm, it can then be referred as "spiritual warfare."

However, spiritual warfare as understood today often goes beyond mere semantics. There is an underlying theological and philosophical framework, giving rise to its expressions and practices. While most spiritual warfare proponents consider themselves Evangelicals, there are some facets of their theological and philosophical framework that may perhaps be described as being distinctive of them.

3.1 Dualistic

There is a clearly-defined line between the good and the bad. Everything is seen as belonging either to God's or to the devil's camp. The amoral seems unimportant. This is probably why ethics has never been a well-researched subject among those in the spiritual warfare movement. As a result, there is the constant danger of falling into heterodox dualism where God and Satan become equal, opposing powers.

3.2 Paradigmatic

Peter Wagner spoke of a "paradigm shift"[11] with more and more people coming to realize that supernatural signs and wonders of biblical times should happen today. But spiritual warfare has now gone beyond merely believing the supernatural or the para-phenomenal.

The world is seen as a stage for the cosmic forces. Every struggle a Christian is faced with has a sort of a paradigmatic parallel in the heavenly realm.[12] Decisions made on earth affect the results of the

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[10] *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), s.v. "warfare."

[11] C. Peter Wagner, ed., *Signs and Wonders Today* (Altamonte Springs: Creation, 1987), p. 5.

[12] Charles H. Kraft, *Defeating the Dark Angels* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1992).

cosmic battle between God and Satan and *vice-versa*.[13] "This means the war we fight will always be at two levels."[14]

3.3 Paradoxical

God is seen as all-powerful and Satan is recognized as a defeated foe but the battle continues to rage on. Victory is at once assured and yet not guaranteed. "Satan does not have complete authority.... He can only influence the world to the degree that man chooses to sin and live in disobedience to God."[15] And, at the same time, God has allowed Christians in the world to "checkmate [Satan's] movement and to nullify his work."[16]

Therefore, Jack Hayford sees spiritual warfare as:

> ...the battle that continues between the armies of God and the forces of the Devil. It is not poetry or play; it is real, and its plunder is the souls of free-willed human beings. If it were merely a matter of power, the Almighty God could master the Prince of Darkness in a moment. But because the ebb and flow of battle depends upon the will of humans—to receive or reject divine rule; to believe or refuse divine grace—the struggle for minds and bodies goes on.[17]

3.4 Biblical Evaluation

For spiritual warfare to be legitimate as Christian belief and practice, it should have biblical foundations. Although it is arguable if the exact phrase "spiritual warfare" is found in the Bible, Christians are involved in a struggle is clear from passages like 2 Cor 10:4; Eph 6:12; 1 Tim 1:18; and 2 Tim 2:3, 4. It is also clear that this struggle is not carnal but

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[13] This seems to be the main premise behind George Otis, Jr., *The Twilight Labrynth: Why Does Spiritual Darkness Linger Where It Does?* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 1997).

[14] Rajan Devadasan, "Battle Station," *AGVoice* (Petaling Jaya: Assemblies of God of Malaysia, December 1993), pp. 16-21 (21).

[15] Dean Sherman, *Spiritual Warfare for Every Christian* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 1990), p. 111.

[16] F. J. Perryman, "The War in the Heavenlies," in *Prayer Warfare*, ed. A. Sims (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 17.

[17] Jack Hayford, *Prayer, Spiritual Warfare, and the Ministry of Angels* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), p. 77.

spiritual. But is the warfare or military motif as consistent and widespread as contemporary spiritual warfare proponents seem to imply?

The military motif is certainly found in the Old Testament. The "Lord of hosts" is a military title. In the theophany of Joshua 5, Yahweh was the Commander of the Lord's army. Only those who reached "military age" were considered responsible for disobeying God in the desert (Josh 5:4-6). In fact, Old Testament history is a series of military struggles between the people of God and the evil gentile nations. But it needs to be recognized that the economies of ancient nations were built around wars and military campaigns. If it had been today's *New Economy*,[18] would Yahweh still work out his covenant through the same military motif?

Except for the apocalyptic Revelation, the military imagery is not so evident in the New Testament. But, Revelation is seldom used to support spiritual warfare beliefs.[19] Most of spiritual warfare teachings find its departure in Paul's writings.[20] Although Paul did describe the Christian's struggle using supposedly military terms like and *strateuesthe* (KJV: "wage war") and its cognate, *strateue* (KJV: "warfare"), those instances were rare. Furthermore, Paul also described the same struggle with words that have no military connotations. For example, the word used in Eph 6:12 is probably better translated "wrestle."[21] Even so, that verse is one of the key verses used in spiritual warfare teachings.

Concerning Satan and demons in the Pauline corpus, Guelich noted that Paul writes very little about Satan and demons or evil spirits.[22] Instead, other "sinister forces at work in the believer's experience" like "death," "sin" and "flesh" receive far more attention.[23] Quite unlike contemporary spiritual warfare proponents, Paul never did build into his

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[18] The two key features of today's "new economy" would probably be technology and globalization.

[19] Wagner in Prayer Seminar (Kuala Lumpur, Sept 1993) did comment in his seminar notes that the word "overcoming," found at least seven times in the letters to the churches, presupposes a conflict between God and opposing demonic forces.

[20] Guelich, "Jesus, Paul and Peretti," p. 42.

[21] Sherman, *Spiritual Warfare for Every Christian*, p. 32.

[22] Guelich, "Jesus, Paul and Peretti," p. 45 noted that of nearly 150 instances in the Pauline corpus of the word "spirit" (*pneuma*), "only two carry a sinister tone."

[23] Guelich, "Jesus, Paul and Peretti," p. 45.

understanding of demons or the angelic host an elaborate system of hierarchies. Furthermore, in the one passage with the most explicit use of warfare imagery (2 Cor 10:3-4), Paul was probably referring to human opponents (2 Cor 10:1-2). In the passage of the armor of God in Eph 6:11-17, the purpose of the armor was more defensive rather than offensive. This is brought out by the words "stand" and "withstand" used in the same passage. This is quite unlike the confrontational stance usually taken by the spiritual warfare movement.

Jesus avoided being identified as the military Messiah that people expected Him to be. Jesus was involved in confrontations with the devil and his forces, "yet in every case, Jesus was clearly in control of the situation. There was simply no contest."[24]

The Christian struggle with the enemy is real and the Bible has clear references to it. However, to limit the description of this struggle to the military metaphor is to limit one's understanding of that struggle. That it is merely a metaphor must be kept in mind. In interpreting a metaphor, care must be taken not to overextend it and thus take it beyond the clear intent of the original writers. Any doctrine or theology built around the spiritual warfare imagery should have more support in scripture than merely rare references to a metaphor.

4. Spiritual Warfare as a Technique

Being practical in its approach, the spiritual warfare movement has embraced a set of techniques. Wagner believes that God has given us "spiritual technology."[25] There now seems to be a recognized differentiation between "warfare" prayers and other Christian prayers; and between "warfare" songs and other Christian praise songs. It seems that as long as the military metaphor can be extended to these prayers and praise songs, any Christian using these prayers or songs could be "doing spiritual warfare."

While the semantics may differ from writer to writer, the military metaphor is maintained. Like the earthly military battles, strategic thinking is necessary and this demands recognition of different

[24] Guelich, "Jesus, Paul and Peretti," p. 40.

[25] Wagner, "Peter Wagner on Spiritual Warfare," *AGVoice* (September 1993), pp. 22-24 (24).

"levels,"[26] "placements"[27] and "battlegrounds."[28] There is also an effort to understand Satan as a military foe leading to the exercise of mapping out Satan's "strongholds" and "territories."

The military metaphor is also extended to include weapons of spiritual warfare. Wagner identifies at least six of these weapons: 1) the name of Jesus; 2) the blood of Jesus; 3) agreement (among the saints); 4) fasting; 5) praise; and, 6) the word of God.[29]

Some practices have become standard techniques among those practicing spiritual warfare. One example is that of "binding and loosing," for which Wagner finds biblical basis in Matt 18:18-20; 12:28-29 and Luke 13:16.[30]

A more recent spiritual warfare technique is that of "spiritual mapping,"[31] which is the identification and naming of territorial spirits over cities and nations. For spiritual mapping, Wagner quotes Ezek 4:1 for biblical support.[32] This practice of spiritual mapping has become highly technical and covers socio-historical as well as spiritual elements. For example, in mapping a city, John Dawson suggests a list of twenty questions about the city's political, religious and sociological history to start with.[33] Wagner implies that the "10/40 Window" is a result of spiritual mapping.[34]

Yet another spiritual warfare technique is that of "prayer walk," that is, "moving out into the community—into the streets, onto the sidewalks, to pray on-site in the community."[35] Wagner sees prayer walk as "the most viable entry point [into spiritual warfare] for a lay Christian."[36]

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[26] Wagner, *Warfare Prayer*, pp. 16-19.

[27] Hayford, *Prayer, Spiritual Warfare*, p. 156.

[28] Sherman, *Spiritual Warfare for Every Christian*, pp. 42-45.

[29] Wagner, "Prayer Seminar: Building Your Church Through Prayer," pp. 5-8.

[30] Wagner, "Prayer Seminar," p. 10.

[31] George Otis has done extensive work on this area

[32] Wagner, *Warfare Prayer*, p. 152.

[33] John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities for God* (Manila: YWAM, 1991), p. 85.

[34] Wagner, *Warfare Prayer*, p. 151.

[35] Wagner, "Peter Wagner on Spiritual Warfare," p. 23.

[36] Wagner, "Peter Wagner on Spiritual Warfare," p. 23.

A modification of "prayer walk" is the "praise march." The *SWN Report* of September 1993 reports an Assemblies of God church in Kajang, Malaysia having an Easter march through Kajang town.[37] Warren Wiersbe, in his book *Real Worship*, suggests that one of the themes that run through the Bible is worship and warfare.[38] He cites Ps 149:6; 24:8 and 44:9 to support his contention. He also quotes a few biblical incidents like Jehoshaphat's confrontation with the Moabites and Ammonites in 2 Chr 20.

5. Conclusion: Contributions of the Spiritual Warfare Movement

While there may be a legitimate call for caution in approaching the beliefs and practices of the spiritual warfare movement,[39] we cannot overlook the many positive contributions of the movement toward the church at large. The church was made to appreciate the supernatural and to recognize its important role in both the natural and supernatural realms. There is also a new confidence in the authority of the individual Christian[40] and the church as a whole. The church is constantly reminded that it is fighting on the winning side.

But the Christian's place of authority in the heavenlies is not taken for granted. Holiness is seen as an important element for success in spiritual warfare. Wagner comments that "holiness is as indispensable for a spiritual warrior as is good eyesight for a military fighter pilot."[41] The spiritual warrior is warned: "If you attempt to bind a principality or power while you harbor sin in your heart, you will surely be defeated."[42]

The enemy is correctly seen as a person and not merely as an impersonal sinister force. His influence in the world is not

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[37] "Marching in the Name of Our Resurrected Lord!" *SWN Report*, September 1993.

[38] Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway, 1987), pp. 147-48.

[39] Guelich, "Jesus, Paul and Peretti," p. 64.

[40] Gary D. Kinnaman, *Overcoming the Dominions of Darkness: Personal Strategies for Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 1990).

[41] Wagner, *Warfare Prayer*, p. 115.

[42] Francis Fragipane, *The House of the Lord* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation, 1991), p. 147.

underestimated. Instead, there is an honest effort to find effective strategies to counter the enemy's evil intentions.

Prayer (often with fasting) is the key activity of the spiritual warfare movement. They are always on the lookout for intercessors and are constantly organizing prayer walks, rallies or concerts.[43] This appreciation for the power and resource of prayer is probably the most important contribution of the spiritual warfare movement for the church today.

The church's mission to evangelize the world is always kept in focus. Evelyn Christenson says that "evangelism is spiritual warfare with Christians getting involved with Jesus in the battle between the rulers of the two spiritual kingdoms of the universe for the souls of lost people on Planet Earth."[44] Wagner declares, "I do not see warfare prayer as an end in itself…. My chief interest in warfare prayer that helps bring about effective evangelism."[45]

The church from all denominations has been brought together through the spiritual warfare movement. There is a common enemy and a common mission. Fighting under a common banner, the spiritual warfare movement has been able to put aside niggling doctrinal and denominational differences.

Despite the seemingly weak biblical foundations, any movement that can make the kind of contributions described in the preceding paragraphs deserves a healthy respect. One may or may not agree with the assessments of the spiritual warfare movement regarding the status of the Christian struggle, but they cannot be easily ignored or dismissed. Perhaps, the strength of their role is a dialectic relationship with traditional theological and biblical studies; each moving the other along so that the church arrives at a more balanced combination of theology and praxis.

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[43] David Bryant, *Concerts of Prayer: For the Spiritual Awakening and World Evangelization* (Ventura: Regal, 1988), p. 14.

[44] Evelyn Christenson, *A Study Guide for Evangelism Prayer* (Atlanta, Georgia: Conger, 1992), p. 4.

[45] Wagner, *Warfare Prayer*, p. 27.