

No.5, N.T. Teaching on Exorcism

In various circles there is a very deep, and may I say, a very unhealthy interest in the subject of demon possession and the related topic of the exorcism of demons. There are those who insist that demon possession is widespread, and that a ministry of the exorcism of demons still belongs to Christ's church.

TERM "DEMONISM" WRONGLY APPLIED

The word *demonism* is often employed with regard to situations where it plainly does not belong. For example, many in their teaching on these matters will speak of the *demons of alcoholism, drug abuse, pornography* etc. While we are aware that Satan and his hosts are unclean spirits and no doubt have a malignant joy in promoting these evil habits and in seeing sinners pursue them, yet it is unbiblical nonsense to teach that to be caught up in these wicked ways is due to demon possession. Rather, the pursuit of these habits is the outworking of man's own depraved and evil nature. It is true that Satan & his forces tempt men to indulge in wickedness, but it is the fallen nature in man that causes him to pursue evil, Gal 5: 19-21. Note here that all of these sins are described as "*the works of the flesh*." They are the product of man's own wicked heart, Mark 7: 20-23. It is clear, that men sin because they are possessed of a sinful nature, not because they are possessed by demons.

THE WORD EXORCISM

In passing a word needs to be said about this term *exorcism* or *exorcist*. Due to the manner in which it is employed today in Charismatic/Pentecostal circles, the impression is given that these are common terms in Scripture. The truth is that the word *exorcist* is only used once in Scripture and not even of Christ or the Apostles! See Acts 19: 13 – you will note that the employment of the word is in connection with characters not the most commendable: *vagabond Jews*. The term refers to Jews who wandered from place to place as magicians or sorcerers claiming that they had the power to expel demons by means of spells or charms. The word *exorcist* comes from a verb that means *to adjure* in the sense of using an oath. Normally, these exorcists, as noted, employed their own adjurations in the form of spells, charms and chants. But on this occasion they used the name of Christ simply because they were aware of the use of that blessed name by Paul and others, Acts 16: 18. However, the point is that this term *exorcist* is never used of God's servants; and in this single instance of its employment in Scripture it is used of characters who were less than commendable. In fact, you will note that on this occasion they failed altogether to "exorcize" the evil spirit! Thus, from a Biblical perspective the term does not really commend itself.

CASTING OUT OF DEMONS BY CHRIST & THE APOSTLES – A SIGN OF THE MESSIANIC ERA

With respect to Christ and the Apostles, the term used with respect to their conquest of demon possession is simply *cast out*. It is a term that denotes the exercising of great authority and power; and it is used many times in the first three Gospels to describe the manner in which Christ dealt with demonic activity. It should be noted that the casting out of demons by Christ or His disciples belongs to the realm of miraculous activity, specifically to the area of the sign miracles, Mark 16: 17. The word for *signs* is "semeion" and is often translated *miracle*, thus it refers to a miraculous or supernatural event. And Christ then specifically says – "*In my name shall they cast out devils (demons)*." Thus, the casting out of demons was a sign miracle – i.e. a sign of the dawn of the Messianic era.

With respect to Christ's own ministry of casting out demons, see Luke 11: 20-22. The context here is the accusation levelled against Christ that He was casting out demons by Beelzebul, v.15. In responding to this accusation Christ makes a very important statement in v.20 – He is effectively teaching that He actually was casting out demons the evidence that the kingdom of God had come, that is the dawn of the N.T. era had arrived. Note the vital teaching of Christ in this verse.

1. By the finger of God Christ speaks of the Holy Spirit. See the parallel passage in Matt 12: 28, 29 where Christ speaks of casting out "*demons by the Spirit of God*." Thus, "the finger of God" is *the Spirit of God*. It was by the power of the Spirit that Christ cast demons out. Christ had been anointed by the Spirit as the Messiah at the beginning of His public ministry, and He exercised the mighty power of the Spirit in conquering the forces of darkness in the form of demon possession.

2. By the kingdom of God is come upon you Christ refers to the beginning of the Messianic era. In v.v. 21, 22 Christ essentially describes the O.T. era during which the devil was like a "strong man" exercising great control over mankind. His goods were in peace, his dominion was largely undisturbed. But with the coming of Christ, the stronger than Satan, a reversal of the situation came about – Satan's grip on man was broken, signified by the prevalence of the casting out of demons by Christ, a sign that He was the true Messiah and that the great Gospel age had begun. See John 12: 31-33 – in the clearest terms Christ declared that by His death the world would be judged and Satan would be cast out. The sense of the words is clear: Christ's death was the culmination of His defeat of the hosts of darkness in that Satan's grip on the world was broken. Ever since the cross, the devil has not been able to prevent the spread of the Gospel into the world. In that sense Satan was bound. He is certainly active against the Church, going around like a roaring lion. But as John Calvin put it – the devil carries his chain with him. He is not able to stop the progress of the Gospel.

3. Therefore, the casting out of demons by Christ was to signal the introduction of the Gospel era – which means that this miracle of casting out demons, like the other sign miracles, has ceased. Note carefully that in the great passage where Paul deals with our spiritual warfare absolutely nothing is said about either demon possession or the casting out of such, Eph 6: 11-18. If demonism is so widespread why then would the Church not be given specific instruction on dealing with the issue in a passage such as this where our spiritual battle is in view? The answer is that no such instructions are given because the casting out of demons was never intended to be a continuing feature of the Church's ministry.

In other words, the Church's ministry against Satan and his hosts is that of preaching the Gospel. Here in Eph 6 we are dealing with a spiritual warfare that must be fought with spiritual weapons. Moreover, the Christian's armour is essentially the Gospel. Study every piece of armour and you will see that Christ is "the whole armour of God." The Gospel is our defence and it is by the Gospel that we go on the offensive against the powers of darkness to see sinners set free from all that Satan employs to keep them in subjection and bondage. Are there not cases of demon possession still? According to various reports demonic possession still occurs. In such a case what is the Church to do? Witness of Christ, pray and urge the individual to look to Christ. It is Christ who overcomes Satan, and should a sinner be "possessed" deliverance will come in no other way.