

Caring and Confronting

- practical steps to help people find key life changes

CARING

Quietness and confidence

‘In quietness and confidence
shall be your strength.’
[Isa 30:15]

‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and do not lean on your own understanding.’
[Prov 3:5]

When you reach out to a person in need, or they turn to you for help, your sense of inadequacy can be enormous:

- You are aware of your own needs and weaknesses;
- You are aware of the extent of the person’s difficulties;
- You are aware of your lack of experience and skills.

We come as ‘broken people helping broken people’. We come as friends; sharing simply what we have: love, time, a few material things perhaps, and our experience of Jesus [cf. Acts 3:6].

In a proper sense, recognising your limitations within the situation is probably your greatest strength:

- It will save you from simplistic responses and solutions;
- It will make you all the more sensitive to the person;
- It will cast you upon God and the need to see him work.

God has promised that if we are quiet and confident he will be our strength and that we are to trust him above all else. If we need wisdom we have only to ask him and he will give it to us [Jas 1:5]. No matter how experienced we become, we must never lose this sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and dependence on the power of God. It is this creative power of God alone which brings people to wholeness, whatever pathways he may choose to use in the process.

Open and honest

Our whole attitude is to be gentle and non-judgemental; we are there as a friend. The sad thing is that in the past Christians often have been critical and condemning and this is sometimes what people expect or in fact have already experienced.

We are to be unshockable. We probably think ourselves as broad-minded but it is still possible to communicate guilt, judgment and disapproval even in our unspoken



reactions. To do this will close the doors between us and the person we are trying to help. We must also be aware that they may attempt to shock us to gain our sympathy or to fix their identity; we must avoid being trapped by this. God is not shocked, just saddened – the real issue is, do they really want things to be different?

Being loving and gentle does not mean being soft on people. We will need to be as firm and strong as we are kind and understanding. If people genuinely want help we are there for them at any cost, but we will not be manipulated or exploited for no reason. There should be a sense of mutual respect. This is a delicate area between the person's needs and our own. Also many of the needs people have may need strong, firm handling. True gentleness is made up of a love that has to be robust. Love is tough.

We need to be open and honest at all times with the person we are helping. Early on it is important to ask them:

- 'What do you really want?'
- 'How do you feel I can help you?'
- 'What are your expectations in talking with me?'

All this helps to see the starting point clearly.

It is often helpful to ask the person to prepare something in writing beforehand about the issues they are facing. This will probably help them to talk more easily and concentrate their thinking more clearly. This will also help when it comes to advising them.

WISDOM AND TRUTH

Self-portrait

We have listened, heard and begun to understand. What do we do now?

It is very important that the person we are trying to help remains active in what continues to happen. Having spoken it is easy for them to take a passive role and want you to tell them what to do. Avoid this. You are working together with them to find answers.

Get the person to put into as clear words as possible what they believe the difficulties and problems really are, in the light of what they have told you:

- This will help them to see for themselves what the issues are;
- This will help them to be more objective about their situation;
- This will help them to put their problems in perspective;
- This will help them to work, with you, on a strategy for change.

Talk through the person's 'self portrait' with them:

- What are the real issues? Identify them clearly [e.g. relationships, fears, impulses, behaviour, etc.];
- Draw out their feelings [e.g. grief can express itself in anger, sorrow or guilt];
- Help them to find the origin of their feelings [e.g. a truly innocent remark may have been taken as hurtful];
- Get them to identify their strengths [e.g. build a positive self-image; work from strength into weakness].

Whatever the person's needs we must do everything possible to help them take responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and actions. Whatever anyone has done to them they personally decide as to how they will respond. They have freedom of choice and this fact both gives them dignity as human beings and will also shape their future. God will come in and work in and through their choices; but what they decide is key. We must help people to help themselves; never doing anything for anyone that they are able to do for themselves:

- This gives the person their dignity before God;
- This retains their dignity to act as responsible adults;
- This puts them more in command of their own situation;
- This increases their self-respect and ability to cope.

Speaking the truth in love

Together you and the person will have gone through their story and have defined their needs. But as they have been speaking you may also have felt the Holy Spirit impressing you with thoughts and insights about the person which may even appear unconnected with the words they have been speaking. Now is the time to raise this with them and see their reaction. It will soon be clear whether God is in the impressions you have gained or not. If there is no positive response let it rest. You may be mistaken, or things may become clearer as you continue. Spiritual 'knowledge' is a gift [1 Cor 12:8] but develops with use and maturity.

Once the issues are clear they need to be examined in the light of God's truth. This is the central point in helping someone. It is God's truth which sets people free [John 8:32], it is God's words of truth which inspire the faith that enables them to respond [Rom 10:17]. Give time and take time to 'speak the truth in love' [Eph 4:15].

Soaking the person gently, but relentlessly, in truth creates an environment in which miracles can happen in their lives. You confront all the issues, all the feelings and emotions, all the painful experiences. You see them for what they really are. There is room for the person to express their anger, frustration and disappointment against God and against others; but you keep coming back to how God feels and what he says and what he wants to do. If there is a willingness to hear and respond to God, the person will begin to come to a place of faith and decision.

The biblical truth of forgiveness is crucial here:

- God is a God who forgives [Ps 103:3];
- His forgiveness is absolute [Ps 103:12; Isa 38:17];



- Forgiveness is possible because of Jesus [Matt 26:28; Heb 9:26];
- Confession is the key to forgiveness [Matt 6:12; 1 John 1:9];
- Forgiveness is final and continual [1 John 1:7];
- Forgiveness is akin to 'virginity' [2 Cor 11:2; Rev 14:4].

Challenges and choices

The person has now come to the place of decision. Remember that repentance [Gk *metanoia*] is a whole change of mind that brings about a whole change of attitude that is ongoing; it is not just a one-off act. The key questions are: 'What do they want to happen?' 'What are they prepared to do?'

- There are events in the past that need settling;
- There are issues in the present that need dealing with;
- There are patterns in the future that need establishing.

Prayer is an essential and central crisis point:

- Remember that the Holy Spirit is present in power to work;
- Sit the person comfortably and ask them to relax;
- Ask them what they want God to do for them;
- Pray briefly that the person will be at peace and able to receive;
- Ask the person to be sensitive to God saying anything fresh to them as prayer is taking place;
- Next it is very important that the person themselves prays, in a clear and detailed way, asking God to deal with each of the issues [e.g. repentance, forgiveness, release];
- Pray for the person yourself, supporting the issues they have prayed about; if some of the issues appear to have a negative spiritual hold connected with them take authority over them in the name of Jesus;
- As the time of prayer concludes affirm the things that God has done and encourage the person to confirm them as well.

Having given time to prayer review what has happened, and having made practical plans for the days ahead:

- Get the person to recall the decisions that have been made that need to be implemented; get them to make contact with you as each step is taken;
- Identify where there is to be an *ongoing choice* to see changes in behaviour and attitudes;
- Ask the person what has been important to them about the time together; these could be helpful as reference points in the future;
- Encourage them to *keep giving thanks* to God for what he has done and is doing, and to draw strength from him as the future unfolds;
- Encourage them to give time regularly to reading the Scriptures and praying; you might suggest passages for them to read and meditate on and so reform their thinking;

- Recognise a sense of ‘open-endedness’ about the time; some issues still need work on, other things may yet emerge in the future; this is fine and to be expected;
- Decide when you are going to meet again and what you plan to do at that meeting;
- Conclude by affirming your complete commitment to them and the promise that you are there for them whatever;
- If regular support, beyond what you can give, is needed, work to make this available for them.

DISCERNING AND CONFRONTING

Recognising demonic activity

Some of the problems that people face may have roots in demonic activity. The Synoptic Gospels clearly show exorcism formed a significant part of Jesus’ public ministry. However, we need to show great caution as we approach this subject. This is an area of pastoral care in which significant psychological and spiritual harm can be caused. At the outset it is important to make a couple of observations:

- Some Christian literature refers to demonic activity as ‘demon possession’ but notice that the Gospel accounts use terms such as ‘demonised’ or ‘having a demon’ rather than the extreme language of ‘possession’.
- We must take seriously the difference in culture between 21st-century Britain and 1st-century Palestine. On the one hand this means that we do not have the necessary cultural background to help us to make a demonic diagnosis easily. The mainly secular worldview in the West does not take the existence of demons seriously. Because of this we may have to re-imagine the Gospel accounts in ways that make sense to our Western minds.

So, the argument that says, ‘Jesus cast out demons and so should we’ is far too simplistic. Our task of recognising and interpreting demonic activity must involve us drawing insights from anthropology, sociology, medicine and psychotherapy as well as biblical studies and theology.

Mapping religious systems

Social anthropology has devised a number of ways of explaining and mapping religious belief systems. The anthropologist Paul Hiebert uses a two-dimensional map.¹ The vertical axis, which he names **immanence-transcendence**, has three segments:

- The lowest segment is the familiar world that is directly observable by the senses;
- The highest segment is the unseen world that is independent of our world and inhabited by cosmic beings or forces;

¹ Paul G. Hiebert, ‘The Flaw of the Excluded Middle’, *Missiology* 10/1 198235-47.



- The middle segment is the intersection between this unseen world and our world. It is inhabited by ghosts, spirits, ancestors, demons, etc. This has been ignored by modern thinking but is actually vital for understanding any religious belief system.

The second axis Hiebert calls **organic-mechanical**; this defines whether a religious system explains experience in terms of beings such as gods and spirits, or impersonal processes such as fate or karma. It can be set out as follows:

Organic Analogy	Mechanical Analogy
<i>High Religion:</i>	<i>High Religion:</i>
Cosmic gods	Kismet
Cosmic angels	Fate
Cosmic demons	Brahman / karma
Spirits of other worlds	Impersonal cosmic forces
<i>Folk Religion:</i>	<i>Magic & astrology:</i>
Local gods & goddesses	Mana
Ancestors & ghosts	Astrological forces
Spirits	Charms, amulets & magical rites
Demons & evil spirits	Evil eye, evil tongue
<i>Folk Social Science:</i>	<i>Folk Natural Science:</i>
Interaction of living beings	

Social anthropology, according to Hiebert, must take the middle segment seriously and deal with it phenomenologically. By this he means that phenomena such as demons, ancestral spirits, etc. have to be understood within the terms of the belief system itself. If people embrace a religious system that includes demons in its worldview then for those people demons really exist. As an outsider it is highly arrogant and ethnocentric to state that although a belief system talks about demons it does not really mean they exist. However, although anthropologists must strive to give as clear a phenomenological account of the religious system as possible, this does not, of course, mean that they must agree with all the statements that are made.

Synoptic accounts

Turning to the stories in the Synoptic Gospels about exorcism it is clear, according to Hiebert's map, that they fall into the category of folk religion. We must take these narratives seriously within the culture of the time. They do presuppose the existence of demons and the ability of exorcists to perform cures on people who are demonised. Because of this we must not quickly jump to some hidden, symbolic

meaning contained in the stories. Nevertheless, when we examine the narratives we see that the demonology is, in fact, quite complex.

Mark 1:21-28 (Luke 4:31-32)

- In synagogue
- Unclean spirit (Luke – spirit of an unclean demon)
- ‘Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God’
- Jesus rebukes the demon: ‘Be silent and come out of him!’
- Convulsions and crying with a loud voice
- Jesus has authority and power over the demons.

Mark 5:1-20 (Matt 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39)

- Unclean spirit (Matt – two demoniacs; Luke – having demons)
- Superhuman strength and violence
- Jesus commands the unclean spirit to come out
- ‘What have you to do with me/us, [Jesus] Son of [the Most High] God?’
- ‘What is your name?’
- ‘Legion,² for we are many’
- Demons ‘given permission’ to enter herd of swine
- Demoniac who had had the legion (from whom the demons had come out) sitting, clothed and in his right mind
- Jesus asked to leave by the inhabitants
- Man stays and proclaims throughout the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him.

Mark 7:24-30 (Matt 15:21-28)

- Syrophenician’s daughter has an unclean spirit (Matt – severely demonised)
- Jesus deals with the demon from a distance
- Demon departs / daughter is healed.

Mark 9:14-29 (Matt 17:14-21; Luke 9:37-43)

- Dumb spirit (Matt – epileptic; Luke – a spirit)
- Seizure, convulsions, foaming and grinding of teeth
- Disciples unable to cast it out / heal him
- Jesus rebukes unclean spirit: ‘You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again’
- Spirit cries out and convulses him
- Disciples cannot cast it out because ‘this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer’ (Matt / Luke – because of their little faith).

Matt 9:32-34

- Dumb demoniac
- Demon cast out and man speaks.

² In the Greek this is a loan-word from the Latin with clear allusion to the Roman armies occupying the region.



Matt 12:22-30 (Luke 11:14-23)

- Blind and dumb demoniac (demon that was dumb)
- Healed (demon had gone out)
- Beelzebul controversy
- 'I cast out demons by the Spirit / finger of God'
- Sign of the kingdom of God having come.

Luke 13:10-17

- Spirit of infirmity
- Bound by Satan for 18 years
- Spinal deformity
- Jesus lays hands on her and she is healed.

Mark 1:32-34, 39; 3:7-12 (and parallels)

- Summary accounts
- Sick, afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics

Specific diagnosis

At least four of the Gospel exorcism accounts involve physical conditions:

- Epilepsy
- Blind and dumb demoniac
- Dumb demoniac
- Woman with spinal deformity

Yet, elsewhere in the Gospels:

- Matthew distinguishes epileptics from demoniacs (Matt 4:24)
- A deaf and dumb man is healed without exorcism (Mark 7:31-37)
- A blind man is healed without exorcism (Mark 10:46-52)
- Those with physical deformities are healed without exorcism (Mark 2:3-12; 3:1-5)

These accounts pose difficulties for the modernist idea that what the stories attribute to demons we can now, in the light of advances in medical knowledge, understand as really being mental illness or epilepsy. According to these narratives, demons can cause such physical ailments as blindness, deafness / dumbness, and even spinal deformity. On the other hand, it is not possible to construct a simple list of groups based on types of illnesses from these narratives either. Blind people may be healed (Matt 20:29-34) or exorcised (Matt 12:22); likewise those who are deaf / dumb (Mark 7:31-37; Matt 9:32-33), and those who are crippled / paralysed (Luke 5:18-25; 13:11-13). The accounts do not presuppose that some sicknesses are caused by spirits and others are not; the same illness may be diagnosed in one instance as in need of

exorcism and another in need of healing without exorcism. There is a certain amount of very specific diagnosis taking place in the accounts.

The Gospels thus display a great deal of medical sophistication: people suffering from similar symptoms will be given different diagnoses. In our medical, psychiatric and psychotherapeutic traditions in the West we simply do not have sufficient skills to make an *effective* diagnosis of a demonic condition. What we need is a broad, interdisciplinary approach to the subject involving at least:

- Medicine, especially psychiatry;
- Psychotherapy;
- Sociology of medicine;
- Anthropology;
- Pastoral ministry in the church;
- Theology;
- Missiology, drawing on the experiences of Christians from contemporary cultures where folk religion and a belief in demons remain strong.

Exorcism

Even where demonic activity is diagnosed, exorcism should be approached circumspectly, for exorcism is an act of considerable psychic violence. M. Scott Peck has said: 'Exorcism stands in relation to ordinary psychotherapy as radical surgery does to lancing a boil.'³ Exorcism should, therefore, be an act of last resort after every other avenue of help has been exhausted. Even involvement in the occult does not necessarily require exorcism. Notice that, in the New Testament, sorcery / witchcraft is seen as a 'work of the flesh' alongside envy, licentiousness, etc. (cf. Gal 5:19-21).

Exorcism should always involve a team with differing skills. M. Scott Peck lists the following:

- Analytic detachment;
- Compassionate involvement;
- Intellectual formulation;
- Intuitive insight;
- Spiritual discernment;
- Deep understanding of theology;
- Thorough knowledge of psychiatry;
- Great experience with prayer.

Appropriate after-care is extremely important. Ongoing counselling and therapy is vital. The person from whom a demon has been exorcised will need:

- **Fellowship:** loving support on a one-to-one basis and within the community of faith. They may need practical help in putting things from the past right (e.g.

³ M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope of Healing Human Evil*, Rider, 1983



marriage problems, the effects of crime, etc.). They may need prayer about bad memories, guilt and behaviour.

- **Teaching:** They need to learn the truth which will keep setting them free. Encourage them to read the Bible and talk to them about it so that they grow with understanding.
- **Separation:** If they have any fetish, charm, books or other objects that have connections with the occult and spiritual powers, these should be destroyed. If there are people who have had a strong influence on them for evil, a break will need to be made. Baptism is important if the person has not been baptised.

In caring for people our aim is to see them become whole in Jesus. We must take each person as and where we meet them, looking to God for wisdom as to how we should respond and rejoicing with them as they discover freedom and *shalom*.

Dealing with the demonic

Wink distinguishes between three types of demonic manifestations:⁴

- **Outer personal possession** – where an individual is controlled by something alien and extrinsic to the self. This is rare, and exorcism is appropriate.
- **Collective possession** – where groups, or even nations, are possessed by something capable of bending them into the service of death (modern idolatry)
- **Inner personal demonic** – the struggle to integrate a split-off or repressed aspect that is intrinsic to the personality. Integration – *not exorcism* – is the appropriate strategy. Tragically, this is the area where most popular works on exorcism focus and advocate the exorcism of spirits of lust, envy, greed, etc.

Reinterpreting the demonic

Although, as stated above, demonic activity and therefore exorcism may be appropriate in rare cases, we need to start with the recognition that the way we look at the world is irreversibly different from that of people in the first century. The social-scientific method we have begun to look at already may well prove the most helpful tool for interpreting the Gospel exorcism stories. This begins by taking the accounts seriously on their own terms and then attempts to translate them in ways that take seriously the broader social, political and economic contexts in which these exorcisms occurred.

Of course, we do not know the personal biographies of those exorcised in the Gospel stories. This is a major problem for the method, but it is not insurmountable. The Gospel accounts point to illnesses that sometimes require healing and sometimes require exorcism. They recognise, therefore, that in many instances physical illnesses are just that – physical illness in need of healing. Where the Gospel writers use the language of the demonic, however, they recognise that something more than physical illness is involved. The narratives suggest that actual demons are involved. When we interpret the stories our task is to translate these real experiences that are being described into language and understanding that is appropriate for our particular

⁴ Walter Wink, 'The Demons' in *Unmasking the Powers*, Fortress, 1986, pp 41-68



Bible-reading communities. The 'something more than physical illness' involved in the Gospel accounts where healing is accomplished by exorcism, although referred to as 'demons' in the stories, may well be more helpfully interpreted in terms of the harmful effects of social, political and economic factors on the life of an individual. Because we have no access to the personal biography of the person concerned then social, political and economic factors, rather than psychological ones, will loom large in the way we interpret the Gospel exorcisms.

Ched Myers⁵ shows us helpful examples of interpreting exorcism stories in the Gospels from the point of view of the social sciences. He argues for the essentially political character of exorcism as symbolic action. For Myers, the exorcism narratives 'are concerned with the structures of power and alienation in the social world' (p143).

This being so, the Gospel exorcism stories can be seen as examples of Jesus' symbolic action. As such they are essentially political actions – in dealing with the dehumanising effects of the demonic in individual lives, Jesus draws attention to the numbing, dehumanising effects of structural evil. From this perspective the account of the Gerasene demoniac is illustrating an important principle. This is the classic case of the demonic effects of internalised oppressive power – the demoniac is possessed by legion just as the surrounding region is controlled by Roman legions.

Questions and Reflections

1. What qualities are required of someone who wishes to help others towards 'wholeness'?
2. What difficulties does the language of spirit possession present to a Christian understanding of illness? What factors should we bear in mind when thinking about this subject?
3. Our care and concern for other people should flow from our desire to see them become 'whole'; that is, to fulfil their potential in every aspect of their life. Describe what qualities you think are needed for someone to be a good carer. Also discuss some of the pitfalls that we must avoid, in order to be effective. How would you avoid these pitfalls?

Reading and Resources

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⁵ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Orbis, 1988



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