

'The Power and the Kingdom are yours...'; Some Missiological Reflections on the Role of Demons.

Henk DeWaard,
Professor of Church History and Missiology
Reformed Theological College

Introduction

When we pray: *'...but deliver us from the evil one. For the power and the kingdom are yours...'*, we posit a clear link between the activity of the evil one and the superior power of the Lord. Human beings living this side of perfection are inevitably drawn into the vortex of temptation by the devil or into painful testing by the Lord (who may use the devil as His instrument, see James 1:13 ff.) When such times come, Christians must persevere in the confidence that ultimate power belongs to the Lord. When the power of the Lord and the power of the devil are locked in combat, the outcome is never in doubt.

When we reflect on the nature of salvation and its outworking in daily living, we soon touch on the fact that there are opposing forces that seek to destroy the work of God and prevent the Christian from living a sanctified life. This ought not to surprise us. After all, the Scriptures are full of references to the role of the demonic in the world. In his final exhortation to the Ephesians, Paul urges them to be fully prepared to *'take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood...but against the spiritual forces of evil...'* (Ephes. 6:11, 12). Clearly there is a sinister side to life that needs to be considered.

In this article I would like to deal with some aspects of the 'demonic', particularly from the missiological perspective. First, I will make a few historical notes, after which the demonic will be set in the wider setting of the Kingdom of God and salvation. Some implications for mission today will be explored and suggested for further consideration.

1. Brief Historical Survey.

There is an enormous revival of interest in the demonic in our day. Many churches are conducting seminars on 'deliverance ministry' and exorcisms are becoming an accepted part of pastoral ministry. This emphasis on the demonic is in part due to the influence of the charismatic movement which has always been aware of the role of the devil and the need to deliver people from his power. While there may have been overzealous practitioners of deliverance, perhaps mainline churches had forgotten the reality of the devil's schemes. This imbalance is now being corrected. In the meantime, however, our own culture is increasingly de-Christianised and pagan influences are thriving, resulting in disturbing signs of demonic activity. Moreover, the horror of modern-day warfare conducted by civilised European people (as portrayed in the film *Schindler's List*) has alerted many to the demonic side of our human nature. No longer can we simply assign belief in demons to mere mythology which 'enlightened' people like ourselves can no longer accept.

For Third World Christians this emphasis on spiritual, evil powers is not strange. They have always lived with the powerful reality of satanic activity. The 'power encounters' we hear about from the mission field, though strange to our ears, are real occurrences to Christians in the Third World and can no longer be ignored by us.

a. In Christian theology the concept of *daimon* (demon) has its roots in the Old and New Testaments. Elsewhere in this issue the OT and NT data on demons will be presented. Suffice it to say that in the NT demons are the devil's underlings who assist him in opposing God's saving work. God's power however, puts limits on his activity. Jesus actively destroyed his work. (I John 3:8) Most of Jesus' miracles were directed against demonic activity. While many people today would demythologise these biblical stories, no one can doubt that in NT times belief in demons was normal.

The whole world and the circumambient atmosphere were filled with devils...every phase and form of life were ruled by them. They sat on thrones, they hovered around

cradles. The earth was literally a hell, though it continued to be a creation of God.¹

b. The Early Fathers continued to believe in the existence and power of the devil and his demons. There was much speculation on the subject. There were those who speculated on the basis of Genesis 6 that demons were the result of the union between fallen angels and human females. Others, on the basis of Isaiah 14:12-15, equated Satan with Lucifer who fell from his exalted position because of pride. Irenaeus and others related the redemptive work of Christ to Satan. This was developed in what came to be known as the ransom theory of the atonement. According to this theory Christ paid a ransom to the devil in order for captives to be set free. In this way full justice was done to the devil and God's standard of justice was maintained while the creation of God did not perish.

This atonement theory may have some merit but it certainly does not do justice to the full story of redemption.

c. As we progress through the Middle Ages, portrayals of the devil become more and more concrete. Very 'holy' people would be able to tell of close encounters with the devil and specific temptations resulting from demonic visitation. This no doubt caused fear and anxiety and led to the devising of ways and means to deter demonic influence. As a result much superstition and Christian 'magic' abounded in the Middle Ages. Baptism in the popular mind became a magic rite to ward off evil influences. Holy water, relics and the cross became means to counteract the attacks of the devil.

Luther had a lively concern for demons. We all remember the stories of Luther throwing his inkwell at the devil. Demons were perceived as being all around using every opportunity to harm humans. Calvin in his *Institutes* has a small section on 'The Devils in the Purposes of God'.² In this section Calvin firmly believes in the reality of the devil and his wicked influence on human beings. He refutes the teaching that demons 'are nothing else than evil emotions or perturbations which come upon us from

¹ A. Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity in the First three centuries*, I, 1904, pp. 160f.

² *Institutes*, Book I, Ch. xiv, 13-19.

our flesh.³ He refers to this matter of demons in order to warn Christians to be prepared for demonic attacks and to persevere in their faith in Christ. Calvin does not wish to dwell on demons. *Therefore, lest we ourselves linger over superfluous matters, let us be content with this brief summary of the nature of devils...⁴*

d. In post-Reformation times there was still considerable interest in demons. Some have spoken of a 'psychic epidemic' which swept through Europe lasting to the 18th century. Those who were in contact with the devil were accused of causing death, bad harvests, fire and disease. In its wake Europe witnessed a 'witch-hunt' in which many people died. It was usually widows, children or social misfits who bore the brunt of this obsession with the demonic.

e. Perhaps as a reaction to this witch-hunt, interest in the demonic declined after the 18th century. This was also the age of the Enlightenment based on belief in human reason and empirical science. The 'Enlightened' world view had no place for demons. At best, the devil became the personification of evil. What had been explained in terms of demonic activity now came to be interpreted in terms of psychological and natural causes. Perhaps the prevailing world view of today is best summed up by Bultmann when he wrote in 1960:

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits.⁵

Even so there are an increasing number of theologians and Christian leaders who believe that the dimensions of evil in modern society can best be explained in terms of demonic activity. Particularly in evangelical and charismatic circles there is a renewed interest in the subject of demonology.

Reformed theologians have also had to rethink their attitude towards the demonic. After all, Scripture takes the matter of the

³ *Institutes*, Book I, Ch. xiv, 19.

⁴ *Institutes*, Book I, Ch. xiv, 15.

⁵ *Kerygma and Myth*, 1960, p.5

demonic seriously and testifies to the existence of evil spirits and that God's people should guard against them.

2. Kingdom and Power.

Thus the whole question of demonology has come to the fore also in Reformed circles. The testimonies we hear from reputable missionaries are so overwhelming in their authenticity that it would be hard to write them off as belonging to a 'lunatic fringe'. They are witnessing something of the power of Satan as he comes into conflict with the power of God at the cutting edge of mission. Missionaries find themselves in situations where the light of the Gospel is introduced into the darkness of paganism. The devil enters into conflict because his domain is under attack.

In this context a renewed emphasis on the Kingdom concept has emerged. The importance of this Kingdom concept cannot be overrated. There has been the tendency, particularly among evangelicals, to restrict the understanding of mission narrowly to the saving of souls and incorporating people into the church. It was hoped that as Christians would grow in grace and knowledge they would also begin to tackle issues of a social nature. This retreat into individualistic Christianity is historically understandable. For a long time the emphasis on social responsibility had been associated with the 'Social Gospel' movement which was deeply influenced by theological liberalism. Evangelicals were rightly cautious when it came to social involvement. On the other hand among the more liberal wing of the church there has been the emphasis on social involvement, the concern for justice and humanisation. Others may even have been content with the concept of Christian Presence as a missionary strategy.

Frequently there has been tension between these two wings of the church, each convinced that it had it right. In more recent times the tension between an emphasis on personal evangelism and social responsibility has been significantly lessened due to the overarching concept of the Kingdom of God. This concept allows us to take a holistic approach in mission, similar to the approach of those who were sent by the Lord Jesus. Christ *'gave*

them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick'. (Luke 9:1,2,10,11; compare also Matt.10:1,2,7,8; Mark 16:15-20; Matt. 4:23,24.)

This comprehensive nature of the mission of the church was emphasised by the Lausanne '74 Conference where many evangelical leaders came together to reflect on a biblical theology of evangelism. The Covenant of Lausanne reiterates the urgency of the evangelistic task but also affirms that *'evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.'* We note here that from this point on Lausanne begins to broaden the concept of mission. Similarly, in Section 12 there is reference to spiritual conflict, though no explicit reference to demons or exorcism. Since Lausanne, evangelical churches are thinking more broadly, inclusively and globally and are regarding the world and history as an arena in which a power struggle is raging.

The Lausanne II Manifesto elaborated on this development:

All evangelism involves spiritual warfare with the principalities and powers of evil, in which only spiritual weapons can prevail, especially the Word and the Spirit, with prayer.

In Affirmation 11 we read:

We affirm that spiritual warfare demands spiritual weapons and that we must both preach the Word in the power of the Spirit and pray constantly that we may enter into Christ's victory over the principalities and powers of evil.

Christians are beginning to realise that there are two kingdoms engaged in mortal combat. Missionaries on the cutting edge of mission have known and witnessed this for a long time and have alerted the churches in the West to it. Wherever the Gospel makes inroads into a pagan culture, the Prince of Darkness will launch his counteroffensive. Missionaries have often had to counter the power of Satan in the power of Christ who is all powerful. Now that paganism is engulfing western culture, we

are beginning to evidence a similar battle in our midst. The increasing occurrence of witchcraft, magic, Satanism and other pagan practices are becoming all too common in western society. The kingdom of darkness seems to be gaining the upper hand. Can Christians demonstrate the power of Christ in a relevant way? Can they demonstrate that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power (I Cor. 4:20)?

3. Christ and Satan.

The New Testament clearly indicates that Jesus demonstrated the coming of the Kingdom in his successful battle against Satan. Jesus started his ministry by proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near (Mark 1:15) and immediately found himself embroiled in an encounter with a demon. (Mark 1:24). Mark immediately gives us the sense that the powers of evil felt threatened and began their desperate struggle against the Holy one of God.

Similarly in Matthew, the public ministry of Jesus was preceded by a confrontation between Christ and Satan in the wilderness. (Matt.4). Luke refers to the same temptation of Christ by Satan but follows that with the Nazareth Manifesto based on Isaiah 61,

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Jesus clearly indicates that his redemptive ministry was the way to break down the Kingdom of Satan. In Matt. 4:23,24 we see Jesus 'missionary strategy':

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures and the paralysed, and he healed them.

In Luke 11:20 Jesus claims triumphantly: *'If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you'*. This declaration is followed by the imagery of binding a strong man. That picture is based on Isaiah 49:24-26 where the prophet gives assurance to the inhabitants of Jerusalem that salvation is near at hand. At that time the demonic had manifested itself in the might of Babylon from which the Lord would deliver his people.

Jesus expected that his disciples would continue his attack on the Kingdom of darkness. When Jesus sent out his followers He gave them a triple commission, namely, to cast out demons, heal the sick and preach the Kingdom (Luke 9:1,2, Matt.10: 7,8). As a matter of fact many of the miracles performed by Jesus and the apostles were exorcisms and miracles of healing.

These exorcisms and miracles of healing were signs that the Kingdom of God had come to deal the deathblow to the power of Satan and all his cohorts. The stranglehold which Satan had on human life is going to come to an end. When Jesus' disciples came back to report that the demons were subject to them, Jesus replied *'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven'*. Whatever all the implications of this text, the message is clear: Satan is heading for a decisive defeat. His power is broken by a greater power. The creation is going to be freed from the power of the devil.

Yet, amazingly, this aspect of redemption has not featured highly in Reformed missiology. In principle there has been the recognition that the ministry of healing and exorcism has a basic validity, in practice the attitude has largely been one of negation and neglect. For this reason we need to look again at the scope and nature of salvation.

4. The scope and nature of salvation.

In any discussion of demonology, we must start with the biblical concept of creation. The totality of creation was created by God and therefore belongs to him. There are not two realms- one belonging to God, the other to the devil. There are not two orders- the one called grace (for the believer), the other called

nature (for the unbeliever). Such distinctions are untenable. Christians are representatives of the King of the whole earth sent to claim all of life in His name. Such a world and life view has far-reaching implications for the mission of the church. It validates the Christian's involvement in the cultural task of unfolding the potential of the world and the dynamics of history. The Creator God is the Lord of all history.

As a consequence of the fall, no created thing is free from the effects of sin. Societal structures, cultural pursuits, technology, sexuality- all have been drawn into the pervasive influence of sin and the evil one (Romans 8:22). Fallen man has a potential for evil which is often actualised in murder, theft and injustice. In his heart there is a tendency towards disintegration and chaos in all his relationships. The Bible takes the existence of evil seriously; sin has a destructive potential for nations and peoples. The teaching and ministry of Jesus is a denunciation and attack upon evil and the Evil One.

Scripture is the story of how God would break the power of the Evil One and realise the objective He had in mind for humanity. God would supervise history in order to restore all things to their intended order. Wolters has expressed this as follows:

We have seen that the fall effects the whole range of earthly creation; that sin is a parasite on, and not a part of, creation; and that, to the degree that it effects the whole earth, sin profanes all things, making them worldly, secular, earthly. Consequently, every area of the created world cries out for redemption and the coming of the Kingdom of God.⁶

The salvation God offers is not restricted to the incorporation of individuals into the Body of Christ. It extends to the redemption of the universe and to the glory of God, when the power of Satan will be completely demolished. While I cannot go into detail here, both the OT and NT indicate that salvation is multi-faceted. It includes:

⁶ *Creation Regained*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985, p.56

- the healing of man's alienation from God on account of sin and the healing of all broken relationships
- a change from the realm of death to the realm of life
- a moving out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.
- a life of hope concerning the age to come.

Since salvation is so comprehensive, the task of the church is also broad in its scope. It includes calling men and women from death to life, but it also includes the attack on the chaos created by the devil in the lives of people, societies and structures.

5. The Devil and Deliverance.

Yet the fact is that we have tended to ignore that there is also a Satan-ward side in the redemptive work of Christ. We already noted that the Church Fathers were aware of that when they spoke of redemption in terms of a 'ransom' paid to the devil. Reformed theology has tended to cast redemption in forensic terms and the work of Christ is regarded as a transaction to satisfy the wrath of God. No one would wish to deny the validity of that view. But it is not the complete picture. We are also told that 'the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work' (I John 3:8). Christ was in conflict with the devil in order to free his people from bondage to Satan. Hence salvation is also a **rescue** from the dominion of darkness and a **release** from bondage to sin and evil (Col. 1:13). Western theology has not given much attention to this aspect of being rescued from bondage. Churches in the Third World seem to understand this better. The questions raised by the charismatic movement have also forced us to look again at the aspect of 'deliverance ministry'. At least there is a growing awareness among Reformed scholars and churches that this issue is due for reappraisal.

Part of the reluctance to exercise the gifts of healing and exorcism stems from the fact that we have often denied that these gifts were meant to be exercised today. It has been a common assumption that the extra-ordinary gifts mentioned in the NT ceased at the end of the Apostolic age. If that is so, prophecy, tongues, exorcism and healing are no concern of the

church today. And should they be exercised it would be an aberration.

This cessationist position is being reevaluated today. There is an increasing recognition of the power and authority which Jesus claimed after his Easter victory and which He delegated to His followers (Acts 1:8). This power did not stop at the end of the Apostolic age. At least there is no clear biblical evidence for that. Throughout the ages there has been evidence that signs, wonders, power encounters and healings occurred. It is interesting in this regard to listen to the words of Berkouwer:

It is clear to us now, of course, that the special signs and miracles were not limited to the time of Christ's walk on earth. Scripture tells us of many signs in the days that followed the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. But it is everywhere evident that these miracles do not occur to provide the Church with a supernatural means of self-protection. They are aimed at the establishment and extension of the kingdom in the world. They are miraculous liberations.... Thus, God, even after the establishment of salvation in Christ wills to go this way and to build the church through signs and miracles. And we find nothing in Scripture to indicate a line that we can draw through a definite period to mark off a boundary between the time of miracles and the time of the absence of miracles.... He who thinks that he can say with certainty that miracles no longer can occur may seriously ask himself whether he thinks in terms of God's power over the world or from a secret capitulation to determinism.⁷

While in the past many may have wanted to explain every extraordinary spiritual phenomenon in rational terms, today we are more open to the possibility of a supernatural explanation. There is a direct confrontation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. There is a clash of powers. While we are sure that Christ is Victor, we are still painfully aware that there is a usurper, who roams around like a lion, seeking to

⁷ *The Providence of God*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1952. p.241-242.

devour his victims. To prepare us for the conflict Christ gave power to His church.

6. Power Encounter.

When the power of Christ confronts the power of the Evil One we speak of power-encounter. We have a clear indication of this in Luke 10:19. Jesus promised power (exousia) over all powers (dunamis). This power is promised to the 70 as they were sent to proclaim that the Kingdom has come (vs. 11) and that Christ has conquered the power of the Evil One (vs.18). The 70 are given authority to exorcise demons as proof and sign of the Kingdom. Nothing, not even the most fearful opposition (serpents and scorpions), would harm them.

This verse is extremely important in presenting the Gospel particularly in animistic societies, though the principle is the same wherever the Gospel is preached. When adherents of other religions hear the Gospel, we are involving them in a power encounter. There comes a point at which a choice has to be made, for or against the Gospel. Scripture gives ample evidence that it is not possible to serve two masters. There is a discontinuity between the old allegiance and commitment to Christ. Precisely at this point we see the struggle between Christ and Satan, between the Kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. For that very reason we oppose universalism (all will be saved in the end) and evolutionism (growth toward maturity). We do not deny that there may be 'stepping-stones' to the Gospel. There are points of contact, but there is even more an element of incompatibility between Christianity and the old faith.

The adherent of an animistic type religion knows that by discarding his religion he ceases to have access to the power which sustains him. The question for him is whether Christianity is able to supply him with the power necessary for daily living. One dunamis is set over against another. References to such an encounter we find in the Gospels as well as in Acts. (Acts 19:13, 18, Acts 26:17) The professional magicians in Acts 19:18 made a definite break with the past by burning their magic books. That was a real power encounter.

In the Epistles we do not find many references to power encounter simply because the Epistles are directed to Christian congregations and the problems they faced. However, the aspect of spiritual warfare in which all Christians are engaged is certainly there (Ephes. 6:10ff, I Tim.4:1). Spirits are real and must be faced head-on in the name of Jesus.

Mission, therefore, is more than preaching, presence or social involvement. It includes all that, but it is more. Mission is an encounter of opposing powers. The missionary is the representative of him who has 'all power'. Men and women are to be persuaded to align themselves with Christ and his Kingdom.

7. Deliverance Ministry.

Now what about the concept of 'deliverance ministry' about which we hear so much today? Should that be part of the church's ministry? In a broad sense, the answer must be 'yes'. The church is in the business of healing, reconciling, liberating, delivering people from all that oppresses them. There are basically four major areas that cause problems in the lives of people - spiritual illness, physical illness, mental illness and demonic oppression and possession.

Spiritual illness due to personal sin requires repentance and forgiveness. Physical illness may be due to purely physiological factors and should be treated as such or it may be due or complicated by emotional factors. In extreme cases there could be a demonic factor. Emotional illness frequently results from abuse, hurts, rejection and sinful ways adopted. Such a condition requires sensitive pastoral care and counselling so that inner healing may occur. Demonic oppression is often caused by involvement in the occult and requires the ministry of deliverance (exorcism). The fact that human beings are made up of interrelated aspects means that healing is needed in various dimensions of life.

If we do not make a correct diagnosis of what the problem is we may very well complicate the problem. Yet precisely at this point we face a problem: what criteria are to be used to determine

whether a person is demon-possessed? I have not been able to find a set of clear criteria⁸ that could give a ready diagnosis of demon-possession and hence we are often forced into a process of elimination.

I would suggest that demonic possession should not be the first thing that comes to mind when we are involved in pastoral care or counselling. Where a more obvious diagnosis presents itself we ought not to blame the devil for an illness. A preoccupation with demons can take away a person's individual responsibility and can become an easy option or a substitute for careful and extended pastoral care.

8. Some Practical Considerations.

In conclusion, I think it would be helpful to draw out some practical considerations that may be useful to all who are in Christian ministry and Christian counselling. In doing so I will draw on the final part of the REC Missions Report, 1988.⁹ I only refer to the last section of it, though the whole report is worth reading. I feel free to use it because I formulated a first draft of it on the basis of some group discussions with pastors from various part of the world. I will also add some other considerations.

1. Members of the churches ought to live in the awareness of the immediacy of the Holy Spirit. Such awareness must be evidenced in a personal walk with God, confession of sin and fervent prayer.

2. Churches in the Reformed tradition need to be open to new insights regarding the full potential of the ministry entrusted to us, particularly in the areas of deliverance from the power of sin, the flesh and the devil.

3. Excessive preoccupation with demons can lead to the adoption of a pagan world view which was essentially

⁸ I would like however to refer to a useful article by my colleague, Willem Berends, entitled "The Biblical Criteria for Demon-Possession", in *Westminster Theological Journal*, Spring, 1976.

⁹ *Christ's Rule: A Light for Every Corner*, RES, 1988, p.77-81.

transformed through faith in Christ. Through the redemptive work of Christ, the kingdom of darkness has been defeated. Col. 2:14,15. Therefore it is unwarranted to focus so much on Satan and the demons that the focus is shifted away from Christ.

4. Another danger to avoid is the excessive emphasis on demons who tend to be blamed for everything. Such tendencies would lead to a denial of personal responsibility.

5. Aware of the abuses and excesses that do occur in the ministry of deliverance, the church needs to ensure that such ministry be exercised to the glory of God rather than draw attention to human instrumentality.

6. Demon possession may only be considered a real possibility after all possibilities including the psychological and physiological have been thoroughly investigated and properly dealt with. If and when exorcism is called for it ought not to resemble a magic rite but must be done on the basis of prayer.

7. The emphasis on power and power encounter ought not to be made at the expense of an emphasis on truth. After all, it is the truth that will set free. The Word and Spirit may never be separated.

Conclusion.

Churches of the Reformed tradition need to be open to new insights regarding the full potential of the ministry entrusted by Christ to the church, particularly in the area of deliverance from the power of sin, the flesh and the devil. Wherever people experience bondage the full pastoral ministry of the church must be expressed. Some of the above considerations may help us retain a balance in an area which easily leads to excess and unnecessary division in the Body of Christ.