

Professor of the Spirit

Years ago theologian C. Peter Wagner fought with Pentecostals. But after an encounter with the Holy Spirit he became one of the world's leading proponents of spiritual renewal.

When he arrived in the Bolivian jungle in 1956 to work as a missionary,

C. Peter Wagner was what theologians call a cessationist. He and his wife, Doris, went to South America with dreams of influencing the region for Christ. But Wagner's conservative religious views left no room for miracles of any kind.

A respected director for the Andes Evangelical Mission, Wagner had been taught in seminary that New Testament-style miracles such as healing or speaking in tongues didn't happen anymore. His theology insisted that the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as described in the apostle Paul's writings, had ceased after the early church age.

So the Wagners didn't plan for anything supernatural to happen on the mission field—and they got what they expected. Results were pathetic, and their churches didn't grow. Then, in the mid-1960s, Wagner's frustration erupted into anger when a Pentecostal evangelist came to the city of Cochabamba and tacked placards on telephone poles, advertising healing services. Wagner warned his parishioners not to attend.

"I thought it was a scandal that Christians would have a meeting in a vacant lot," Wagner recalls. "So I preached that healings can't happen today, that we have clinics, doctors and hospitals nowadays for sick people."

But Wagner faced two problems. First, members of his

congregation went to the meetings despite his objections. Second, some of them were healed.

This was a difficult predicament for a pastor who believed that Pentecostals belong in the lunatic-fringe category. He tried to defend his anti-Pentecostal views by telling himself that the evangelist in Cochabamba was using mind-control to induce results.

After fretting over the issue for months, Wagner visited a Methodist church in Cochabamba where a respected American missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, was a guest lecturer. Wagner admits he “sneaked in the back of the church like Nicodemus and found a dark space to hide.” When Jones asked people to come to the altar to receive prayer for healing, Wagner refused—despite the fact that he had an infected cyst on his neck that had become an oozing sore.

Just that day Wagner’s doctor had told him that the cyst was getting worse and would require surgery. But Wagner wouldn’t budge from his seat. How could a cessationist admit he needed supernatural healing?

As if the visiting preacher knew Wagner was hiding in the shadows, Jones announced: “I know some of you need healing, but you won’t come forward. So I am going to pray for you also.” Jones prayed, and Wagner quickly left the church—hoping his missionary colleagues wouldn’t recognize him.

But a surprise was waiting for Wagner when he got home and took off his bandage. The stubborn cessationist was the victim of a miracle. “That sore was healed, and it never came back,” Wagner says. “And that began to change our lives.”

Introduction to the Spirit

Despite this first supernatural encounter in Bolivia, Wagner did not become a Pentecostal overnight. (He still shuns the term.) But in 1967, when he and Doris returned to California on furlough, they began to reevaluate everything they'd been taught about the Holy Spirit.

A teacher at the Fuller School of World Mission, Donald McGavran—in an effort to track spiritual trends—challenged the Wagners to study churches that were growing. This forced them to realize that they'd misjudged Pentecostalism.

“McGavran told us that you should look at the churches where the blessing of God is resting,” Wagner says. “Well, in Bolivia the churches that were growing were the Pentecostal ones. But I couldn't go there because they were my enemies!”

So Wagner went to neighboring Chile, where South America's first megachurches were emerging. There he saw Christians prophesying, speaking in tongues, dancing in the Spirit and winning new converts. Suddenly he realized that Pentecostals were not lunatics after all. They were, in fact, the future of Latin American Christianity.

The Wagners had been wrong, and the realization was embarrassing.

“We came back to Bolivia and said to ourselves, ‘How could we have been so stupid?’” Doris recalls. “We had never thought of praying for sick people. We sat at the bedsides of people and let them die. And in our 16 years of work in Bolivia we never

saw a demon. We just weren't trained to be on the front lines."

Today, neither of the Wagners is angry with the people who taught them to deny the Holy Spirit. "We never got upset at them,"

Doris says, "because we always believed that those guys did the best they could with what they had. They just weren't open to the gifts of the Spirit."

Wagner himself experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit before returning from the mission field. He then wrote Look Out! The Pentecostals Are Coming, released in 1973 after he began teaching at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He had no idea at that time that God would use him to ignite a renewal movement from his classroom at Fuller.

That is literally what happened in 1982 when Wagner asked an unknown evangelist named John Wimber to help teach one of his courses. A recently converted musician, who had turned down the chance to manage one of The Beatles' U.S. tours, Wimber was an unlikely candidate to serve as guest lecturer at a seminary.

But Wagner was attracted to Wimber's simple faith and his hippie passion for evangelism. He was also intrigued that Wimber witnessed regular healings, though Wimber admitted privately to Wagner that he prayed for sick people for a year before he saw anyone healed.

That semester about 100 graduate students enrolled for the Signs, Wonders and Church Growth class. Wimber taught 98

percent of the course while Wagner watched with glee as his pupils—many of them from cessationist backgrounds—learned about how God can use healing, deliverance and other miracles to spread the gospel.

Wimber actually laid hands on students and prayed for healings during his lectures. During one class Wagner himself was healed of high blood pressure. After receiving prayer he became faint and fell on the floor in front of the class.

“Somehow I felt disconnected, but I knew I had not passed out. It was before I had ever heard about anyone being ‘slain in the Spirit.’” Wagner says.

At the same time Peter was learning about healing, Doris found herself in situations where she had to learn about demons. Once, a distraught Asian student came to her office at Fuller seeking prayer. Before the session was over, Doris commanded a spirit of lust to stop tormenting her, and the girl immediately vomited.

“I’d never been taught anything about deliverance, but by default I suddenly became the local ‘expert,’” Doris says. People began making appointments with her for deliverance ministry, and before long she was casting out spirits of Freemasonry, Hindu idolatry and all types of sexual immorality.

Interest in the Signs and Wonders class increased, and enrollment grew to 325 within a few years. But as reports of healings and deliverance circulated on campus, the spiritual climate at Fuller grew hostile. Conservative professors got anxious and ordered Wimber out of the classroom in 1985. They

came after the Wagners next.

“I was hung out to dry,” Wagner says with some sadness. “Those were the most painful years of ministry.”

Out of 12 key faculty members who had decision-making power at Fuller, 11 of them opposed him. He was almost kicked out of the seminary, but Wagner kept his cool, maintained his thick skin and remained a gentleman.

In the end, Wagner stayed on the faculty, and the cessationists who opposed him backed off. The worst name they ever called him, Wagner says, was “charismatic” (a term he disliked at first but is more comfortable with today). Wimber was called worse names, including “heretic,” but after he left Fuller he continued to grow his network of Vineyard churches until his death in 1997.

A Holy Spirit Scientist

Today it is safe to say that C. Peter Wagner, now 73, the former cessationist who fought Pentecostals in the 1960s, is doing more to encourage Pentecostalism than any theologian on the planet. The man has written 62 books, the most popular title being *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Make Your Church Grow*, which has sold 250,000 copies.

Unlike many academicians who write at a tedious college-reading level, Wagner is a populist who tries to reach average laypeople. None of his books ever hit a best-seller list, but total sales of all his titles is more than 2 million copies. Considering that many of his books are used in seminaries, Bible colleges and independent church-training centers and are

available in 25 languages, Wagner's impact seems staggering.

"Peter's contributions have always pushed us forward," says his pastor, Ted Haggard. "He's a continual student, always learning and writing about his discoveries. He's an innovative creator and an adventurous pioneer."

"There's no doubt in my mind that future generations will look back and consider Peter Wagner a giant in the faith like D.L. Moody, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Charles Spurgeon," adds Alice Smith, executive director of the U.S. Prayer Center in Houston.

Although he still teaches part time at Fuller, Wagner left the confines of the seminary in Pasadena several years ago to find room to grow. A free thinker who can't be boxed in, he needed a new home and younger associates who would be more supportive of his unconventional philosophy of missions and church growth. He found this home in 1996 in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he established his own ministry, Global Harvest, and a 21st century extension seminary called the Wagner Leadership Institute with a current enrollment of 750 students.

From his office at the World Prayer Center, located on the grounds of Haggard's New Life Church, Wagner writes books, organizes conferences, prepares lectures and mentors young leaders. He is a dynamo who refuses to slow down, in spite of his diabetes, his wife's debilitating arthritis and the criticism that has followed him since the days of the Signs and Wonders course at Fuller.

Wagner is in so many ways a man ahead of his time. Despite his

grandfatherly demeanor (friends joke about his resemblance to Colonel Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame), he does not act like a 73-year-old professor. He is computer-savvy and proficient in PowerPoint. Because he's not afraid of change, and because he loves to question the religious status quo, he seems younger than pastors half his age.

At his core, Wagner is a scientist of the Spirit. Like a spiritual meteorologist, he observes church growth, missionary statistics, occult activity and global political trends and then tries to find out which way the wind is blowing. When he tracks something important, he publishes his results and then moves on to the next discovery.

His passion is world evangelism. He's a visionary, but he isn't content to motivate Christians with vision alone. He's also a pragmatist. He aims to arm the church with the tools to do the job.

If we intend to win the world for Christ, Wagner says, then the church must get serious about reaching Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. He organized the United Prayer Track for the 10/40 Window Campaign in 1991, one of the most ambitious prayer efforts ever attempted. Taking their cues from Wagner, millions of Christians prayed for the evangelization of the world's most restricted countries during an eight-year period. The Strategic Prayer Network, which he directs, has mobilized 2 million intercessors for international evangelism efforts.

Wagner is not an ivory tower guy. He stays connected to the grass roots. A workhorse who puts in 12-hour days, he currently chairs nine organizations including the International Coalition of Apostles, which serves leaders of

independent charismatic church networks, and the Apostolic Council of Prophetic Elders, which offers accountability to those involved in prophetic ministry.

He also provides spiritual oversight to a number of recognized national ministers including prophet Chuck Pierce, Cindy Jacobs (whom he helped launch into broader ministry in 1989), California-based apostle Ché Ahn and Michael Fletcher, who leads a growing network of churches based in North Carolina.

“God has used Peter Wagner to bring spiritual gifts into operation in noncharismatic evangelical churches, the prayer movement into the 10/40 Window, and now the fivefold ministry into the forefront of the Christian movement,” Fletcher says.

“He’s a pioneer,” adds Jacobs, who considers Wagner a mentor. “He is always open to the new things the Lord is saying to the body of Christ. He doesn’t want to get stuck in the old.”

Wagner thrives on adventure. His travels have taken him all over the globe (he helped lead a “prayer journey” to Kazakhstan in November), and he keeps a running list of exotic meats he has eaten in foreign countries. The list includes dog’s spinal column from South Korea and cow’s eye and monkey’s arm from Bolivia, as well as boa constrictor. “And I still want to eat rat in China,” he says with a grin.

He also knows how to relax. He and Doris built a home in the Rocky Mountains, where he displays his collection of antique farm equipment—including a restored 1937 John Deere tractor—to remind him of his boyhood home in upstate New York. He raises llamas on his property and spends his leisure time reading westerns and collecting jokes (his ministry associates kid him

about his need to find new ones).

But with all his varied roles—theologian, author, missiologist, futurist, strategist and drum major for the prayer movement—Wagner is also a reformer who is not afraid to rock boats and challenge religious mind-sets. And that is why controversy always follows closely behind him.

“When Peter sees the need for change in the body of Christ, he is not afraid to seek the Lord and present the needed paradigm shifts—even if they are controversial,” says Pierce, who has worked closely with Wagner since 1991.

Today, Wagner’s primary focus is on how the charismatic renewal is changing the 21st century church. His theory, which he articulated in 1999 in *Churchquake!*, states that Christianity is being redefined by new, independent church networks that are governed by modern-day apostles. Before long, Wagner believes, denominations as we know them will take a back seat as these newer groups grow.

Wagner says these new churches will “evangelize the world 10 times faster” than older denominations that have become encumbered by what he calls “the spirit of religion.” And he goes further to warn that those who are attempting to reform denominations from within are probably fighting a losing battle.

“I don’t condemn the old networks,” Wagner says. “But people are now realizing that they have spent 30 or 40 years trying to pour new wine into old wineskins. They are attempting the impossible.”

Obviously Wagner's perspective is not welcome at most denominational headquarters. Some leaders, including many in the Assemblies of God, view Wagner's teachings on the apostolic movement as extremist. But when challenged, Wagner digs out his research and points to the evidence: In developing nations such as Nigeria, Guatemala or Ukraine, he says, it is newer indigenous church movements that are growing the fastest.

Wagner's message is what you would expect from a professor: Don't argue with the facts.

He swallowed that advice more than 30 years ago when he didn't want to admit that Pentecostal churches were growing in Latin America. As a result, a cessationist joined the very movement he had once criticized—and became its most prolific defender.

Philosopher of a Revolution?

As a tracker of trends and an advocate for reform, C. Peter Wagner is one of the most unique theologians of our day.

Don't let C. Peter Wagner's straight-laced appearance or his daunting academic credentials fool you. He may look like a bookworm with his white beard and dark-rimmed glasses, but you will not find this man hiding behind his Ph.D. in an ivory tower. The polite-looking scientist is really a grass-roots reformer whose favorite sport is overturning the tables of today's stodgy religious establishment.

"I hate the spirit of religion," Wagner told Charisma in a recent interview. "The spirit of religion's assignment is to prevent the body of Christ from moving into the next season.

It tries to maintain the status quo.”

Wagner doesn't like status quo anything, and he will not let religious spirits hang around without a fight. Give him a paper and a nail and he will post his own set of theses on the Wittenburg doors of the modern church. And he won't worry too much if people get upset.

The 73-year-old professor began his reform efforts 30 years ago when he published his first book, *Look Out! The Pentecostals Are Coming* (Creation House). In it he challenged staid evangelicals to reassess their theology to make room for spiritual gifts such as healing and casting out demons. It was not a popular message in 1973.

Using his scientific pragmatism and a keen sense for tracking spiritual trends, Wagner noticed that Pentecostal churches around the world were growing at a time when evangelical churches in the United States were becoming stagnant. He probed, examined data and was willing to throw out his own theological biases. His conclusion: There is an undeniable link between church growth and Pentecostal phenomena.

Most people in the academic community ignored Wagner's research. Meanwhile his colleagues at Fuller Theological Seminary in California tolerated his unorthodox behavior in class and allowed him to teach a course about signs and wonders. (He's probably one of the few seminary professors in the world who can boast that 44 percent of the people he prayed for in his classes were healed of physical ailments.)

Fuller's professors thought he was too radical when he introduced the course on miracles in 1982. Little did they

know that Wagner would soon become a drum major for several controversial movements within the church. Among the causes he has championed:

Territorial spiritual warfare. Wagner has been a leading proponent of the theory that nations, cities and unevangelized people groups can fall under the control of invisible demonic powers. In books such as *Confronting the Powers* (Regal, 1996), he offers a biblical basis for what he terms “strategic-level” warfare that involves fasting, casting out demons and prophetic intercession. He also argues that early Christians understood territorial warfare principles when they evangelized the Roman Empire.

Personal prophecy. In the early 1990s Wagner endorsed the ministries of prophets such as Cindy Jacobs, Bill Hamon and Chuck Pierce, and he later convened the Apostolic Council of Prophetic Elders to encourage integrity in the expression of the New Testament gift. He is also eager to tell how the Holy Spirit has used prophecies to provide him with personal guidance.

The new apostolic reformation. Wagner made new enemies—particularly among some Assemblies of God leaders—when he began advocating in 2001 the emergence of modern-day apostles as a key to church growth. He maintains that denominations (which he refers to as “old wineskins”) quickly grow ineffective and bureaucratic when they deny the ministries of gifted apostles.

“Christianity is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” Wagner says. “We will evangelize the world 10 times faster when we embrace those ministries.”

The “extended” church. Wagner believes that during the next 10 years empowered laypeople and anointed “marketplace apostles” will establish unorthodox church models that will operate outside the normal confines of church networks and denominations—and he expects the established church to oppose this trend vehemently.

“The kingdom of God is not confined within the four walls of the church,” Wagner says emphatically. “So God is shaking things up and offending denominations.”

J. Lee Grady is the editor of Charisma. He interviewed Peter Wagner last summer.