

**Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare:
A Theological Assessment of its Premises and Practices**

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With the impact of globalization, the rise of Eastern spirituality, the emergence of the New Age Movement, and the influence of Pentecostalism around the world, evangelicals have exhibited an ever-increasing interest in matters related to the spirit world. The last several years have seen an explosion of books and articles published from a variety of perspectives regarding the task of engaging unseen forces in spiritual warfare through prayer. As a result of this increased awareness of the spirit world, controversial trends and strategies have begun to emerge in evangelistic efforts. One such methodology has come to be known as “strategic-level spiritual warfare” (SLSW).¹ In the context of Christian mission, several leading missiologists² reasoned that if demons can interfere with the lives of individuals, entire geographical locations and people groups can be held captive by “territorial spirits” (Wagner 1996, 26). Thus, in order for the light of the Gospel to penetrate the hearts of individuals and enable receptivity to the gospel, these evil powers need to be exorcised (Kraft 2015, 241).

After SLSW reached the pinnacle of its fervor in the 1990s, the impact of this movement began to wane, and many key books by pivotal leaders went out of print (Wagner 2012, 27). Its teachings, however, have begun to resurface in various corners of the world, infiltrating city-wide prayer movements and cross-cultural efforts (Van Der Meer 2010, 160). In the last several years, for example, Destiny Image Publishers has released anew some

¹ Charles Kraft calls it “cosmic-level warfare” and presupposes the existence of a rank of higher-level satanic spirits that oversee the work of demons on the earth.

² For example, Peter C. Wagner, Charles H. Kraft, and George Otis, Jr.

of the most influential books on SLSW and “resurrected” the writings of key contributing authors (Wagner 2012, 27).³ With this renewed emphasis on territorial spirits, the reinvigoration of prayer movements around the world, and an increasing awareness of the spiritual realm, this paper is a timely contribution to this subject. As such, the purpose of this assessment is to analyze SLSW practices under the lens of Scripture, providing a brief evaluation of its methodology, hermeneutical approach, and a concise critique of its missional strategy.

Although popular writers on the SLSW movement are prolific, few academic analyses have been devoted to the careful theological evaluation of this mission strategy. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to describe and examine many of the success stories claimed by SLSW advocates or seek to provide a historical basis for such an approach. Several scholars have attempted to reconstruct the historical legacy behind SLSW, which will be helpful to those interested in historiographical work.⁴ The primary focus of this paper, however, is to discuss and evaluate the main tenets of SLSW from a theological perspective and offer an effective biblical alternative to this approach.

Accordingly, this assessment is divided into three parts. Section one provides a brief introduction and overview of SLSW by tracing its developments, key terminology, and initiatives with the intention of identifying advocates and critics involved in the debate. Section two looks at the practices and principles of SLSW in light of Scripture in order to construct a proper theological discourse. Finally, section three presents a way forward, highlighting several missiological implications and practical considerations in the construction of a theology that takes seriously both spiritual and human realities. The goal in this final section is to synthesize the complexities juxtaposed in the intersection of spiritual and human experience through the

³ See for example, Wagner (2015) *Breaking Spiritual Strongholds in Your City* and Wagner (2012) *Territorial Spirits*.

⁴ For example, Chuck Lowe (1998), Michael S Reid (2002), and Gerald Ediger (2000).

implementation of biblical principles that guide us back to the basics.

Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare

Several individuals have served as key proponents of SLSW,⁵ but perhaps none equal the contribution of Peter Wagner. Widely recognized as the leading SLSW voice, Wagner wrote extensively, edited various compilations, and convened conferences in an effort to foster dialogue and further research on this topic.⁶ In an attempt to clarify the issues involved, the Spiritual Warfare Network,⁷ led by Wagner, identified three levels of spiritual warfare: ground-level, occult-level, and strategic level (Wagner 1996, 22). Strategic level warfare is unique in that power confrontations occur against “demonic entities assigned to geographical territories and social networks” (Beilby and Eddy 2012, 179). The assignment of these “territorial spirits” is to keep groups of people in spiritual bondage and oppression, provoking diseases, natural disasters, human trafficking, economic misfortune, and all other possible manifestations of evil in our world (Beilby and Eddy 2012, 179; Wagner 1990, 77).

According to SLSW advocates, these territorial spirits can be identified through “spiritual mapping,” a technique by which the strongholds of satanic entities may be recognized and dismantled. In fact, George Otis, Jr. argues that this method allows individuals to gain vital information, such as the names of the evil spirits, in order to “release us to economic and effective action” (1991, 84). Hence, spiritual mapping provides the pathway

⁵ Cindy Jacobs, Peter Wagner, Charles Kraft, John Dawson, Ed Silvano, George Otis, Jr., Paul Yonggi Cho, Michael Green, and, more recently, Rebecca Greenwood.

⁶ See for example, Peter Wagner, ed. (1991), *Engaging the Enemy: How to Fight and Defeat Territorial Spirits*, Ventura: CA, Regal Books; Peter Wagner, ed. (1990), *Wrestling with Dark Angels*, Ventura: CA, Regal Books; Peter Wagner, ed. (1993), *Breaking Strongholds in Your City: How to Use Spiritual Mapping to Make Your Prayers More Strategic, Effective and Targeted*, Ventura: CA, Regal Books. Peter Wagner (1996), *Spiritual Warfare Strategy*, Shippensburg: PA, Destiny Image; and Peter Wagner (2012), *Territorial Spirits*, Shippensburg: PA, Destiny Image.

⁷ The Spiritual Warfare Network grew out of the Lausanne II movement and was led by Wagner until its disintegration. It was subsequently renamed as the “Apostolic Strategic Prayer Network” (Holvast 2009, 145).

to discovering the identity of demonic entities which plague communities and cities around the world. As Wagner explains, “Our prayers can be more precisely targeted through skillful spiritual mapping” (1996, 31). The more precise the prayer, the better the results.

Though many critique spiritual mapping due to its recent arrival in the missiological discussion, Charles Kraft believes that this technique is simply a modern term for the biblical concept of surveillance. For example, when God instructed Moses to send spies into the Promised Land before the people could enter, surveillance was key. Wagner further argues that by exercising this skill, a new “spiritual technology” may be introduced, resulting in a boost to the missionary enterprise while at the same time allowing the hearts and minds of unbelievers to be open to the gospel (1996, 30). Wagner points out that spiritual mapping is not a strategy that will necessarily save the lost but will contribute to the removal of obstacles the enemy has placed in their way. He affirms,

No one has been saved through pulling down strongholds or binding the strong man. Only the preaching of Christ and Him crucified, followed by repenting and experiencing personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, can bring the new birth and life eternal (Wagner 1996, 26).

Wagner is encouraged by the optimistic remarks of Kjell Sjoberg, a seasoned intercessor and SLSW proponent, who insists that “individuals exist today with a gift for prophetic espionage . . . [and with] a hunting instinct to track down the enemy’s manipulations” (1996, 31).

Another equally important aspect of SLSW is “identificational repentance,” the act of identifying with and representing a certain group of people before God in prayer. In so doing, the intercessor repents for the sins of their forefathers so that God may, in turn, heal their land (Kraft 2015, 259; Beilby and Eddy 2012, 187). Advocates note that Nehemiah utilized this approach, setting in motion “a redemptive beachhead” by which an entire nation turned from devastation to salvation (Otis 1999, 251). More recently, advocates of SLSW have gone so far as to claim that God is now calling “spiritual terrorists” who will engage in this type of warfare prayer to demolish the strongholds of the devil and set the captives free (Cerullo 2015,

2).

Kraft remains highly positive about the SLSW approach based on its perceived results. As an example, Kraft points to the ministry of Carlos Ancondia, an Argentine crusade evangelist who publicly confronts the spirits before preaching and whose evangelistic impact has been truly significant (Moreau et al. 2002, 194). Likewise, Wagner identifies Anacondia as the “most effective citywide interdenominational crusade evangelist of all time,” an individual whose ministry “to the uninitiated might appear to be total confusion. But to the skilled . . . it is just another evening of power encounters” (2002).

Both Kraft and Wagner discuss the spiritual transformation of the Guatemalan town of Almolonga as a demonstration of the incredible results of spiritual mapping. After breaking the power of the territorial spirit *Maximon*, a Mayan deity who had been worshipped for years in Guatemala, a radical transformation began to take place in the town. Bars closed down, businesses took on biblical names, and churches were built to house thousands of new converts (Wagner 1996, 212). Even the agriculture was impacted, invigorating the town’s economy as the size and quality of the produce increased exponentially. Carrots were the length of a man’s arm, and cabbages grew to the size of a basketball (Kraft 2015, 261). Allegedly, many stories of this nature are recorded as examples of the benefits gained through warfare prayer to bind the “strong man” who gives oversight to a territory in the unseen world.

Indeed, many efforts are currently underway to challenge territorial spirits with the hope of unleashing spiritual revival and socio-economic reinvigoration. The majority of these are categorized as “prayer initiatives,” and the most common of them are “prayer journeys.” These trips, taken nationally and internationally, consist of engaging in prayer and reconciliation walks to lay the groundwork for spiritual mapping or to conduct “strategic bombing” (Moreau et al. 2002, 263). In her book *Authority to Tread*, Rebecca Greenwood shares her personal experience leading several of these prayer journeys and discusses the positive results observed in Russia, Ukraine, and Houston. Greenwood concludes that in each of these places, both the political and social atmosphere began to change after the group

arrived and specifically challenged the spirits (2005, 145).

In another text, Greenwood offers a peculiar narrative that supports her assertion (Beilby 2012, 193-198). Gathering in Wichita, Kansas, she and a group of intercessors specifically sought to bind the spirit behind the abortion clinic of Dr. George Tiller. At the time, Tiller was considered the leading abortionist in America for performing illegal late-term abortions. After the initial training of her group of intercessors in 2005, a trip in late 2007 proved pivotal in the assignment against the “territorial spirit.” After receiving revelation through a dream of the spirit’s name, the group stood in front of the clinic and prayed fervently to bind *Lilith*. Greenwood shares positive results from this effort, as evidenced by the reduction in abortions performed at this clinic and the overall decreased abortion rate throughout the state. To the shock of many, two years later, Dr. Tiller was fatally shot in his home church by an anti-abortionist, resulting in the closure of his clinic (Beilby and Eddy 2012, 193-197). Although Greenwood laments the death of Dr. Tiller in her narrative, she also affirms that “the largest city in Kansas remains abortion free” mainly due to their prayer efforts (Beilby and Eddy 2012, 197).

Despite these apparent successes, the SLSW movement has attracted its fair share of critics. While most Christians would not deny the reality of spiritual conflict, many remain concerned with certain emphases within SLSW teachings. Chuck Lowe’s *Territorial Spirits and World Evangelisation?* is undoubtedly the most thorough and sharp critique regarding the existence of territorial spirits and the practices of SLSW. Lowe believes that, apart from having no biblical support, most of the success stories behind these efforts are merely based on hypothetical speculations that do “not pass scrutiny” (1998, 144). Priest, Campbell, and Mullen have also offered an incisive critique, concluding that SLSW “doctrines” are without a solid biblical foundation and appear to be based on anecdotes (Rommen 1995, 19-21). Furthermore, they insist that caution is warranted against the unilateral acceptance of the positive results attributed to their methodology (Rommen 1995, 41). As they note, SLSW proponents often appeal to pragmatism leading to conclusions that are based on questionable empirical evidence. David Powlison, Professor at Westminster Seminary, also concludes that some practices behind SLSW seem speculative at best and mythological at worst

(Beilby and Eddy 2012, 205).

Aside from a lack of scriptural evidence for many of the practices behind SLSW, some critics have other reasons for questioning their tenets. Samuel Escobar remarks,

What I find questionable in the idea of “territorial spirits” and “spiritual warfare” is the quantifying rationality of American technological culture being uncritically applied even to the understanding of demonic activity and prayer A strange form of Zionism is sometimes propagated through evangelical media (2003, 59-60).

Still, other scholars have formulated a less irenic response in their assessment of SLSW but nonetheless remain wary of the entire approach. For example, missiologist Scott Moreau disagrees with the emphasis placed on spiritual mapping as a method to “smart-bomb” the enemy. He argues that “prayer is not intended to be a vehicle of violence, but a means of fellowship, growth, and strength” (2002, 267). Nevertheless, he remains convinced that the idea of territorial spirits may be biblically based and that some of the teachings of SLSW have served to stimulate zeal and renew interest in prayer within the church.

Biblical scholar and professor Clinton Arnold adopts a similar position. While affirming the reality of demonic spirits associated with territories, especially nations, Arnold concludes that Christians are not called to engage these spirits in spiritual warfare, nor do they have the authority to do so (1997, 164). Preferring the term “empire spirits” to better exemplify the function and nature of these demonic powers, Arnold describes in depth the biblical foundation behind the ontological reality of territorial spirits (1997, 153). Arnold’s position will be discussed in further detail in section two.

Clearly, SLSW has awakened an army of critics. Generally speaking, these critics base their evaluation of SLSW on whether the practices behind this methodology are scriptural and warrant the attention and acceptance they have received over the last few decades. Although much has been written at both the popular and scholarly levels, few academic studies have been

devoted to assessing the theological rationale and biblical roots for the practice of SLSW.

One such academic study, conducted by Michael Reid, set out to close this gap.⁸ Reid focused on whether SLSW has a sound biblical and theological foundation and follows a legitimate tradition throughout church history. To complement his study, Reid surveyed a group of pastors in England regarding their beliefs associated with SLSW practices. He found that 50% of the interviewees believed in territorial spirits, a conclusion which he asserts must be corrected due to its lack of scriptural evidence (Reid 2002, 237). Another significant study, originally written as a doctoral dissertation,⁹ charts the emergence and decline of the SLSW movement, describing the legacy of “spiritual mapping” in the United States and Argentina both from a theological and anthropological perspective.

Yet another recent article considers the current impact of SLSW teachings in Africa, revealing how certain African intercessors believe that “the evils of slavery still have a spiritual effect on the descendants of the slaves” and that they must “undo the effects of the slave trade” through prayer, identificational repentance, and spiritual mapping (Van Der Meer 2010, 161). The writer also notes that many charismatic leaders prefer to spend all night in prayer, fighting territorial spirits, instead of addressing the evils of society at the socio-economic levels (Van Der Meer 2010, 162). Clearly, these practices require careful theological reflection, especially in cultures that are more naturally attuned to demonic influences and inclined to address issues from a strictly spiritual perspective.

Evaluation

While many of the elements contained in SLSW are not devoid of questionable, concerning, and even controversial features, any evaluation must begin by reflecting on the positive contributions this movement has offered

⁸ Michael S. Reid, *Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare: A Modern Mythology?* (2002) Fairfax, VA: Xulon Press.

⁹ René Holvast, *Spiritual Mapping in the United States and Argentina, 1989-2005: A Geography of Fear* (2009) Leiden: Brill.

to the overall missionary enterprise. Several biblical scholars and missiologists have pointed out that SLSW has led to a deeper appreciation for fervent prayer, a zeal for unity, reliance upon the Holy Spirit, and a passion to save the lost (Arnold 1997, 160; Pocock et al. 2005, 190; Moreau et al. 2002, 266). The motives behind this approach seem pure and honorable, stemming from a deep desire to bring the gospel to dark places and set people free from the grip of the enemy. As Peter Wagner affirms, “If I have 10 more years to serve God, I want them to make a difference in the number of souls that are saved around the world. My interest in warfare prayer is directly proportional to its effectiveness in enhancing evangelism.”¹⁰ Despite the mixed views and perspectives on SLSW methodology, one cannot deny that God has used this movement to heighten the Church’s corporate awareness of the presence of satanic powers and awaken His people to take a proactive stand against the enemy’s schemes. As one team of missiologists concurs, “Questionable elements do not nullify a legitimate movement of God” (Pocock et al. 2005, 190).

Much can be said in response to this ongoing debate, but the purpose here is to offer several preliminary questions regarding the methodological and phenomenological aspects of SLSW. First, the question must be raised as to whether territorial spirits do in fact exist and, if so, whether Christians have been given the authority to engage and combat these spirits through warfare prayer. Even SLSW advocates are cognizant of the inherent dangers related to the confrontation of demonic powers without the “legal right.” Peter Wagner himself points out the risks of this type of ministry, describing the perils many have faced for entering into the SLSW methodology lightly, without due spiritual preparation, or with insufficient knowledge (1990, 86-88). In fact, as Rebecca Greenwood indicates, “Some individuals have experienced excessive and devastating counterattacks from the enemy as a result of warring against principalities” (2005, 124). Furthermore, Cindy Jacobs notes the myriad of spiritual pieces that must be in order prior

¹⁰ Quoted in Clinton Arnold (1997), *3 Crucial Questions*, p. 161.

to confronting high-level principalities. Specifically, Jacobs asserts the essential aspects of waiting for God's timing, fasting for extended periods of time, and displaying unity among the members of the church (1991, 242-244). Clearly, this type of engagement is a highly specialized ministry, one that requires an incredible amount of time, investment, preparation, training, and research in order to avoid the unnecessary backlash of the enemy's counterattacks.

A second question that naturally emerges from this conversation concerns the status of these spiritual powers after a confrontation. What happens to the evil spirits that are bound and cast out after their strongholds are demolished? Wagner believes that though territorial spirits may leave following a SLSW encounter, they are not completely destroyed. In fact, he argues that "the power of territorial spirits can be neutralized, but obviously not forever" (1996, 152). If SLSW methodologies do not ultimately result in the destruction of territorial spirits, one must sensibly consider whether Christians should be directing efforts and resources toward such a seemingly endless endeavor.

Third, although the results of the SLSW efforts seem remarkable, the attentive reader will wonder if these outcomes have, in fact, been the direct result of "spiritual mapping" rather than other unmentioned factors which may have played a role in unleashing the transformation behind these stories. In light of the prevailing chaos around the world, we should certainly rejoice when cities like Almolonga experience economic invigoration and spiritual renewal. Nevertheless, to attribute this transformation to a single cause (overcoming a city's territorial spirit) is to be reductionistic at best and biased at worst.

As such, it becomes imperative to be more integrative in the spiritual warfare approach, taking into consideration the interrelation among the spiritual, personal, cultural, social, and psychological aspects of human existence. Such an approach is clearly preferential to assigning causation to a single factor. After all, should we not also account for other factors that may have played a role in the transformation of a city or people group? Could

not other elements be involved in the explosive growth of churches, a renewed receptivity to the gospel, the stimulation of an economy, and the spiritual transformation of an entire city? Needless to say, we must develop a holistic perspective to avoid falling prey to the tendency toward providing simplistic and pragmatic answers that could potentially lead to overplaying one's position. Furthermore, success stories should not be primarily used to *prove* the validity of the SLSW efforts but rather as a *witness* to God's faithfulness in responding to the prayers and commitment of His people.

Fourth, Greenwood's case study in which she describes her Wichita experience is not bereft of ambiguity and tension. Certainly, it would be unfair to question the good intentions of these faithful intercessors. In addition, it is surely possible to believe that God used their prayers to help lower the abortion rate in Kansas. Several questions, however, still remain. If one is called to stand against a particular social injustice, is it sufficient to simply bind the evil spirit purportedly behind it, knowing that it could very well return at a later time? Were there not additional means by which Greenwood's group could have approached this situation, addressing intrinsic societal problems beyond just the spiritual? Is it possible that our subjective assessment of ministry strategies could be tainted by the extensive time we have committed to such efforts? Naturally, interpretive conclusions must be made with both caution and wisdom.

Finally, one must question the attention, emphasis, and centrality that have been placed upon SLSW methods by those who have adopted a certain "fanaticism" toward its methodology. Certainly, other missional strategies have proven efficacious in their efforts to bring the gospel to all nations prior to the development of SLSW. Wagner's affirmation that territorial spirits have the "ability to prevent the spread of the gospel" (1990, 77) leads us to wonder how it was possible to bring the gospel to the nations prior to the discovery of the SLSW strategy. Were previous efforts not also effective in bringing people from darkness to light? If other missional methods have clearly worked before, why centralize the SLSW practice as if it were the only effective means of evangelism? As Pocock states, "Does spiritual warfare deserve to be elevated to the dominant place it holds in the emphasis and orientation of some people and movements?" (Pocock et al. 2005, 199).

A more balanced perspective is unequivocally needed.

Notwithstanding the above critiques, what emerges as redemptive in the SLSW approach is the faithfulness of a God who sees the zeal of His people, hears their prayers, and honors their efforts. While Scripture clearly warns us that “people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6) and that “zeal without knowledge is not good” (Proverbs 19:2), the same Bible also cautions that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1), admonishing us to “never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11). Thus, in our critique of certain SLSW practices, we should refrain from unnecessarily sacrificing zeal on the altar of orthodoxy. Rather, we must “fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Timothy 1:6) as we keep our spiritual fervor closely tied to appropriate biblical perspectives and theological reflections.

Theological and Scriptural Analysis

At this juncture, it is essential to grapple with the theological and scriptural foundation propagated by SLSW advocates in their model. Attention will be given to the exegesis of key texts used to support SLSW theory and methodology. Moreover, the hermeneutical approach used by proponents of SLSW will also be briefly assessed.

To begin, the main questions directed toward SLSW’s theological foundation are ontological and epistemological in nature. Does scriptural evidence exist that points to the reality of territorial spirits? If so, are Christians called to engage such spirits? Is the hermeneutical approach used to provide biblical evidence for SLSW reasonable? What is the role of experience in defining what is valid when considering concepts about which Scripture is silent?

At a time when an awareness of the spiritual world was steadily increasing, a monumental article by Paul Hiebert (1982) provided unintended fuel for the creation of theologies dealing with these spiritual realities. His clear call to develop a holistic theology that includes “a theology of ancestor, spirits and invisible powers of this world” was coupled with a warning that

such a theology could unintentionally lead to a “Christianized form of animism in which spirits and magic are used to explain everything” (1982, 420). Contrary to animistic worldviews, Hiebert advocated constructing a theology built on “the history of God and of humans, and their relationships to each other” without placing primary attention on the activities of the spirit world (1982, 420).

Without a doubt, the existence of this “middle level” constitutes part of the biblical worldview. As Ott and Strauss state, “Mission theology is incomplete without a theology of the excluded middle that is rooted in Scripture” (2010, 254). This theology must recognize the presence of spiritual forces and the manifestation of spiritual dynamics while emphasizing God’s ultimate sovereignty and supremacy over creation, including the spirit world. Although it is natural to approach the biblical narrative with cultural lenses, it is vital to avoid falling “into the trap of adopting a cultural perspective on spiritual power” (Ott and Strauss 2010, 240). At the same time, however, a recognition of the reality of the unseen world undoubtedly constitutes a part of “the worldview of most of the peoples of the earth” (Ott and Strauss 2010, 252).

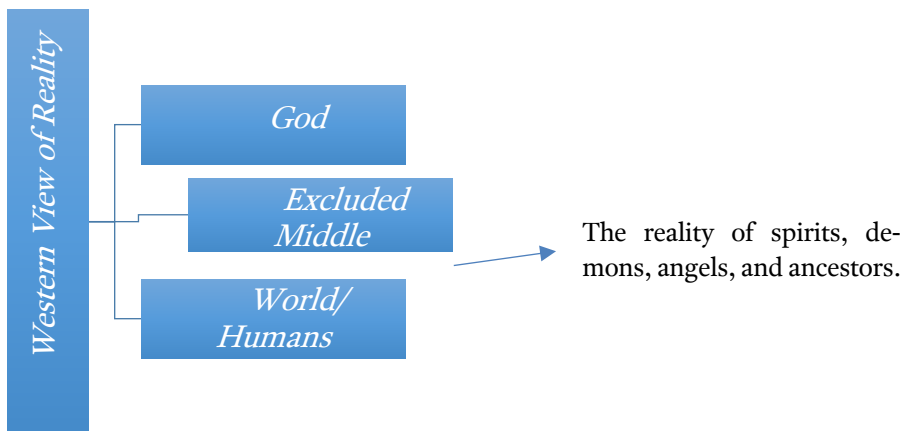


Figure 1: The Blind Spot of a Western View of Reality

Source: Adapted from Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle” in Missiology Vol. 10, January 1982, pp. 35-47.

It was out of a clear attempt to formulate a theology that emphasizes God's superiority over the excluded middle that SLSW came into existence. Critics of SLSW, however, claim that the majority of the teachings embedded in this methodology lack the requisite scriptural foundation and are based on dubious experiential evaluations. Particularly, many have expressed concern due to the close association of SLSW with animism and pagan worldviews, a danger against which Hiebert emphatically cautioned. Unfortunately, space does not allow for a comprehensive treatment of each biblical text used to support SLSW perspectives. Nevertheless, one key passage – Daniel 10 – is generally used to support the existence of territorial spirits. To a brief exegetical discussion of this pericope I now turn.

Biblical Evidence

The basic controversy surrounding the SLSW movement centers upon the concept of “territorial spirits” and the associated strategies for “binding” and “breaking” their strongholds. A key passage used to support the existence of such spiritual beings is found in Daniel 10. In this passage, Daniel has a dream and prays for three weeks that God will reveal the meaning to him (10:2). On the twenty-fourth day, an angel appears to Daniel, apparently as the result of three important actions: his attempt to gain understanding, his humility before God, and his consistency in prayer (10:12). In response to Daniel's faithfulness, the angel¹¹ says to him:

Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come as a response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me because I was detained there with the king of Persia So he said, “Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece

¹¹ Arnold points out that this angel was probably the angel Gabriel, according to Daniel 9:21.

will come” (Daniel 10:12-13, 20).

Several exegetical notes are necessary. To begin, it is interesting to note that the Hebrew word מְלָכִי (translated “king” in English) is plural, thus raising significant questions as to their identity. While some commentators hold that the author is referring to a group of human kings (Contesse & Ellington 1994, 271), others are persuaded that their identity is rooted in the spiritual realm. Miller observes, “These ‘kings’ likely were spiritual rulers who attempted to control Persia,” for “the concept of the angel’s being ‘detained with’ the earthly kings of Persia seems untenable” (1994, 284).

Arnold points out that the Hebrew term נָשִׂיף (“prince”) translated as *archon* in the Septuagint, is a word used by Paul to refer to angelic powers (1997, 154). Furthermore, “Each nation was thought to have its own angel who served as its protector,” acting on behalf of the saints (Contesse & Ellington 1994, 272, Miller 1994, 285). This perspective is reinforced by the fact that Michael is said to be the “chief prince” (10:13), “prince” of Israel (Daniel 10:21b), the “great prince who protects” the Israelites (12:1) and is also referred to as the “archangel” in Jude 9. Thus, it is possible that the words “prince” and “king” are actually used interchangeably in this context, leading to the conclusion that the “kings” and “princes” that detained Daniel’s messenger were indeed dark angels. In light of this evidence, Arnold claims that there is “clear consensus among Bible scholars on this foundational point” (Arnold 1997, 154).

Thus, there is little doubt that the prince of the Persian kingdom referenced here is a dark angel, for as Miller asserts, “no human prince could have withstood” an angel of God (1994, 283). Miller further claims that this dark angel “was either a powerful angel assigned to Persia by Satan or Satan himself” (1994, 285). Furthermore, the cosmic battle presented in this passage involves dark angels wrestling against good angels, and these dark forces appear to have “specific connections to the successive empires of Persia and Greece” (Arnold 1997, 153). In addition, other passages in the Old Testament also suggest that angels have a certain degree of control over nations or people groups (Deuteronomy 32:8, Psalm 82, Isaiah 24:21). Hence, these dark forces appear to affect human relationships and exert

their oppressive influence over earthly governmental affairs (Boyd 2012, 156; Arnold 1997, 153, Miller 1994, 284). Not all scholars, however, are convinced. For his part, Lowe claims that it is erroneous to assume that these spirits ruled over the regions of Persia and Greece (1998, 33), an objection also shared by Priest, Campbell, and Mullen (1995, 68-76).

Thus, though there is strong debate regarding the existence and authority of territorial spirits, a few preliminary conclusions may be drawn. First, this passage does seem to indicate that there are ruling dark forces involved in a cosmic battle in the heavenly realms. Second, although it cannot be directly inferred that such beings form a hierarchical relationship in their rule over territories, the reference in Joshua 5:14 to the “commander of the army of the Lord” may point to some type of authority structure amongst high-ranking angelic beings (Howard 1998, 158). Finally, other biblical passages in addition to Daniel 10 (Deuteronomy 32:17, Psalm 96:5, Psalm 106:37-38, Rev. 18:2)¹² also suggest the existence of ruling spirits over nations and people groups, although little is said about the hierarchical organization or names of these entities and how they relate to one another.

Apart from affirming the ontological reality of dark angels that influence human affairs, it is important to note that Daniel 10 makes no mention of Daniel’s desire to seek out information regarding their identity or location. Rather, these verses appear to teach us two specific truths that assist us in developing a holistic theology regarding God’s role and our role in spiritual warfare. First, the three aforementioned actions that Daniel models elicit God’s response, even though delayed. Daniel set his mind to gain understanding, humbled himself before God, and made earnest intercession for the people of Israel. He was not even aware of the cosmic battle being waged in the heavenlies, but his petitions were heard as soon as he began to pray (9:23). Second, the sovereignty, control, and superiority of God are clearly on display, both in this passage and throughout the entire book of Daniel. “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven” (4:35).

¹² Biblical Scholar Clinton Arnold provides a compelling case for the reality of evil spirits associated with territories and people groups through a detailed study of these scriptural passages.

He is infinitely higher than anything or any power, and his kingdom will be firmly established throughout the ages. As Scripture states, “The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed” (2:22). Thus, primary attention should be given to the actions of Daniel in order to understand our role in seeking an appropriate response to spiritual conflict. Rather than devoting ourselves to myths, “which promote controversial speculations” (1 Timothy 1:4), emphasis must be given to the overarching triumph and superiority of God over the created order.

A final word is necessary concerning the extent of the believer’s authority to “cast out” territorial spirits. To use Arnold’s own description, “We do not have the right to directly command a demon to leave a city, territory or country” (1997, 165). Figure 2 illustrates the limitation of our delegated authority. After all, nothing in Scripture tells us that evil spirits will obey if an “open door” remains. As Arnold contends, where sin is present, the enemy has “an open invitation to stay” (1997, 166). Furthermore, passages such as Jude 8-10 and 2 Peter 2:10-12 seem to caution believers about speaking against angelic or fallen angels. Not even the archangel Michael dared to do so (Jude 9), and Peter admonishes believers who were “not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings” (2 Peter 2:10). Here, the word translated as “celestial beings” is the Greek *κυριότητος*, a term also used in Colossians 1:16 (translated as “powers” in the NIV) and in Ephesians 1:21 (translated as “dominions” in the NIV). Although it is not clear how these believers were accusing “celestial beings,” Peter’s clear warning to not rebuke territorial spirits should ring loud and clear.

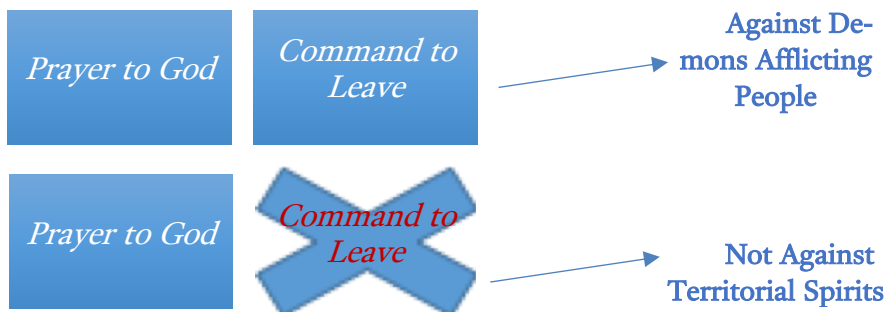


Figure 2: The Extent of a Believer's Authority

Source: Adapted from Clinton Arnold (1997), 3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare, Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, p.164.

Hermeneutical Approach in the SLSW Discourse

Most of the controversies surrounding SLSW arise from the hermeneutical approach its advocates use to defend their position. Although Wagner cites a number of passages as biblical support for his views, two examples will be offered here as representative of his hermeneutical approach. Unfortunately for Wagner, both instances clearly exhibit his unintended proclivity towards eisegesis.

In the first example, Wagner considers Paul's statement regarding "fighting with wild beasts in Ephesus" (I Corinthians 15:32). Wagner interprets this passage as an example of Paul engaging in strategic-level spiritual warfare, claiming that "beasts could well be territorial spirits" (1996, 204). A careful analysis of this passage, however, provides further insight into Paul's experience. While some biblical scholars believe that this phrase indicates that Paul was forced to fight with literal animals in the coliseum as a punishment for an alleged crime, others argue that his wording ought to be understood metaphorically (Thiselton 2000, 1251).

By examining more closely the surrounding context, however, the reader gets a closer glimpse at what Paul intends to communicate. In the verses immediately preceding the aforementioned text, Paul says: "And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day – yes, as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord." (15:30-31). From these verses, Paul appears to face dangers, perils, and daily struggles throughout his missionary journeys. Thus, his fight against wild animals may be a metaphorical reference to both his physical sufferings and the continual resistance he experienced from spiritual forces. To ignore his earthly sufferings and argue that his struggles were caused only by the supernatural influences that were opposing him is an over-simplification of Paul's complex life situation. As Boyd poignantly remarks, "Throughout the Bible, 'earthly' and 'spiritual' battles were viewed as two dimensions of one

and the same battle” (Beilby and Eddy 2012, 135). Although little is known regarding the particular experience Paul is referencing, what is certain is that nothing in the text supports Wagner’s conclusion that “wild beasts” are territorial spirits. Furthermore, regardless of the identity of these beasts, there is again no reference to the Christian’s call to exert authority over them.

The second example of Wagner’s method of scriptural interpretation is found in Acts 19. Here, Paul describes his ministry in Ephesus through power encounters. Interestingly, Wagner believes that Paul’s reference to “fighting the beasts in Ephesus” might be linked to this story (1996, 208). In Acts 19, Paul is ministering in powerful ways, resulting in the healing of the sick and the freedom of those who had been demonized (19:11-12). As a result of Paul’s teachings against idolatry, a great disturbance arises in Ephesus. Demetrius, a silversmith who makes silver shrines of Artemis (Diana), becomes fearful that his economic gains might be undermined, and the temple dedicated to their goddess might be discredited (19:23-27). Because Wagner believes that significant damage to territorial spirits on the strategic level is caused by power ministries on the ground, he offers the following interpretation of the text:

Without overtly confronting Diana herself, Paul and the missionaries had weakened her authority so much that the silversmiths and others rioted. They, along with the general population of Ephesus, were alarmed that Diana’s temple could be despised and her magnificence was being destroyed. Diana had been so powerful that many people thought the very fabric of their lives might be ripped apart if she were harmed (1996, 210).

It is evident that Wagner’s creative explanation is based on mere pre-suppositions and not on direct observations from the text. First, far from exhibiting strategic-level spiritual warfare, Paul’s ministry here seems to be contained to “ground level” warfare if, in fact, he did not overtly confront Diana. The text does not in any way indicate that Paul regarded Artemis as a territorial spirit or that he prayed against her. In fact, the opposite con-

clusion may be drawn. If doing God's work of teaching, healing, and deliverance weakens the power of territorial spirits at the ground level, then these methods seem to be a more effective means for overcoming the powers of evil than simply speculating about whether one has effectively bound a spirit in the heavenly realms. Second, Luke makes no connection between the riot and the weakening of Artemis' authority. Rather, the context points to Demetrius' concern for the loss of his economic benefit. The text indicates that his opposition to Paul was directly linked to his financial interest as a silversmith who received "good income from this business" and was worried that the trade "might lose its good name" (Acts 19:25, 27). Nothing in this passage makes the connection between Artemis losing power and the rioting of the people. Finally, Paul does not seem concerned with engaging in this type of strategic-level spiritual warfare at all. Rather, his interests lie in healing the sick, delivering the demonized, and preaching the gospel. Thus, the text does not offer any clear evidence of Paul encountering or confronting territorial spirits.

Conclusion

To bring this discussion to a close, several remarks are necessary. First, because spiritual conflict involves bringing people from darkness into light, issues arising from experiences not clearly addressed in Scripture must be carefully assessed by the "hermeneutical community of the global church" (Moreau et al. 2002, xxvii). Failure to do so allows individual experiences to create unnecessary controversies that distract the Christian community from our primary calling to evangelism and discipleship.

Second, many of the controversies surrounding the theological foundations of SLSW arise from an inappropriate hermeneutical approach. The biblical texts used to validate this theory do not present any clear evidence that SLSW was ever used to combat the forces of evil. Wagner himself admits that he has been "guilty of drawing some mistaken conclusions on more than one occasion" (1996, 61). Thus, speculating about what might have happened behind the scenes is not the correct approach to properly understanding and interpreting the biblical text.

Finally, Lowe notes that one other danger of this approach is to develop

strategies and theologies based on an “overextended middle” (1998, 110). By placing an excessive focus on subjective interpretations rather than on a balanced biblical perspective that seeks to glorify God, important elements clearly accentuated in the text might be neglected. Needless to say, the focus ought to be placed on *biblical* strategies that further the Kingdom of God and not on personal opinions or interpretations.

Missiological Implications

Despite the many controversies surrounding SLSW, this initiative has certainly encouraged the community of faith to take strides in the right direction. Not only has it made the evangelical church more aware of the urgency of intercession, the importance of corporate prayer, and the reality of the spirit world, but it has also stimulated the birth of new Spirit-led movements. The answer, however, does not lie in seeking to develop new methods, strategies, or techniques in order to gain knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Rather, the solution must be found in recovering practices that will lead to greater fruit in the Kingdom of God. The passion for the lost, the longing for God’s presence, and the importance of unity in the body of Christ are among the redeemable elements of SLSW that should motivate the Church to rescue the timeless practice of intercession.

Thus, as we endeavor to follow the risen Christ and fully embrace his mission, how are we to proceed? First, the development of a more balanced and biblical perspective on spiritual warfare is essential. To under-emphasize the reality of spiritual conflict that many believers and non-believers experience around the world is to give the powers of darkness free reign while people remain oblivious to the attacks and counterattacks of the enemy. On the other hand, to place too much emphasis on the power of evil is to lose sight of the reign of Christ and, at the same time, runs the risk of finding a demon under every bush. We must resist these tendencies and carefully consider biblical principles to train disciples in the area of spiritual warfare. In so doing, we may be fully prepared to “resist the devil” (James 4:7) “when the evil day comes” (Ephesians 6:13). The inherent danger in teaching Christians to fight against principalities and territorial spirits “is that it can arm immature believers with information and models for which

they are not ready” (Friesen 2000, 145). Though certainly pure in intention, much of the SLSW material fosters ambiguity, confusion, and fear in the hearts and minds of its many readers. Emphasis on the authority that God has given Christians to combat the forces of evil as well as the power to live a holy life ought to be the primary focus of teachings on spiritual warfare.

Furthermore, we must remember that although there is a cosmic battle raging in the heavenly realm, “there is, however, no doubt about its outcome” (Hiebert 2000, 119). While the Church expectantly awaits the day when the full restoration of God’s creation will finally be realized, we currently live in the tension of the *already* and the *not-yet* of our times. Because the powers of the old age are still present, the old and the new ages will continue to co-exist until the eschaton is fully realized. The church finds itself actively participating in this cosmic battle. Thus, we must be spiritually prepared to resist the oppressive forces of darkness and equipped to confront all forms of evil in the structural patterns that perpetuate demonic influences in our society, ideologies, and sinful human tendencies.

Second, we must recover the importance of prayer and intercession in our missional endeavors. In a thought-provoking article, Mike Breen proposes that if the missional church could be illustrated as a brand new car, discipleship is undoubtedly the engine. He writes, “No matter how beautiful or shiny the vehicle, without an engine, it won’t go anywhere” (2011). Carrying the analogy further, if the engine of the Church is discipleship, then prayer is the fuel, providing the necessary energy to keep it going. Without filling the gas tank, the car might start, but it will not go very far. Thus, for the Church to be effective in its calling to evangelism and disciple-making, intercession must not be neglected. As Johnstone says, we must go “beyond the present controversy and get on with world evangelization by active intercession for the countries, peoples, and cities still in the thrall of the prince of this world” (Rommen 1995, 139).

From the experiences of countless missionaries and revivalists, we would do well to remember that methods and strategies will prove insufficient unless we recover the urgency of interceding for lost souls and for the brokenness experienced in our world. It is in intercession that we most

clearly see that God's chosen people do not exist for themselves. By humbling ourselves in dependence upon the Father and carrying each other's burdens, we realize that we "exist for the sake of God's glory and his mission, and for the sake of others toward whom God's mission is directed" (Goheen 2011, 26). It is important to remember, however, that though intercession is one of the most vital tasks of a missional church, it is rarely the *only* task. Proclaiming the liberating news of the gospel, reaching out to the destitute through acts of kindness, loving mercy, seeking justice, maintaining personal purity for the sake of the gospel, and striving for unity in the body of Christ are all examples of how Christians ought to be "oriented towards two fronts"—toward God and toward others (Goheen 2011, 26).

Finally, regardless of one's opinions about SLSW, each local church must commit to uniting with other believers and churches in order to deal with demonic oppression and influences at the city-wide level. In times of crises and social disintegration, the Church's influence should permeate the creases of a broken society by modeling a deeper spiritual life and greater unity among the various ecclesial bodies. The Great Commission in its entirety cannot be fulfilled by one individual or church. Therefore, we must work together to effectively be the light of the world.

In recent years, prayer movements have touched the lives of many as a spiritual revival has been birthed around the world. In her book *Desperate for His Presence*, Rhonda Hughey, director of Fusion Ministries, has documented the transformation experienced in several nations as a result of their focus on "pursuing God's presence as our greatest good and as essential to the healing, restoration, and transformation of our cities and nations" (2004, 11). As leaders unite their efforts to pray for transformation in their cities, Hughey observes that "this is not a 'trend' or the latest ministry strategy," but truly a powerful movement of God that is spreading to every corner of the earth to restore and rebuild cities (2004, 13). Hughey's focus is on city transformation that stems from "people unifying in vision and intercession, enabling the heavens to 'open' over a city" (2004, 28). In the last few years, perhaps like never before, a renewed vision for mobilizing people to pray for cities and their nations has been at the forefront of hundreds of

networks created to stimulate corporate prayer.

I personally have witnessed the effects of this renewed emphasis in my own city of Kankakee, Illinois. Recently, two lay leaders from two different churches in our city have brought congregations together across denominational lines with a fervent desire to see God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. One evening each month, members from twenty-three local churches gather to pray for revival and peace in the city. As a result of this initiative, prayer walks have been conducted around the schools, and a spirit of collaboration has developed among the various churches united in this effort. We know that God is glorified through our attempts to build bridges of hope. The following quote from one of the leaders illustrates this goal:

The benefits that we have seen from God’s people getting together to pray are immeasurable. In addition to being able to pray more effectively for each other, breaking down walls based upon pre-conceived denominational and/or racial biases, and showing those outside of the Church that Christians can actually get along, we have experienced ways to effectively be the hands and feet of the body of Christ.¹³

Just as the Israelites were to be “a distinctive people displaying an attractive lifestyle to God’s glory before the surrounding nations” (Goheen 2011, 25), so also should the Church be a beacon of light in the darkness. As we look *upward*, seeking God’s presence so that His work of restoration might flow to all peoples, and *outward*, reaching out to a desperate world devastated by evil, we become the light of the nations. Perhaps, only as we travel along the “narrow road” will the walls we have stealthily constructed around our “city on a hill” come down for all to see the glory of our King.

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¹³ E-mail correspondence with Tom Cooke, one of the lay leaders behind these efforts, on July 22, 2016.

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