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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Phantom Menace: Territorial Spirits and SLSW

Melvin Tinker

Introduction

George Lucas's *The Phantom Menace – Episode 1* of the great Star Wars saga has broken all box office records; so much so that by comparison even *Titanic* has sunk without a trace! But few may have noticed that within Christian circles, there is developing a school of thought which parallels the ideas of Lucas's cinematic epic, and which could conveniently be termed 'Spirit Wars'. Consider the following:

The hypothesis I am suggesting... is that... Satan delegates high ranking members of the hierarchy of evil spirits to control nations, regions, cities, tribes, people groups, neighbourhoods and other significant social networks of human beings throughout the world. Their major assignment is to prevent God from being glorified in their territory, which they do through directing the activity of low ranking demons.¹

To describe this type of spiritual engagement, Peter Wagner has coined the phrase 'Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare' (SLSW). This may be an example of theological art imitating life, since the term carries echoes of Ronald Reagan's 1980s appeal to defend America against the 'evil Empire' of his day by developing the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) or 'Star Wars' programme. Wagner is not alone in promoting this concept. There is now an international group of Christian leaders forming the 'Spiritual Warfare Network' which included David Yonggi Cho, Cindy Jacobs and George Otis Jnr.

What is SLSW?

There are three strands to this new brand of spiritual warfare.

First of all, there is the belief that a hierarchy of demonic spirits with lower ranking fallen angels has power over specifically designated geographical areas. Wagner claims that the first step to effective spiritual warfare is to learn

1 C Peter Wagner and F Douglas Pennoyer (edd) *Wrestling with Dark Angels: Towards a Deeper Understanding of the Supernatural Forces in Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura: Regal Books 1990)

the names and nature of the assignments of the demonic spirits, although this is not absolutely necessary: 'Effective spiritual warfare does not require knowing the names of the spirits, but experience has shown that when we are able to identify them specifically by name, we seem to have more authority over them, and therefore we can be more effective.'²

Others, like George Otis Jr, advocate 'spiritual mapping'.³ This involves extensive research on the religious history of an area, including the prevailing folk religions, superstitions and practices. He assumes that behind such beliefs and behaviour lie malevolent spiritual forces which use them as instruments to blind people to the gospel. As we become more informed about these things, claims Otis, we can pray more effectively against their influence.

The second strand involves dealing with the so-called corporate and generational sins of a region. The leading name here is John Dawson.⁴ The trick is first to identify the sins of a town or city (including its past sins), and then to confess and repent of them on behalf of the inhabitants, allowing offended parties to 'release' forgiveness, for as Dawson says, 'Satan is terrified by reconciliation'.⁵ Wagner gives this notion his complete backing: 'No aspect of warfare is more important than identificational repentance' (the term given by Dawson to describe this process).⁶ He also writes: 'Through accurate and sensitive spiritual mapping we can identify strongholds rooted in unremitted sins of past generations.'⁷

The third element of SLSW is 'in your face' prayer warfare (my term). Cindy Jacobs, for example, draws attention to the way Jesus ended his temptations in the wilderness: 'Away with you, Satan.' Here she argues, is biblical warrant for praying against territorial demons in an area.⁸

2 C Peter Wagner *Confronting the Powers: How the New Testament Church Experienced the Power of Strategic-Level Warfare* (Ventura: Regal Books 1996) p 200

3 George Otis Jr 'An Overview of Spiritual Mapping' in C Peter Wagner (ed) *Breaking Strongholds in your City* (Ventura: Regal 1993)

4 John Dawson *Taking Our Cities for God: How to Break Spiritual Strongholds* (Creation House 1989)

5 John Dawson *Healing America's Wounds* (Ventura: Regal 1994) p 276

6 C Peter Wagner *Confronting the Powers* pp 249-62

7 C Peter Wagner *Confronting the Powers* pp 158-9

8 In C Peter Wagner *Warfare Prayer: How to Seek God's Power and Protection in the Battle to Build His Kingdom* (Ventura: Regal 1992)

For those who might be disposed to dismiss such ideas as belonging to the Christian fringe in North America, let me quote two examples which relate to events and ideas in Hull and North Yorkshire. First:

Hull isn't all bad or all good, it's a mixture, just like you and me. There are good and bad things in its history and about it at present. There are signs of the Kingdom of God but also boulders in the path of the people of Hull coming to Jesus as Lord and saviour... There are roots in Hull's past that need to be brought to the cross and repented of; some of these were done to Hull, some are at least in part its own responsibility... By these processes and as we pray through this special year, we hope that the spirit, the 'Angel of Hull', will be set free to fly, to be all that God intended it to be.⁹

Second:

On March 17 of this year (St Patrick's Day), a major reconciliation event was held at St Mary's Church, Whitby. At this event, two men (representing the ancient Celtic church and the later more dominant Roman church) asked for and received forgiveness for the divisions and hurts caused through the famous Synod of Whitby in 664 AD. From that date onwards, the church in Britain lost the rich, vibrant and aggressively missionary culture of the Celtic Christians to the more formalised and hierarchical Roman structure. The leaders of the three churches believe God has called them and their churches together to build on and 'tap into' the breakthrough that took place that night.¹⁰

Such beliefs are becoming increasingly common. But is there sufficient biblical warrant for such views?

The Bible and Territorial Spirits

In a recent book entitled *Spiritual Warfare – What does the Bible really teach?*,¹¹ Dr Clinton Arnold reviews the biblical material and makes several statements like these (all italics mine): 'Turning to the Scriptures for insight

9 *Hull a City of Hope* produced by 'The Angel Group' 1999

10 'The Good News' July 1999

11 Clinton Arnold *Spiritual Warfare, What does the Bible Really Teach?* (Marshalls 1999)

about the so-called territorial spirits, we *will not find much*, but there are a few important passages that clearly affirm the reality of demonic spirits associated with territories.¹² ‘The New Testament gives us little direct teaching about angelic patrons over cities, territories, regions or nations. Jesus says *nothing* about these higher-level spirits. *Neither* does the Book of Acts *contain explicit teaching* about them.’¹³ ‘Paul’s references to the “principalities and powers” says *nothing* about regional or city spirits.’¹⁴ Referring to Revelation 18:2 Arnold writes:

This passage *does not explicitly speak of* territorial spirits, but *could* include them. More important, Babylon is personified as a woman in Revelation 17 and is depicted as riding on a beast. This animal represents demonic power since it came up out of the Abyss (Rev 17:8). The passage thus affirms and illustrates the close nexus between a city and a demonic power that influences the human rulers of the city.¹⁵

What does Arnold conclude from this?

The biblical and historical evidence supports the idea that there are territorial spirits. These are fallen angels that wield some kind of dominion over people groups, empires, countries or cities. They exercise their supernatural power not only to bring harm and misery but, most important, to keep people from coming to a knowledge of the one true God.

However, he is critical and cautious of some of the methods advocated by the SLSW approach: ‘The evidence does not appear to suggest a strategy for dealing with territorial spirits similar to what some are proposing today.’¹⁶

Here we have an example of a scholar who wants to have his cake and eat it. He openly admits that the biblical basis for such beliefs is slender and that no evidence exists which ‘describes, or instructs us on how, or even whether, we are to engage these high-ranking territorial spirits’.¹⁷ Yet, because of a prior

12 Arnold *Spiritual Warfare* p 170

13 Arnold *Spiritual Warfare* p 177

14 Arnold *Spiritual Warfare* p 178

15 Clinton Arnold *Spiritual Warfare, What does the Bible Really Teach?* (Marshall's 1999) pp 178-9

16 Arnold *Spiritual Warfare* p 181

17 Arnold *Spiritual Warfare* p 183

commitment to the idea of territorial spirits, he attempts to give credence to the notion by a process of supposition, speculation and unwarranted extrapolation.

There are two main biblical passages which form the basic point of reference for territorial spirit beliefs: Deuteronomy 32 and Daniel 10.

In Deuteronomy 32:8 we read: 'When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the *sons of Israel*.' It is generally agreed that the phrase 'sons of Israel' would be better rendered 'sons of God' as attested by the Septuagint and Qumran. This carries the idea that as the imperial monarch rules his provinces through governors and satraps, so God governs nations through the members of his heavenly court (cf Psalm 82). However Israel is special in that God governs them directly: 'For the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance' (v 9). The question still remains whether some of these 'sons of God' are malevolent, but even if the answer is yes (and the 'judgment' passage of Psalm 82 seems to suggest this is so (vv 1-2, 6-9)), God remains sovereign over them, achieving his good and eternal purposes. This is the distinctive theological emphasis of the Book of Daniel.

In Daniel 10 we have more than an indication that behind the earthly struggle of God's people there is an invisible 'heavenly one'. Thus an angel appears to Daniel and explains his delay: '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' (Dan 10:13). Later Daniel is informed by the angel: 'Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come.' Note how Michael is referred to as a 'prince' as are these other two beings. This distinguishes them from earthly kings and confirms the view that they are angelic beings. However, there are two important points to note. First, it would be a mistake to speak of such beings as '*territorial* spirits' as if there is a specific link between angelic activity and a geographical location. Such spirits are to be associated more with political and religious power and ideologies which in this passage cannot be separated. In 1 Corinthians 10:20 Paul tells us that when people worship idols (as did all these world powers), it is not statues which they worship but demons. Behind the national gods of Persia therefore, there were supernatural and evil personalities, feeding and directing malice

towards God's people. For this reason, we cannot deny that there is a demonic influence in the political/religious/ideological spheres of life. But this is not the same thing as tying demons to specific areas. (If the territorial view is correct then every time there is a boundary reorganization or the break up of a country – like Yugoslavia – there would presumably have to be a political reshuffling of the demonic cabinet!)

Secondly, Daniel is not commanded or requested to offer prayers to 'bind' or 'oust' these 'princes'. This is not surprising given that one of the main theological motifs of the book is the sovereignty of God. Daniel simply gets on with the business of being a faithful witness in captivity, praying that God's purposes will be fulfilled. Where he does confess a nation's sin, as in chapter 9, it is not of the 'identificational repentance' variety as propounded by Dawson; rather, he prays on behalf of God's covenant people as a member of that covenant community. He does not 'repent' on behalf of the Babylonian Empire. The equivalent today would be church leaders interceding for the church, confessing the sins of God's people and pleading for mercy and renewal. To quote Arnold: 'What the Book of Daniel does impress on our hearts and minds so clearly is the absolute sovereignty of God. He is in control of history. God knows and has predetermined the succession of empires. He is infinitely superior to the heavenly powers.'¹⁸

Even with these two 'proof texts' from Deuteronomy and Daniel no major theological doctrine or Christian practice is built on them in Scripture. Should we not follow the Bible's example in this regard?

Ephesians – a Test Case

It is not unreasonable to suppose that if any biblical support is to be found for SLSW, it would be in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Given the nature of idol worship in Ephesus, as we see from the cult of Artemis (Acts 19) we would expect at least some indication of the sort of 'spiritual warfare' technique advanced by Wagner, but we find no such thing. There is no evidence that Paul encouraged or engaged in prayers against territorial spirits in his ministry in Acts. He simply preached the gospel and carried out his apostolic ministry. Here is Arnold's comment (remembering he believes in

18 Clinton Arnold *Spiritual Warfare, What does the Bible Really Teach?* (Marshall's 1999) p 176

territorial spirits):

The silence of Scripture on the issue of strategy is quite evident. When we consider that the New Testament records the spread of the Gospel into pagan lands where idols and occultism held sway, it is very surprising to find no mention of a strategy that stresses discerning, naming and praying down territorial spirits.¹⁹

Commenting specifically on the Ephesus mission he writes:

Neither is there any indication that Paul himself regarded 'Artemis' as the high-ranking spirit over Ephesus and the west coast of Asia Minor, nor do we see Paul confronting or instructing his converts to engage the territorial spirit behind Artemis worship... What Luke stresses in his account of Paul's ministry in Ephesus is Paul's evangelistic teaching (in the synagogue and then in a lecture hall) and his deliverance work.²⁰

Paul's letter to the Ephesians confirms the account of his ministry given by Luke. There is no mention of praying down territorial spirits or mapping the spiritual territory. There was no need for this, as Paul teaches the supremacy and victory of Jesus over all authorities (visible and invisible) as won at the Cross, the fruits of which are now being demonstrated to all and sundry in the context of the church.

The Location of the Spiritual Battle

The classic passage on 'spiritual warfare' occurs in Ephesians 6, which is the climax of all that has gone before and must be understood within the context of the letter as a whole. In chapter 1 Paul has made it clear that Jesus Christ is the source of all spiritual blessings; we have redemption in him (v 7); we are God's possession, sealed by the Holy Spirit (v 14) having a power at work within us comparable to the power that raised Jesus from the dead (vv 19-20). If that is so, then who needs to tap into some other power by re-enacting and repenting for the collective sins of the past? Jesus is above every rule and dominion, ie he is Lord of all (v 22). With what purpose in view? His exalted status is to be used exclusively for the sake of his church, which is his body

19 Clinton Arnold *Spiritual Warfare, What does the Bible Really Teach?* (Marshalls 1999) pp 183-4

20 Arnold *Spiritual Warfare* p 191

(v 25). A key passage is Ephesians 3:10: ‘His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.’ The church is both the custodian of the mystery of the gospel (Eph 3:9) and its visible expression (Eph 3:10). Given that it is the church which is the manifestation of God’s plan of redemption and the instrument through which he brings this plan about, it follows that the main object of the devil’s attack will be the church itself. We might well expect the local church, as the expression of the heavenly church, to be the main spiritual battlefield, and that is exactly what Paul teaches.

The power of the gospel message has been made manifest in bringing into being a believing community. So in chapter 2:1-3 it is men and women outside of Christ who are dead in trespasses and sins. In terms of their social and intellectual environment they follow the ‘ways of the world’, ie a mindset in opposition to God. There is also the effect of their natural fallen inclination, which Paul calls the ‘flesh’, as well as the influence of a supernatural opponent, ‘the prince of the power of the air’. Paul does not give priority to one over the other; both are involved in corrupting rebellious mankind.

The status and standing of Christians could not form a greater contrast to this. They are members of a supernatural community in which God dwells by his Spirit (Eph 2:22). They are no longer slaves to evil forces, but ‘through faith in Christ can approach God with freedom and confidence’ (Eph 3:12). As such they are ‘to be strong in the Lord and his mighty power’ (Eph 6:10) all made available to us by Christ’s victory on the Cross, appropriated by simply believing the gospel message (Eph 2:8).

The Nature of the Battle

In Ephesians 6:10 Paul writes: ‘For our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.’ Demonic spirits certainly exist, but the term Paul uses to describe our contending with them is taken not from the military sphere, but the world of wrestling. What actually happens?

In Ephesians 6:10 Paul refers to the devil’s ‘schemes’, literally ‘stratagems’.

What this involves has already been explained at length in Ephesians 4:14 where the same phrase occurs, calling for Christians to grow in biblical knowledge so they might not be ‘blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men and their deceitful *strategems*’. In other words, the devil will try and destabilize Christians and corrupt the church fellowship through false teaching (perhaps through teaching which would have us looking for ways of countering Satan which are not legitimate because he does not adopt them!).

The devil is also mentioned in Ephesians 4:27: ‘Do not give the devil a foothold.’ How? The injunction comes in the middle of some practical teaching about the way Christians are to relate to the body of Christ (the church) because of their new life in Christ (vv 25-32). More specifically it is through anger (v 26) that a foothold *within* the fellowship can be given to the devil. What better way to discredit the church’s claim that reconciliation and peace have been achieved through the Cross (Eph 2:15-16) than to encourage bitter wrangling between believers! The spiritual battle is less glamorous, more personal and nearer to home than the SLSW programme would have us believe.

■ The Means of Conducting the Spiritual Battle

The call in Ephesians 6:10 is for everyone *collectively* to put on the whole armour of God, an allusion to Isaiah 59:17. The trap Christians can fall into is to be mesmerised and led astray by the power of the extended metaphor Paul employs, thus providing more grist to the mill for the new spiritual warfare advocates. If we put to one side the components of the armour metaphor, we are left with basic ‘down to earth’ Christian truths and practices which are far from romantic but are nevertheless very demanding.

Here they are:

Truth: (v 14). Holding on to right doctrine as well as speaking the truth and not lying to each other (Eph 4:15).

Evangelism: the gospel of peace (v 15). That is how the church in Ephesus was established in the first place: ‘And you also were included in Christ when you *heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation*’ (Eph 1:13). No special prayer march or spiritual mapping here, just arguing the gospel in the synagogue and lecture theatre for a period of two years. The result? People

were converted. They repented of their magic arts – no extra special ‘ministry’ to deal with ‘generational sin’ is recorded or required – the gospel is God’s sufficient means of making us into God’s workmanship (Eph 2:10). Certainly Paul prayed and asked for prayer, but he never asked for spirits to be bound. All he wanted was the spiritual strength he needed to preach the gospel fearlessly (Eph 6:19).

Faith (v 16) is a personal trust in God and not in techniques. It is holding on to, and working out, the implications of our secure position in Christ which is our salvation (v 17). We are put into a right relationship with God and are therefore called to live right lives before him (righteousness (v 14)) including our lives at home and at work (Eph 5:22–6:9). How is that faith and knowledge fed but by the Scriptures, which is the Spirit’s sword (v 17)?

Finally there is *prayer* which is integral to everything, praying *in* the Spirit *for* all the saints (v 18). There is not even a hint that we are to pray against territorial spirits.

The Objective of the Spiritual Battle

The aim of our spiritual warfare is not to disarm principalities and powers, which Christ has already done (Colossians 2:15). That is why he is seated above every rule and authority and why in principle Christians are seated with him in complete security (Eph 2:6). The objective of spiritual warfare is to ‘stand’. Four times Paul speaks of this. By standing firm we testify to whatever principalities and powers there may be of Christ’s victory on the Cross. By standing and not being distracted into dubious ‘ministries’, we get on with evangelism declaring the ‘gospel of peace’ and so see others drawn into his kingdom. By standing firm we engage in believing prayer, praying for the right things with correct understanding and so advance Christ’s cause in the world.

Conclusion

One of the greatest successes of the Second World War was Operation Fortitude. This was the invention on the part of the Allies of a fantasy invasion force directed at the Pas de Calais. A fabricated ‘1 Army Group’ was created in south-east England. Using a massive array of dummy landing craft and a signals network, a phoney order-of-battle was established bigger than the actual 21 Army Group which landed in France. The deception was so effective that it kept many of Rommel’s major Panzer divisions pinned down

at Calais well after the D-Day landings had taken place. Is there not a parallel to be drawn with what is happening in some church quarters today? As we have seen, no convincing scriptural evidence exists for territorial spirits or the practices being advocated attendant upon such beliefs. What is being proposed by the proponents of SLSW is very different from the practice of the apostles. The result is that through a sad and bitter irony the devil is achieving his own *Operation Fortitude*, distracting Christians from the business they should be engaged in by getting them to focus their attention on what is in effect a 'phantom menace'. Surely, it is now time to abandon wild speculative ideas with their equally bizarre and strange practices and get back to the clear world-view of the Bible and the old evangelical belief in the power of the gospel. If we do not do so the deception will continue and we can only shudder to think what the consequences might be.

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