

DEMON-POSSESSION AND PASTORAL CARE

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At the outset it will be fitting to quote the well-known words of C.S. Lewis who wrote in the preface of 'The Screwtape Letters', that fascinating and revealing treatment on the activity of devils, that "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors..." (Lewis, 1959,3).

It could be argued that Lewis' counsel from the 1950's has largely fallen on deaf ears, for in the 1990's - many years after the first appearance of Lewis' book - we are faced with the reality that a large section of Christendom continues not only to ignore but to even deny the existence of devils, while on the other hand an ever-increasing section of the Christian church is busy doing just the opposite, viz. "to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in devils".

The Church of Scotland, in its 1976 pronouncement on exorcism, may be cited as an example of the first-mentioned position. Its General Assembly in that year accepted advice to 'enjoin ministers to refrain from conducting a special ceremony of exorcism' on the grounds that *all so-called 'demonic possession' was 'of a mental and psychological nature'* (italics mine, KVV) and that 'a special ceremonial designed to expel evil spirits must tend to produce a misunderstanding of the role of the pastor which seems to give him magic powers...' (Virgo, 1987, 215).

The second position is held by those who are affected by what is called the 'charismatic revival'. Many people in that section of the church are of the opinion that exorcism of evil spirits is to be attempted more or less as a routine activity in the context of personality problems, such as mental weakness, spiritual temptation, etc. Writes Collins:

... in some Christian circles, the devil seems to get more credit and attention than he deserves. Satan is blamed for all problems and annoyances. Rebuke and exorcism are the preferred methods (and in some churches the only methods) of problem solving and there is little place for compassion, understanding, and sensitive Christian counseling. (Collins, 1998, 572).

1. The reality of the demonic.

The two positions outlined above must be considered as being at extreme ends of the spectrum. The denial of the existence of the demonic is at odds with the testimony of Scripture, while the same may be said of the opposite view which appears to become increasingly prevalent in the Christian church with the continued growth of the charismatic renewal movement: *i.e. to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them (devils)*.

What then is the testimony of Scripture, and how can it be of help to the pastoral care giver, who is faced by the claims of both these extreme positions? Other contributions in this issue will have a more detailed look at the testimony of Scripture, but it will be of value to sketch at least a few broad lines here.

Probably the most triumphant emphasis in Scripture is that *Christ is Victor!* The promise of Genesis 3:15 (*viz.* the seed of the woman will crush the head [of the offspring] of the serpent) has become a reality in the cross and resurrection of the 'offspring of the woman', Christ Jesus. Time and again this theme appears on the pages of Scripture. Already in the Gospels it is unmistakably clear that Christ is LORD, e.g.:

- the evil spirits obey Him, for He has authority over them (Mark 1:27, 6:7, Luke 9:1, 10:19)
- the prince of this world will be driven out; he stands condemned (John 12:31, 16:11)
- the strong man is tied up (Matthew 12:29, Mark 3:27).

The apostle Paul encourages the congregations with the same *good tidings*:

- "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20)
- "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness" (Colossians 1:13)
- "having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15)

The Hebrews hear the same gospel:

- "so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14)

And the apostle John testifies that:

- "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work (1 John 3:8).

Now it is true – as well as extremely important to take careful note of – that the Scriptures also state that Satan, though mortally wounded (his head crushed!), is still showing much activity in his death throes. Every Bible reader is well aware of the subtle attacks by Satan on Christ at the very beginning of his ministry (Matthew 4, Luke 4). We read of Satan entering Judas (Luke 22:3), filling the heart of Ananias (Acts 5:3), even tempting Peter (Matthew 16:23). We read that *even now* Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14); that the whole world is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19); that the devil has taken people captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26); that the enemy the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8) and that Satan leads the whole world astray (Revelation 12:9).

2. Satan is bound.

Well may we ask: what precisely is Satan's *present* position? Is he defeated, or is he not? If his head is crushed, why is he still able to go around like a roaring lion? How can he possibly be the ruler of this world *after* the cross and the open grave? To what extent can he affect the well-being of Christ's Church and the advance of God's Kingdom? Is he really able to interfere in the lives of even God's own people? Comments Leahy:

Certainly the Bible does not minimize the sinister power of the Evil One...But it remains to be asked if Satan is a monarch in some divinely granted domain, or a vanquished foe, an impostor, a liar and a deceiver. Scripture leaves us in no doubt about the answer to this important question. (Leahy, 1990, 24)

It is essential to see the question of the extent of Satan's so-called authority in the light of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. When that Lordship is given its full weight, the inescapable conclusion is that Satan has *no* authority! When Jude writes that Satan is bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day (Jude 6), that surely means that the sentence passed upon him in Genesis 3 has decisively been executed in the cross and resurrection of Christ.

The Colossians 2:15 reference was quoted earlier: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." F.F. Bruce comments on that truth as follows:

... He grappled with them and mastered them, stripping them of all the armour in which they trusted, and held them aloft in His mighty, outstretched hands, displaying to the universe their helplessness and His own unvanquished strength ... now they are disabled and dethroned, and the shameful tree has become the victor's triumphal chariot, before which His captives are driven in humiliating procession... (Bruce, 1957)

The above should not lead to an attitude of carelessness, as if Satan and his devils are of little or no consequence. But the Scriptures forbid us to hold exaggerated views of his authority and power. The conflict between God and Satan is not a struggle between two great powers with the outcome in the balance. We fight a mortally wounded enemy. His pretension to dominion is a lie. He is a usurper with no authority. He is an impostor, a squatter with no rights.

The binding of Satan is so real that he has no authority or power over the Christian. In Christ the believer is safe and victorious. "The evil one cannot harm anyone born of God", declares the

apostle John (1 John 5:18). The prince of darkness has no authority over Christ (John 14:30); consequently he has none over those who are in Christ and who share in His victory over evil (Leahy, 1990, 30,31).

These truths are basic to the ministry of the Christian care giver. To deal with people in need can be done on no better foundation than the awesome truth of the Kingship of Christ. His authority over every human and demonic power must be accepted in faith and applied with assurance. That does not guarantee instant results as regards healing and wholeness, but it does provide the essential perimeters within which one can confidently minister and be ministered to.

3. Can a person today be possessed by Satan or a lesser demon?

Even though the Scriptures give abundant testimony to the Kingship of Christ, and to the fact that Satan is bound, the Gospels, particularly, attest to the fact that there was an abundance of demon possession during the time that Jesus was on earth. A brief look at these occurrences in the *New Testament* may be helpful before we consider the question whether there is any demon possession *today*.

In the Gospels the fact of demon possession is mentioned more than 50 times, while there are also references to it in the book of Acts. The possession of human beings by demons is written about in the Scriptures as an *actual* occurrence, and not - even though many are asserting this - as a primitive explanation for madness, epilepsy or other mysterious afflictions and diseases. Luke the physician (who certainly must have shown some professional interest in these matters), but also Matthew and Mark, make a clear distinction between demon possession and other illnesses which may have been caused by disease or injury (Luke 4:40,41; 6:17-19; 9:1,2; Matthew 4:24; 10:1; Mark 1:32).

Symptoms of madness and illness due to demon possession include convulsions (Mark 9:18,20,26); self-injury (Luke 4:35, Mark 9:18,22); bizarre behaviour, isolation and withdrawal (Luke 8:27); deafness and dumbness (Mark 9:17-27). When Jesus was accused of possessing a demon, he was at the same

time declared to be talking utter nonsense, being raving mad (cf. John 7:20; 8:48 ff; 10:20,21; Mark 3:21,22,30). In our day, when we have begun to understand that the same perceptual symptoms that lead to bizarre or insane behaviour may arise from various distortions of bodily chemistry resulting from the use of hallucinogenic drugs, from significant sleep loss or from bodily malfunctions, there should be no difficulty in believing that insane behaviour may also stem from other causes, including demon possession (Adams, 1977, 116).

In the context of redemptive history it is generally accepted that Christ, in his earthly ministry, was directly opposed by satanic forces in an extraordinarily intense confrontation. At all costs Satan sought to prevent the Son of God carrying out His saving work, and the forces of evil showed their destructive work again and again. But more powerful was the ministry of Christ in casting out these same demons!

It is surely for a specific purpose that the writers of the Gospels often make reference to Christ in his activity of exorcising the demons; it is central to their message. This particular ministry is to be understood in eschatological terms as evidence of the messianic identity of Jesus, who came not only to preach about the Kingdom (Mark 1:14,15), but also to usher it in and establish it (Matthew 28:18,19; Acts 1:3; Adams, 1977, 117).

There is Biblical evidence that shortly before the second coming of Christ there will again be an intense activity of satanic forces. Revelation 20 speaks of Satan being released from his prison for a short period to deceive the nations, before being "thrown into the lake of burning sulphur". It will again be a period of intensive demonic influence, before the glory of the new heaven and the new earth will appear. In 2 Thessalonians Paul also writes about the present restraint which is imposed upon the forces of evil. Once more - though for a brief period - the "work of Satan will be displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders", but the Lord Jesus "will overthrow them with the breath of his mouth and destroy them by the splendour of his coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10).

It appears that the message is unmistakable: unless there is irrefutable evidence that the return of the Lord is imminent, the period in which we live at present is characterized by the fact

that *the demonic is bound*, that *the lawless one is held back*, that *the strong man is tied up*.

However, these Scriptural statements need to be balanced with other Scriptures which have been referred to earlier. Our struggle is still "against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil" (Ephesians 6: 11 ff.), and the call to Christians is ever to be alert. For this reason it may be argued that Adams is overstating the case when he comments:

This curtailment or restraint upon Satanic power and influence necessarily involved the virtual cessation of such activity by his demonic forces. This accounts for the rare incidence, if not the entire absence, of demonic possession in modern times. It is possible, of course, that demonic activity is still being curtailed *as the gospel penetrates* new and previously untouched communities of the world ... The eschatological timetable and the nature of the present millennial era adequately account for the failure of the modern church to encounter demon possession as a common daily phenomenon. (Adams, 1977, 118)

Such comments as the above do not appear to give a proper Scriptural balance concerning the demonic by referring to the present-day activities of these evil forces in such terms as: "virtual cessation"; "rare incidence"; "if not the entire absence". Demonic activity and exorcism continue after Pentecost (Acts 19:11-20). Demon possession has been reported throughout the history of the church, especially in places where the gospel was making initial inroads into pagan areas (cf. John L. Nevius, in his classic *Demon Possession*).

Unbelievers most certainly are captivated by Satan and his forces: they are 'of the devil', 'children of the devil' (1 John 3: 8,10). John, in his first epistle, sees two families, 'the children of God' and 'the children of the devil'. The one family is governed and moulded by the devil whose evil character is stamped upon it. The other family is governed by God's Word and Spirit and it reflects the divine character. Those who are members of the family of God need not fear the evil one. They are to be alert and watchful and clad in the armour which God supplies; but in

Christ, their victorious Redeemer, they face the devil and his dark angels fearlessly (Leahy, 1990, 176).

There is no biblical reason to think that demonic possession can occur in the life of a *believer*; it cannot! The Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, and it is impossible that at the same time he or she is indwelt by an evil spirit. *Demonic oppression* (a term favoured in Pentecostal and charismatic circles) is said to be the 'thorn in the flesh' for Christians, but biblical substance is lacking for such a position (Acts 10:38 certainly cannot be referred to as evidence), especially when the symptoms of *demonic oppression* appear to be little or no different from *demonic possession*. When it is claimed that *demonic oppression* often represents a strong and controlling influence over Christians, and that at times even exorcism may be necessary, it is clear that the position described above is certainly lacking in biblical credibility.

4. What is wrong with current popular Christian teaching on the demonic?

The current popular teaching within sections of the Christian church has already been mentioned briefly at the beginning of this article. It is the view that many personal problems arise from demonic influence and must be treated by diverse forms of spiritual battle, at times also exorcism. Those who are of that conviction – and their number seems to be on the increase – gather to pray for deliverance and demand that demons of depression, lust, anxiety, anger, confusion, etc. depart when they are commanded to do so in the name of Christ. Packer identifies that situation well when he comments: 'But if all of life is seen as a battle with demons in such a way that Satan and his hosts get blamed for bad health, bad thoughts, and bad behaviour, without reference to physical, psychological, and relational factors in the situation, a very unhealthy counterpart of super-supernaturalism is being developed' (Packer, 1990, 196).

Packer is not the only one who sees this view as 'a major obstacle to moral and spiritual maturity.' Already more than twenty years ago the Christian Reformed Church in North

America stated in their *Synodical Report on Neo-Pentecostalism*(1973):

Again in our day and in the western world, there are reports of demon possession and exorcism. We express great reservation about some of these reports and the indecent eagerness with which some gospel practitioners "diagnose" cases of demon possession, when the difficulties are cases of hardened sinfulness, character weakness, natural resistance to the gospel, self-induced fears, mental illness or diseases such as diabetes ("sugar demon"). All of these are serious and the Christian counselor, minister or physician must and can deal with them according to biblical insight. (p. 463, Report 34, Acts CRC 1973)

The comments above were made in the early seventies, but they are as relevant to today's situation as they were then.

Some other voices are worth listening to.

- David W. Van Gelder, in the *Journal of Pastoral Care*, June 1987, describes and analyzes a case of demon possession experienced by a sixteen year old boy, and he offers theological and psychological interpretations of the case. He certainly leaves some room for the phenomenon of demon possession and exorcism, but also states: '(before this particular exorcism) I believed most present-day cases to be fake; I still do' (Van Gelder, 1987).
- Leslie Virgo comments on the (excessive) talk of devils and demons and deplores such a way of understanding both personal problems and psychological disturbance. People who hold this conviction tend to see themselves as some sort of battle ground of the Spirit against the devil. One's own sense of identity and personal responsibility is diminished, perhaps to the point of extinction (Virgo, 1987, 204).

A representative group of evangelicals who form the intercession group of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation raised similar concerns (July 1993). Some of their warnings are particularly relevant:

- "There is a danger that we revert to thinking and operating on pagan world-views or on an undiscerning application of Old Testament analogies that were, in fact, superseded in Jesus Christ."
- "A preoccupation with the demonic can lead to avoiding personal responsibility for our actions."
- "A preoccupation with the powers of darkness can exalt Satan and diminish Jesus in the focus of His people."
- "The tendency to shift the emphasis to `power' and away from `truth' forgets that error, ignorance and deception can only be countered by biblical truth clearly and consistently taught."
- "We observed the tendency to emphasize technique and methodology in the practice of spiritual warfare, and fear that when this is dominant it can become a substitute for the pursuit of holiness and even of evangelism itself." (*The Australian Evangelical*, 4/93, p.6)

5. What are Christians to do when Satan attacks them?

In the Lord's Prayer Christians pray: `...deliver us from evil (from the evil one)'. Well do they need to pray such words, for even though they "are not unaware of his schemes", they are to be careful "that Satan might not outwit us" (2 Corinthians 2:11). How can they take their stand against the devil's schemes? By being strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. By putting on the full armour of God ... the belt of truth ... the breastplate of righteousness ... the gospel of peace ... the shield of faith ... the helmet of salvation ... the sword of the Spirit ... the word of God (Ephesians 6:10-20). Once this stance is taken, it is simply a matter of resisting the devil steadfastly. He must flee.

A proper understanding and appropriation of the gospel and its implications is essential in extending pastoral care to those who are attacked by Satan. They must be taught, again and again, what the believer possesses in Christ. Those who believe in Jesus Christ are secure because he or she is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, free from the power and jurisdiction of Satan: "The evil one cannot harm anyone born of God" (1 John 5:18).

Faith must be exercised:

- "... take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6:16)
- "Resist him(the devil), standing firm in the faith ..." (1 Peter 5:9)
- "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4: 7)
- "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them (those inspired by the spirit of the antichrist), because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Christians are repeatedly assured of their safety in Christ. At the same time we are warned that it is possible to forget that God's people are in a spiritual struggle and that they should remain alert to satanic influences in their own lives and in the lives of those they are called upon to care for (Collins, 1988, 572).

6. Is there a difference between demon possession and psychological problems?

In our own time, the sorting out of physical and psychological symptoms which can mimic certain operations of the devil (particularly depression and manic elation, inferiority feelings, and schizophrenia) will have to be carried out by pastoral care givers who are well trained both in biblical truth and pastoral psychology (Lovelace, 1979, 141). Yet it must be recognized that most psychological problems are *not* the result of demon possession (Minirth et al, 1992, 19).

Meier (et al) gives the following list of guide-lines:

1. The demon-possessed have extrahuman strength.
2. The demon-possessed react negatively to the name of Jesus Christ, while those with psychological problems usually respond positively.
3. There is a change of voice when the demon speaks.
4. Demon-possessed people can perform supernatural acts.
5. Demons speak logically while individuals with psychological problems sometimes do not.
6. Those possessed often have a past history of occult activities such as participating in seances or Satan worship.
7. Demon-possessed individuals do not respond to therapy. (Meier et al, 1991, 260).

The earlier mentioned report on *Neo-Pentecostalism* (Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1973) states that there are two things common to cases of demon possession in Scripture in any detail: the affected person is helpless to deal with it and the demon(s) speak independently of the person's volition. Sane Christians who have met with demon possession have also noted that whenever there is doubt whether or not one deals with a genuine instance of demon possession, there will be immediate and sometimes violent opposition to the mention of the name of Christ.

Even so, it is certainly not a clean-cut affair to distinguish between psychopathology and demonology, between the need for psychotherapy and the need for spiritual warfare (Collins, 1988). There may on occasion be a situation where spiritual forces are at work which are unmoved by traditional methods of counseling, viz. counseling is ineffective because of powerful satanic influences within the counselee's life. Counsels Lovelace:

Once the activity of Satan has been detected in any situation, unusual caution or elaborate rituals of exorcism are not necessary to handle the enemy forces. Nevius found that the proximity of strong Christians and the reading of Scripture was enough to drive off many of the possessing spirits he encountered. (Lovelace, 1979, 141/142).

Most writers agree that the approach to exorcism should be done cautiously, reluctantly and carefully. Very often the ordinary remedy may not be exorcism but counseling into the fulness of Christ. However, there may be rare occasions that some form of exorcism should be considered, though Collins warns that dealing with the demonic should be done only by the spiritually mature, and by those whom the church recognizes as being specially gifted as 'discerner of spirits' (Collins, 1988, 571).

Some twenty years ago the archbishop of the Church of England in Great Britain gave the following advice as regards exorcism:

1. It should be done in collaboration with the resources of medicine.
2. It should be done in the context of prayer and sacrament.
3. It should be done with a minimum of publicity.

4. It should be done by experienced persons authorized by the diocesan bishop.
5. It should be followed up by continuing pastoral care. (Virgo, 1987, 215/216).

The final point mentioned is quite vital. Continuing pastoral care is essential, even if exorcism has taken place. The client may see exorcism as shifting the blame for his condition off himself and on to a demonic third party. No true healing can come about until the counselee learns many things about himself that he formerly found unacceptable so to do, and until he learns the freedom to accept Christ for himself and, within that freedom, to accept responsibility for his own actions (Virgo, 1987, 216).

Collins sounds a very similar warning when he states that there are some who use exorcisms as a way to avoid the work of counseling or to inadvertently hide their ignorance about human behaviour. Warns he:

Counselees can misinterpret comments about Satan, sometimes develop paranoid fears of the demonic and often have their problems made worse when they hear they are demon possessed. The problems are accentuated when exorcisms fail to bring any change, but the counselee is left to struggle both with the original problem and with the belief that he or she is possessed by demonic forces. (Collins, 1988, 571)

7. The return of Jesus Christ.

No one knows the day of the Lord's return. When that time draws near there will be a noticeable increase in demonic activity (Revelation 20:3,7), but the Lord of lords and the King of kings will be the Victor and the new heaven and the new earth will come in all their glory. Until then, God's church is to be ever watchful in the struggle against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil. The most powerful weapon which Christ has given to His church is the Word of God proclaimed in the fulness of His Spirit. That Word speaks words of comfort and admonition: 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you' (James 4:7).

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