

My First Exorcism

Foreword

Rev. Dr. John W. Kleinig

In his Preface to “The Screwtape Letters” C. S. Lewis makes this shrewd observation:

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve 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 and hail a materialist and a magician with the same delight.”

I would add another pair. It is just as foolish for pastors to presume expertise in diabolical activity as to ignore them. The measure of an effective pastor (and his theological stance!) is his ability to minister to people who are under spiritual attack and to learn from that experience.

A calm discussion on demon possession, like any serious theological reflection on it, is, of course, deeply embarrassing even in Christian circles in those countries that have been shaped by the ideology of the Enlightenment. That view of the world sets up an iron curtain between the natural, material world and the supernatural, spiritual over-world. It also completely discounts the existence of a supernatural, spiritual underworld. Thus both demons and the devil are, theoretically, expunged from the cosmos by definition. If only it were that easy! Their possible existence is ruled out of order except as the phantasies of an unstable imagination. Yet for all that the demons refuse to be excluded. They still haunt us, even though we don't know what to do with them, let alone think of them.

In contrast with the western denial of the demonic realm, most other cultures take the existence and activity of demons for granted. And that from their experience of them! Thus the exorcism of demons is vital to the mission of the churches in the second

and third worlds. There evangelism involves the ministry of deliverance, for wherever the gospel is proclaimed in a pagan environment the demons emerge for hiding. And they have to be dealt with, spiritually. That too is increasingly so in North America, Europe, and Australia as the effects of apostasy from Christ are experienced and the walls that have kept the demons at bay come down! Something is changing at the deepest levels of popular culture as the spiritual world is once again rediscovered by our compatriots in many different ways. This rediscovery has, in turn, produced a deep and yet somewhat indiscriminate interest in spirituality as they try to make sense of what they experience. It is not entirely clear why and how this has happened. But it has, and it is, I think, likely to accelerate.

This change of perception first struck me in my first years as a young pastor from 1969-1972, a tumultuous time of social, cultural and religious upheaval that swept across the western world. As a result of sexual experimentation, the use of hallucinogenic drugs, and the counterculture that celebrated emotional liberation through them, young people experienced for themselves, emotionally and psychologically, imaginatively and cognitively, the wonderful and yet terrible realities of spiritual goodness and spiritual wickedness. With that came the call for teaching on spirituality and the need for deliverance from demonic darkness in all its ugly manifestations. I still remember, vividly, the first time an evil presence looked straight at me with malice and mockery through the eyes of a teenage girl and addressed me with an alien voice quite unlike her own. By sheer necessity I, like Harold Ristau, had to engage in the ministry of deliverance, something that I had not been trained to do. Both then and in later instances I was guided by what I knew from the ministry of Jesus in the gospels and what I learned gradually from painful experience.

As I welcome this lively study by Harold Ristau on his first exorcism, I am grateful to him for his reflection on it and on what he has learnt from it. As a pastor and theologian I resonate with much of what he says. He speaks from within his own

tradition as an orthodox Lutheran pastor at a time when his own church is rediscovering its own heritage of teaching on spiritual warfare. While his approach is popular and useful for any mature Christian, this book is addressed, mainly, to other pastors. It is not a handbook on exorcism or a pastoral treatise on the ministry of deliverance. It is, instead, an extended pastoral case study, based on and inspired by his first experience of an exorcism. It combines his description of that encounter with a Biblical, theological reflection on it and the implications of it for his own theological and spiritual self-understanding. Thus he does not prescribe any particular method of exorcism, but shows how the ministry of deliverance is to be undertaken as part of the whole counsel of God, the whole of Christian doctrine, and the whole enactment of God's word in the divine service.

Ristau is to be commended for his sober, pragmatic approach to an issue that is all too often treated sensationally. Contrary to popular misconceptions of demonization as a single, uniform state of oppression, there is a spectrum of demonic activity that ranges from accusation and condemnation to what is somewhat mistakenly described as demon possession. And each of these attacks needs to be dealt with differently. Since the devil is the master of chaos and confusion, the father of lies, it is also unhelpful to look for order where it does not exist. Thus the pastor does well to deal with what is presented as it occurs, without undue reliance on any set pattern or a stock ritual procedure, in providing Christ's help for people under demonic attack. Each case is different and is usually part of a process rather than a single dramatic event, a process in which the causes for attack are dealt with, new defenses are erected, and the soul is gradually healed.

Ristau is also to be commended for his consistent emphasis on the three basic, interrelated resources that are available to pastors for ministry to people who are under demonic spiritual attack. First, exorcism is not an exercise in personal spiritual expertise or power; it is always the exercise of Christ's authority in the office of the ministry and of

faith him. Thus office of the ordained ministry provides all that is needed for him to deal the master of insubordination and his insubordinate cronies. By himself the pastor has no authority or power to silence them and put them back where they belong. He depends entirely on the authority of Jesus Christ and the power of his Holy Spirit.

Second, since exorcism depends on Christ's victory over the devil and all the powers of darkness, the pastor's basic weapon, his sword, is the Spirit-filled word of God. God's word alone has the power to penetrate the dark corners of the human heart and to drive the devil from the stronghold of the guilty conscience. Nothing else can do that. When God's word is spoken out aloud and addressed to the conscience of the hearer, the demons are unsettled, disempowered and put to flight. Of all God's words the most powerful is the most holy name of Jesus. The reaction to that name shows the spiritual state of the hearer. The proclamation and confession of Jesus as Lord brings deliverance.

Third, since pastors, like the twelve apostles (Matt 10:1; Mark 6:7; Luke 9:1), are commissioned to drive out demons in the name of Jesus, they rely entirely on his help in the ministry of deliverance by praying to the Father in his name. They ask for protection and guidance from the triune God and that best by praying the Lord's Prayer. Therefore the ministry of deliverance is the faithful ministry of intercession which relies on God's word to know what to pray for, and how. If in doubt about what is going on; if uncertain about what to say or do, the pastor resorts to prayer for the troubled soul and himself as Christ's representative. By praying he, as it were, steps aside, so that the interaction between him and the harried soul becomes an encounter between Jesus and the devil, the Holy Spirit and the unclean spirit.

The anecdotal and reflective character of this book does not claim to provide its readers with the final word on demon possession and exorcism. It is, instead, a tentative exploration of the issue that aims to stimulate reflection and encourage action. More than anything else it sets out to give pastors confidence in helping people who are

under demonic attack or disabled by the devil. By telling his own story and sharing his own reflections on its significance, Ristau encourages all pastors and all faithful Christians to be vigilant against the devil in all his many guises and to resist him by their faith in Jesus (1 Pet 5:8-9).