

The Church and Socio-culture Justice: A Latin American Perspective

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During these days, we have all been discussing, and will be discussing, the bright vision we have of the unity of the church and of God's plan of Shalom. At the same time, however, we have been discussing these, and must discuss them, in the context of the evil realities of our time: world hunger, unjust distribution of wealth, international and national economic systems that make that distribution even more unjust; political oppression; sexist and racist discrimination, ecological decay, an arms race that has taken us to the brink of disaster, and many others.

At the end of these discussions, we often come away with a sense of frustration and bewilderment. We do not see easy solutions. Although shipping tons of grain overseas may keep people from starving, and therefore is an act of Christian compassion, it hardly addresses the fundamental causes of world hunger. We could try the route of education, thinking that the problems of the world will be solved by better schooling—and there is no doubt that there is positive value in education—but we shall soon discover that often the better educated use that very training as a means to exploit and subjugate others.

In one word, before the problem of evil in our time we stand perplexed. Perhaps there was a time thirty or forty years ago when we would boldly have ventured into simple solutions to these problems. But today we are overawed by their complexity, by their interconnection, by their magnitude, by our inability really to grapple with them.

This has many consequences for our lives as Christians today. But one such consequence—and a very unexpected one—is that we are beginning to sense something of what the Bible means when it speaks of demons.

I am not saying that we can somehow jump back twenty centuries, forget about germs, psychoses, and hormones, and speak naively as if evil spirits floating in the air were the cause of all our plagues and problems.

What I am saying is that, in the midst of our perplexity before our own most urgent problems, we can empathize with a view that sees evil, not only as something which we ourselves create, but also as something of such magnitude and mysterious complexity that we are unable to grapple with it in an effective manner. And, after all, that is, at least in part, what is meant by the Biblical imagery regarding demons. In some ways, the mysterious giants of economic injustice, ecological upheaval, and the arms race are much more demonic and fearsome than some little devil floating around with horns and a pitchfork.

Thus, if it is true that most of us have left behind a view of the world as populated by demons and other such powers, it is also true that we must now leave behind our optimistic and simplistic views of a few years ago, when we thought that some technological or ideological fix was around the corner.

It is still true that we cannot escape responsibility for our world and for our future. We cannot simply say, "The Devil made me do it." But it is also true that the more seriously we take our responsibility the more we tend to be perplexed by the overpowering complexity and magnitude of evil.

At this juncture, then, it may be well to look again at what the New Testament, and specifically the book of Acts, has to say about how we are to face the demonic forces that are loose upon the world. It may well be that some of its insights may help us understand the nature of our Christian struggle against such demons as economic injustice, ecological encroachment, and the like.

This I invite you to do on the basis of two texts from the book of Acts. The first text is from Acts 16:16-22:

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. (17)She followed Paul and us, crying, "These people are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." (18)And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

(19)But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers; (20)and when they had brought them to the magistrates they said, "These people are Jews and they are disturbing our city. (21)They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice." (22)The crowd joined in attacking them; and the magistrates tore their garments off and gave orders to beat them with rods.

The action in this text is fairly clear. A slave girl is possessed by a demon who is the source of her

divining powers. Evidently, the demon causes her to follow Paul and his group crying out the truth about who they are. Paul does not care for this, however, and performs an exorcism. The demon leaves the girl, who is no longer a source of financial gain to her masters. They are annoyed, and have Paul and Silas beaten and put in prison.

The second text comes from Acts 19:13-16:

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

This is not a text that is often used in contemporary preaching. Probably the problem is not that it deals with demons. We have heard quite a number of sermons on demons—especially on TV—but not on this text.

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The reason for this may well be that here we have to do with a sarcastic demon, and most people who are inclined to preach on demons do not have a very keen sense of humor!

The story as the book of Acts tells it is simple, yet poignant. Paul had been preaching for two years at Ephesus. His main function there was not exorcism. His function was the preaching of the Gospel. But that preaching was accompanied by such signs that some itinerant exorcists thought that the name of Jesus could somehow be added to their professional bag of tricks, as a

specially powerful one. So, they went into this house, seven exorcists together, and attempted to cast out a demon with a strangely noncommittal formula: "I adjure you in the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches." To which the demon responded, with marked sarcasm: "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" (Or, in a freer translation: "Jesus I know; and Paul I know; but who the devil are you?") And then, to add not insult to injury, but injury to insult, the man in whom the demon was jumped on them and gave them a sound thrashing.

There are a number of obvious parallelisms and contrasts between these two texts.

The most obvious contrast is that in one case the exorcism succeeds and in the other it fails. The seven sons of Sceva cannot cast out the demon, whereas Paul causes the demon to leave the slave girl.

Secondly, there is a contrast between the two formulae that are used: In the one case: "I adjure you by the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches"; in the other, Paul says: "I charge you in the name of Jesus." The first formula is second-hand; the second is direct. The first formula acknowledges the power of the name, but keeps it at a distance, so as not to submit to it. The second is both a command to the demon and a confession of faith. Both acknowledge the power of the name of Jesus; both call on that power; but one places the speaker under that power, and the other does not.

Also, in both cases the power of the evil acknowledges the power of the Gospel. The sarcastic demon responds to the sons of Sceva: "Jesus I know; and Paul I know." The demon of divination follows Paul and his companions crying: "These people are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

Parenthetically, it should be noted in passing that, even though the words of the demon are true, Paul is annoyed, and the exorcism stops the witness of the demon. It would be interesting to compare this with Paul's words to the Philippians:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. (16)The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel; (17)the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in . my imprisonment. (18)What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice. (Phil. 1:15-18)

Both passages from Acts conclude with beatings. In the failed exorcism, the man with the sarcastic demon jumps on the seven would-be exorcists, and they flee the house naked and wounded. In the case of Paul and his companions, the owners of the slave girl bring charges against them, and they are also undressed and whipped. It may also be noted in passing that the violence in the case of the sarcastic demon is merely a private incident, whereas the violence in the case of Paul and his companions is legalized violence. Furthermore, it legalized illegal violence, for Paul was a Roman citizen, and the very first law of ancient Rome was that a Roman citizen could not be beaten. Paul knows his rights, but does not press them until the next day, when he uses them to lay bare the injustice that has been done:

But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying: "Let these people go." And

the jailer reported the words to Paul, saying, “The magistrates have sent to let you go; now therefore come out and go in peace.” But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, people who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now cast us out secretly? No! let them come themselves and take us out.” (Acts 16:35-37)

Finally, both cases lead to unexpected results in terms of witness—beyond the brief sections that were read. In the case of the demon-possessed girl, the jailer and his family come to faith and are baptized. After the section we have read on the defeated exorcists, many Christians who had evidently kept some of their old magic books brought them out and burned them. Perhaps they had not yet been convinced that they should rely totally on God, and not on their older practices. Faith was strengthened in both cases.

From all of this, we can draw at least two important conclusions about the workings of evil and the power of the gospel to overcome it.

In the first place, suffering, or the lack of it, are not necessarily an indication that one is on the side of the gospel or on the side of evil. The sons of Sceva are beaten, and so are Paul and Silas. The sons of Sceva are left naked, and Paul and Silas are stripped of their garments. The sons of Sceva flee, and Paul and Silas end up in jail (Hebrews 11:32-38). Meanwhile, the demons are possessing two people about whose personal goodness or evil we are told nothing. In fact, their only claim to fame is to have been possessed by demons.

Indeed, there are more demonic forces at work here than simply the individualistic issue of two

demons possessing two people. There is also the no less demonic force of some people owning a girl, and exploiting her suffering for their own gain. Even after she is freed of her demon, she is not freed of her owners. We are not told what happens to her thereafter; but we can guess. There is a demonic force that eventually lands Paul and Silas in jail, for it is the girl's owners, deprived of their gain, who bring up false charges before the magistrates. Actually, the demon was more truthful than the slave-owners, for the demon declared what Paul and his companions truly were, while the slave-owners brought up charges that have nothing to do with their true grievances. Thus, the not-so-good Roman order, which allows for slavery, is further corrupted by the demon of vested economic interest, which uses that order to its own end, to the point that the magistrates end up breaking Roman law.

Let us take a few minutes to discuss this in more concrete terms. For example, the issue of world hunger. We all agreed that there is something demonic about it. Yet, those who suffer hunger are not necessarily, nor usually, those who serve the demons that cause hunger. What are those demons? Name them. By that I mean, do not name merely psychological motives for world hunger, such as greed; name the structures, the practices, the powers, that produce world hunger.

Secondly, although being acquainted with evil is no sign of goodness or lack of it, there is a way of being acquainted with evil which is powerful—a power acknowledged even by the demons. The sarcastic demon declares: “Jesus I know; and Paul I know.” The powers of evil are

acquainted with Jesus, and even acknowledge his power. This is a theme which it may be difficult for us to envisage, but which runs throughout the entire New Testament. One might even dare say that this theme is central to the New Testament, whose message is obscured without it. For what the New Testament says is not simply that Jesus was a great teacher, nor simply that he died for our sins, nor simply that he performed miracles. The most important thing that the New Testament says about Jesus is that throughout his life and death he faced the strongest forces evil could muster, and he conquered them all.

Evil may still be running rampant in the world. But its ultimate force has been taken away, in that One has already conquered it.

It may be difficult for us to see this. It may be difficult for conceptual reasons, since this is not our normal way of thinking. It may also be difficult because it is not often that we see around us signs that a new era has indeed dawned. It may be difficult, but it stands at the very core of the Christian faith. If we do not somehow believe and experience this, and are willing to stake our lives on it, our relationship to the fundamental events of the New Testament is little more than hearsay and second hand, like those exorcists who felt compelled to disassociate themselves from those events by saying: “the Jesus whom Paul preaches.”

Our difficulty is partly caused by the oddity of the situation in which we find ourselves: we confess that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has overcome the powers of sin

and evil that have held our world in their grip. At the same time, we live in a world that seems to go on, still under the power of sin, as though nothing had happened. There are moments when that victory breaks through—and there are times when the old order is strong, and only faith can proclaim the victory of Christ. Faith knows how to deal with both occasions.

The account of the sarcastic demon seems quite contrary to what we might assume. The conventional wisdom is that if there are demonic powers it would be best for Christians to stay at arm's length from them—unacquainted and not crossing paths! Like the old blessing says: “May you be dead half an hour before the Devil knows you’re gone.” But here, in this passage, the demonic power knows Jesus and knows Paul. The powerlessness of the would be exorcists lies in the fact that they are not known by the demon. Not only does the evil spirit know Jesus and Paul, they are very clearly respected.

The Jesus whom Paul preaches is the Jesus who takes on evil, who wrestles with it and ultimately conquers it. It is the Jesus of Gethsemane and the Cross—of hard-won victories over evil. The Paul who preaches this Jesus is not one who stands on the sidelines and bids evil leave, but rather the Paul who also takes on evil, who suffers for what he preaches, who knows that the way to victory over evil is the way of the cross and no other. He writes to the Corinthians: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (II Cor. 4:8-10). Of

course the demonic powers know Jesus and they know Paul.

What this means is that the only way to overcome evil with the power of the gospel is to be acquainted with evil. The itinerant exorcists are trying to have victory over evil with no cross—no engagement with evil. That will not do. In fact, they are in far worse shape when they leave the attempted exorcism than when they begin it.

Nor are they alone. How often have we been quite clear as to what is demonic in our corporate life—and attempted to be rid of it by standing on the sidelines, remaining unacquainted with evil ourselves—hoping that evil will not come to know us—and invoking the name of “Jesus whom Paul preaches”—only to discover that evil remains strong and mocks our powerlessness. After such encounters, we may find our own faith sorely tried, and decide that it really makes little difference in this world. These unfortunate exorcists could have told us that!

The name of Jesus is a powerful weapon against evil but only when uttered on the way to the cross. To be unacquainted with evil is not a strength, but rather a sign of the lack of engagement. Paul had real power over evil, because he not only preached Jesus, but followed him. The victory over evil he proclaimed was the victory Jesus had gained. Our attacks on all that is demonic in our world cannot be conducted from the safety of the religious sidelines. Even with his success over the demon that possessed the girl, Paul and his friend end up beaten by order of the magistrates, and imprisoned.

In our response to the demonic forces of world hunger, all our churches have made important statements on the root causes of hunger. Are these statements sufficient to engage the powers of evil? Are there other, more radical and costly ways, in which we, as individuals and as churches, should engage the powers of this evil?

Would the demonic powers we seek to challenge know us? Or have we remained sufficiently distant that we continue unknown by those powers?

As a final note, the following words from Hebrews should remind us of our calling:

Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, (33)sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. (34)For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. (35)Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. (36)For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

(Hab) (37)"For you a little while,
and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry;
(38) but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him."

(39) But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls.