


Demonic spirits and the Spirit of God

Pierre Gilbert

Surprised by war

A spiritual war has been going on for thousands of years. Because many of us who are Westerners have been programmed since childhood to think about human life in materialistic terms, it is not surprising that many people, even Christians, are reluctant to accept the reality of such a conflict.

Many people in the West subscribe to a secular humanist worldview in which humans are defined as no more than the sum of their biological processes. This view of human nature reduces the mind to the brain and denies the possibility of conscious life after death. What we are has been



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designed not by a loving God but by the impersonal forces of the cosmos that were unleashed randomly about 13.8 billion years ago.

In this metaphysically flat universe, there is no divine transcendence. Scant attention is given to how our actions, good and bad, contribute to the construction of our deep self. Not only do we give little consideration to the shape of our soul, but, more importantly and tragically, we accord nearly no importance to the impact of our thoughts and actions on our relationship with God. From a historical perspective, this is remarkable, for never before have men and women lived in a universe where the heavens were thought to be empty by so many.

As C. S. Lewis observes in the *Problem of Pain*, the nearly complete evacuation of the divine from our daily lives has become a major obstacle to sharing the Christian faith.¹ For the first time in history, the average person no longer has a clear sense of sin as traditionally understood.

1 For a detailed discussion, see C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1996 [1940]), 48–62.

Whereas within historical Christianity, sin is viewed as an offense committed against a transcendent, holy God, many people now understand sin in solely immanent terms as pertaining only to offenses against persons, communities, or the earth. The cure, if there is to be one, will therefore reside not in the redemptive work of Christ but solely in politics and activism.

Christians, however, do not live in a merely secular universe. They believe in a personal God to whom they are morally accountable. They also grasp, in a way the secular mind cannot fathom, that actions, praiseworthy or not, have a cumulative impact on people's identity. Christians recognize that thoughts and actions leave etchings on the soul that in time mold their character. This is not to say that every Christian is fully aware of this spiritual dimension of life, but most of them would have some inkling of this reality.

Where Western Christians are likely to show resistance is in admitting the reality of a spiritual war that is integral to human existence. While most Christians recognize the necessity of living good and exemplary lives, fewer are willing to accept the reality of a spiritual conflict in which evil spirits seek to win souls to their side.

Demons, the Holy Spirit, and human free will


As I explain in my book *Demons, Lies, & Shadows*, the existence of the devil and demonic spirits cannot be empirically tested; demons cannot be weighed, measured, or photographed.² And yet the New Testament unambiguously refers to their objective existence and their malevolent intentions for God's project and humans.³

Popular culture has trained us to think in dualistic terms: good versus evil, the light side of the force versus its dark side, and so on. As appealing as it might be to conceptualize spiritual warfare as a conflict between demons and angels, that would not be accurate. While the New Testament refers to Satan, the devil, and demonic spirits, their real counterpart are not angels but the Holy Spirit. This does not mean, however, that this spiritual war directly pits the demonic and the divine against each other. Demons know all too well that God is infinitely beyond their reach. Their primary target is humanity.

2 Pierre Gilbert, *Demons, Lies & Shadows: A Plea for a Return to Text and Reason* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2008), 17-44.

3 See, e.g., Matthew 4:1-11; 12:22-32; 15:21-28; Mark 1:21-28; 4:1-20; Luke 9:37-43; Acts 5:16; 8:5-8; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 6:10-20.

According to the New Testament, demonic spirits have the ability to interact with humans. Historical evidence seems to confirm this assessment. In cultures where the existence of spirits is integral to the belief system, men and women actively seek to communicate with them in the hope of gaining some kind of personal benefit.⁴ Such interaction, however, consistently results in catastrophic outcomes for the individuals concerned and their communities. Several New Testament passages confirm



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both the sinister intentions of these creatures of darkness and the catastrophic consequences for those who fellowship with them.⁵

As best as we can tell from the biblical evidence, Satan and other evil spirits emerged out of a rebellion against God (Jude 6; Revelation 12:7–10). God is free and will only have those who choose to serve God freely. As the first humans were given a critical opportunity to choose God (Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7), the same was apparently true for angelic beings.⁶

But angels are not humans. For reasons that are not revealed in Scripture, the angels that turned against God became something less, something *other*. They transformed into permanently bent creatures, reshaped beyond recognition and maniacally devoted to destroying humanity. Scripture seems to indicate that, for such creatures, there is no redemption; they are ultimately destined for destruction (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10).

The Holy Spirit also has the ability to relate to humans, but this interaction is deployed on an entirely different plane. In this respect, demons and the Holy Spirit have only one thing in common: they cannot significantly influence humans without their consent. God has endowed humans with self-determination; the Bible offers no evidence that the fall completely obliterated human free will. God's word to Cain to the effect that he could resist the impulse to kill his brother (Genesis 4:6–7) offers

4 For those interested in a first-hand description of the disastrous consequences of human interaction with demons, I recommend Mark Ritchie, *The Spirit of the Rainforest: A Yanomamö Shaman's Story*, 3rd ed. (Island Lake, IL: Island Lake, 2018).

5 See Matthew 8:28–29; Mark 5:3–5; Luke 8:27–29; 11:26; 1 Peter 5:8–9.

6 See Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 43–86, 223–265.

compelling evidence that humans retain an effective degree of self-determination.

Free will is most effectual in the spiritual sphere of human existence. If humans can resist God, as Scripture repeatedly shows,⁷ surely this ability

must extend to Satan and demons. The notion that evil spirits can possess a person without his or her consent is a false idea that originates from ancient Mesopotamia and finds little support in Scripture.⁸

The Holy Spirit can indwell men and women who have chosen to accept God's invitation to enter into a relationship with Christ.⁹ But that is only the beginning. The Spirit then guides and assists the follower of Christ in a variety of ways: recognizing and resisting sin,

empowering for ministry, assisting in prayer, and so on.¹⁰ The Spirit ennobles the human soul, makes us into the image of Christ, and empowers us to love and to serve others. The Holy Spirit does not compel. Instead, the Spirit's influence is subtle—more like a light breeze than a hurricane. The Spirit gently invites and graciously nudges us to act.

A Christian who chooses, however, to follow the impulses of fallen human nature will grieve the Spirit and seriously curtail the Spirit's ability to express the Spirit's presence (Ephesians 4:30). In order to be effective in our lives, the Spirit requires our constant cooperation.

Demonic spirits are on the other end of the spectrum. Once they gain a foothold in the life of an individual—either directly as in traditional cultures or through ideologies of death as is the case in secular settings—an unholy symbiosis emerges, one that is predicated on the all-encompassing

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7 The capacity to defy God is perhaps best demonstrated by Adam and Eve's decision to challenge God's command to refrain from eating from the forbidden tree in Genesis 3. The Old Testament prophetic discourse is a witness to Israel's continual propensity to resist God even in the face of repeated divine judgements.

8 See Gilbert, *Demons, Lies & Shadows*, 17–44.

9 See, e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:11, 19; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Galatians 3:2.


10 See, e.g., John 14:26; 16:13; Romans 8:26; 15:16; Ephesians 2:22; 1 Thessalonians 1:5–6.

hatred these creatures have for God and on human nature's own innate hostility toward God (Colossians 1:21).

This is not to suggest that humans lack the ability to independently engage in radical evil. Jesus makes that clear when he states that evil naturally emerges from the human heart (Matthew 15:19). In other words, even without demonic influence, human history would still be littered with violence and cruelty. But if demons exist, then one can assume that whatever potential humans already have for evil, demons can—through some mysterious synergetic process—inspire, concentrate, and further focus this potential. While this is impossible to prove, it is conceivable that evil on the scale the world witnessed throughout the twentieth century may have partly been the result of direct or indirect demonic influence.

The remarkable case of a demon-possessed man (Mark 5)

The Gospel of Mark offers some interesting insights into the relationship between demons and humans. In chapter 5, the author describes the case of a man who is possessed by a “legion” of demons. The text does not explain how this man came to be possessed. We are only given a snapshot of the resulting condition. He is portrayed as living among the dead. He



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is completely out of control, self-destructive, and alienated from his family and the broader community (Mark 5:2–5). When Jesus goes to him, he is no more than the shell of a man; his humanity virtually destroyed. Demons need humans to spread evil, but their blind hatred for God and humanity is so intense, so blindingly fierce, and so encompassing that they will not hesitate to destroy the very hosts that enable them to wreak havoc in the world.

But something remarkable emerges out of this account. The demons' ability to keep this man from encountering the

Son of God is curbed by the man's innate capacity to turn to Jesus. Right from the outset, the man is unexpectedly described as coming from the tombs “to meet him” (5:2 NIV). If God will not compel anyone to turn to him, neither can demons keep anyone from reaching out to God.

As tragic as demon-possession may be for an individual, it is through the dissemination of demonic ideologies that large-scale destruction is most efficiently brought about. A demonic ideology, like a virus, can survive the near destruction of the original host and reinfect a new one in little time.¹¹

The bottom line in all this is simple. Demons seek the moral corruption and destruction of men and women. They revel in creating chaos and hopelessness. What is deeply troubling in all this is that, despite

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the devastation it causes, interaction with demons or demonic ideologies is as addictive as heroin. Without the deployment of God's power in their lives, people inexplicably go back for more.

The Holy Spirit, in contrast, seeks to infuse all those who embrace Christ with life, hope, goodness, meaning, and purpose. I cannot overstate the importance of keeping front and center the

principal difference between demonic spirits and the Holy Spirit. If demons are bent on hating God and everything that is associated with him, the Holy Spirit forever leans toward the Father and the Son. Demons poison life and take it away. The Holy Spirit carries the life of God and expands it wherever the Spirit is given the freedom to do so.

Conclusion

What are we to gather from this brief reflection on demons and the Holy Spirit? First, any interaction with demons is to be avoided at all costs. Nothing good ever comes out of such encounters. As for the ideologies of death that may be partly inspired by demons and further propagated through human networks, it is also our responsibility to be discerning and to resist them wherever they emerge. In this respect, we would do well to remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer and how he denounced the evils of Nazism.

Second, on the positive side of the ledger, interaction with the Holy Spirit is to be encouraged. The more we submit to the Spirit, the more

¹¹ This is similar to the distinction C. S. Lewis makes between physical pain, which is limited to its immediate causes, and ideological evil, whose impact can reach far beyond the circumstances from which it originally emerged. *The Problem of Pain*, 117–18.

freedom the Spirit will have in shaping our inner self and using us for the glory of God.

My only caution is to tread lightly. The Holy Spirit is no opportunist. The Spirit does not prey on human weakness. When it comes to our partnering with God in the furtherance of God's Kingdom, the Holy Spirit is our greatest ally. The Spirit empowers, guides, and leads. But the leading of the Spirit is subtle and requires our collaboration.

While the broad strokes of what the Spirit calls us to do are clear, when it comes to the "smaller" choices of life—whether to reach out to someone in need or witness to the person sitting beside us on the plane—that requires special attentiveness to the presence and the leading of the Spirit.

There are no simple recipes for developing a greater sensitivity to the Spirit's voice. Suffice it to say that there are at least two things we can do, one negative and one positive. On the negative side, as much as is humanly possible, let us avoid the willful cultivation of sin, whether it be moral or ideological. Nothing silences the Spirit faster than willful disobedience and arrogance.

On the positive side, let us continually and intentionally call on the Spirit to increase the Spirit's presence in our lives (Ephesians 5:18). Unlike demons, whose obsessive desire is to destroy human freedom and dignity, with the Holy Spirit, it is the opposite. The more space we give the Spirit, the more we become what God intends for us to be: ever freer, more noble, and more life-giving.¹²

About the author

Pierre Gilbert is associate professor of Bible and theology at Canadian Mennonite University. Originally from Quebec City, he holds a PhD from the Université de Montréal and an MA from Providence Seminary. He is presently planning the publication of a book on the problem of evil based on Genesis 1-3. He is married to Monika.

12 For further reading on this topic, see Gilbert, *Demons, Lies & Shadows*; Page, *Powers of Evil*; and Willard Swartley, *Jesus, Deliver Us: Evil, Exorcism, and Exousiai* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019).