

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Closing The Demons' Mouths

The Gospel tells us that *Jesus drove out many devils, but he would not let them speak, because they knew who he was*. This, along with other similar statements, gave rise to the phrase “the Messianic Secret”; it is as if Jesus does not want to be called “the Christ”. Why might this be?

Can You Keep A Secret?

Better than you can, it seems is the customary answer. It turns out to be an unreal secret. The people Jesus heals are all told to be quiet about what he has done for them, but they can't stop talking about it; indeed, it's hard to keep secret the fact that Jesus has just stopped a funeral in full flow by restoring the corpse to life. So before long the countryside is ringing with his name, and he is pursued by vast crowds, to the point of danger to public safety. But Jesus succeeds in one field at least: he closes the mouths of the demons; he will not depend on the testimony of demons. I wonder what vital truth is embodied in that rather special achievement.

The Devil's Contribution

Is there a way in which we can try to build our faith on the contribution of Satan? I think there is, and I think it is a very clever way for the power of evil to penetrate the Christian life. Life is good; mere existence itself is good. Evil is therefore something which, in its pure form, *cannot* exist; pure evil would not even have the goodness of reality. Evil only exists by subverting something good. When you meet evil, it is because it already has some foothold in reality, some host whose life and powers it has annexed. This is what the Biblical doctrine of “demonic possession” is about. Modern people get superstitious about this. They think of the demon as a foreign presence sitting inside a person. That, of course, is nonsense: but the reality is rather more worrying. The demon's being is the being of the host, which has lost its divine destiny, and replaced it with something less. I guess people might think of great monsters of the past as “possessed by evil”. The real power of someone like Hitler, however, is a

revelation of what one human being can do when he commits all his powers to one end. If that end excludes God, you can say that a demon has possessed him.

The Grace Of God

To be “possessed” by the Holy Spirit is to be led into life: he is *Lord and Giver of Life*. Such “possession” is entirely benign, because the Spirit of the Creator is identical with the eternal life of a creature filled with grace. To be possessed by a lesser spirit is to exclude true holiness and true humanity: it is slavery, and imprisonment; it distorts and cripples the strength of the personality, betraying into dead ends all our powers. This is fearful; however we are not to be built on fear, but on love. Everything which *frightens* us into virtue, *constrains* us to be good, *shackles* us to what's right is obedient to the voice of demons. It is an attempt to beat ourselves into divine shape. We shall do little good by trying such a path. Its assumption is that our freedom is too dangerous, the risk of evil too powerful; secretly it acknowledges that evil is stronger than good, and eventually that Satan is stronger than God. This is ultimately the denial of the true God, and Satan has won us.

The Cross

When God created the world he knew it would set up the Cross, just as he knew it would bring forth the murder of Abel and the Holocaust of the Jews. He did not insert escape-clauses to prevent these and other demonic happenings. He wanted his children to choose freely to follow the paths of grace, and he gave us the longing for goodness to guide us to him. We call this risky strategy *the Divine Plan*. Every element in it is essential: the risk, the sufferings, the failures all have to be endured so that the ultimate harvest will be sound. Jesus goes forth into the suffering world, and in the half-light of the dying Sabbath the multitudes bring him the sick, the damaged, and the possessed. He will heal and reconcile and liberate all the children of God; but he will build nothing on

the stolen power of demons.
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