

EVIL'S STRATEGY IN CHURCH LIFE

AIMS:

- To **reduce** the occasions when those who follow Christ unknowingly work against him.
 - To examine a **key Scripture passage**: Peter's rebuke to Jesus and Jesus apparently referring to him as *Satan*.
 - To see from the passage's context and content what can be learned about today's **evil pressures** on Christians.
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OUTLINE:

Part I - Evil Introduced

1. Evil and Us
2. Jesus, Peter and Satan

Part II - Evil Lays in Wait (Mark chapters 1 to 8)

1. The Context (Mark)
 2. Jesus Opens Eyes
- Application

Part III - Evil is Alerted

1. Peter's Recognition of Jesus: *The Messiah*
 2. Jesus's Recognition of Peter: *This Rock*
- Application

Part IV - Evil Speaks Out but is Recognised and Dismissed

1. *'God forbid, Master!'* – Peter Rebukes Jesus
 2. *'Get behind me, Satan!'* - Jesus Rebukes Peter
- Application

Part V - Evil is Explained

1. A Stumbling Block
 2. Human Assumptions versus God's Plans
- Application

Part VI - Evil is Eclipsed

1. Affirmation Heals Rebuking
 2. Relationships are Restored
- Application

Part VII - Evil is Beaten

1. Good versus Evil
 2. Discipline versus Disorder
- Application

Findings in Focus

Part I – Evil Introduced

1. Evil and Us

a) Us - not just 'them'

It is easy for us Christians mentally to 'locate' evil with others and elsewhere rather than around and within ourselves, especially with the media's endless reporting of atrocities and its constant parade of terrorism.

Years ago *The Times* published readers' letters on 'What is Wrong with the World?'

G. K. Chesterton famously wrote:

Dear Sir,

I am.

Yours sincerely...

This is the Christian view, and the security, direction and survival of the Christian Church is endangered when members assume that 'real' evil is only distant, but are blind to it among themselves.

b) Discern your teachers!

Beware of Christian self-styled authorities on evil: often those who grasp the subject too thoroughly end up with the subject grasping them with equal vigour! As you cannot ask me my qualifications to write about evil, I have outlined them for you below.

[My qualification to write about evil is based particularly on a ten-year experience, 1965-74, as the Secretary of the Christian Exorcism Study Group. We drew together leaders in that ministry from every denomination with the object of learning from one another, and pooling our insights. I summarised the conclusions of material gathered over a decade, devised a two-day clergy-training course, and wrote it up in my book **But Deliver Us From Evil** (1974). It remains a standard work on pastoral care of demonic disturbance in people and places. I later wrote a Grove Booklet, **Exorcism, Deliverance and Healing** to take account of the 'deliverance' insights of the charismatic movement which was then gaining ground. Copies of both are still available – see the books page on this website. Also on this website are the articles **Spiritual Warfare and the Ordinary Christian** and **The 'Wilderness Experience' Explained.**]

c) Distorted Good

It is unhealthy to think *too* much about evil – or too little. Evil, unfortunately, is not always easy to spot. Sometimes it is obvious, but usually it is extremely difficult. A great deal of evil is **distorted good**, which is why it so often goes unrecognised and unchallenged. (Nationalism is distorted patriotism; idolatry is distorted love; smothering is distorted mothering; license is distorted freedom, and so on.)

2. Jesus, Peter and 'Satan'

a) A Key Scriptural Passage

A key passage about evil – which forms the basis of this article – concerns Jesus and a leading Christian, Peter. It is set out below. (As Peter rebukes Jesus, and Jesus rebukes Peter I shall refer to it as the **Double Rebuke** incident.)

[Mark 8:31-33, Matthew 16:21-23.]

When I last read it, I asked myself whether I would have made the same response as Peter had I been in the same situation. I will give my answer below. Meanwhile, read this important passage, and ask yourself the same question. Would you have reacted like Simon Peter?

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'

But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me...'

[Matthew's version, because only he records what Peter actually said. 16:21-23]

Would you have reacted like Peter?

It came as a shock to me to realise that had I been in Peter's shoes at the time –

- **I would have addressed Jesus in much the same way!**
- **Jesus would have addressed me in the same way!**
- **I too would have been Satan's mouthpiece!**

I am writing this article to alert you to the fact that the same forces that worked through Simon Peter (whatever labels we give them) can work through us. I want to help you understand why and how we today can be trapped into working *against* the Lord we love and serve.

b) Put fighting before defining!

Before we get into Part II, I must say something about the language we use about evil. Christians will vary greatly in their terminology.

- **What I will teach about evil does not depend upon the words I choose to describe it.**

Evil is here, real, intelligent and scheming. The Christian task is to join Christ in his fight against it and in his defeat over it; not to allow differences in terminology to divide Christ's Church.

One purpose of evil is to divide Christians. It would be particularly sad and ironic if they did it to themselves in the process of arguing about the nature of evil!

While Scripture mentions evil, its task is not to reveal it. Scripture's task is to reveal *Jesus the Christ*, not the forces against him. The Bible is a book of theology; it is not a demonology – thank God!

Scripture uses a multitude of images to convey the nature and reality of evil, and taken together they are very helpful. It is useful to liken evil both to an *angel of light* and a *roaring lion*. Such images cannot easily be bettered – whatever century we live in.

[Angel of Light - 2 Corinthians 11:14, Roaring Lion - 1 Peter 5:8]

In Part II, I shall outline the strategic place the **Double Rebuke** incident has in the Gospel story, for it makes little sense if looked at out-of-context.

PART II – Evil Lays in Wait (Mark chapters 1 to 8)

1. The Context (Mark)

The account of the rebukes by Peter and by Jesus come at a strategic point in Jesus's life, and cannot be understood in isolation. Mark's story, the earliest, goes as follows -

a) Jesus's Life in Outline (Mark) (Chapter numbers are only a rough guide)

- Ch.1 **Jesus is prepared for Ministry by Baptism and a Wilderness Experience.**
Ch. 2-4 **Jesus proclaims God's Kingdom by Deed and Word – but meets religious Opposition.**
Ch. 4-8 **Jesus's Miracles create Unbelief. He travels south towards Jerusalem.**

- **Peter proclaims Jesus: the '*Christ/Messiah*'. Jesus predicts his Passion.**
- **Peter rebukes Jesus about his Passion prediction.**
- **Jesus rebukes Peter for being Satan's mouthpiece of Temptation.**
- **Peter witnesses Jesus's Transfiguration**

- Ch.10-15 **Jesus goes to Jerusalem for his Passion and Crucifixion.**
Ch.16 **Jesus is raised from the dead.**

Peter's recognition that Jesus was *the Christ/Messiah* is a pivotal point, and comes halfway through the Gospel story.

b) The Good News Goes Unrecognised

Mark's account was written to be read aloud. Listeners will have heard in Mark's very first verse that Jesus was the *Christ*, but will then have heard over seven chapters of *Christ's* life before Mark tells of Peter's declaration that Jesus is the *Christ/Messiah*. And what an incredible story it was – nothing like it had ever happened before!

Mark focuses on Jesus's **deeds** rather than his teaching, and presents him as a man of action. Listeners to Mark's Gospel will have heard the following amazing sequence -

- of God the Father affirming Jesus as his Son at his baptism in the River Jordan!
- of Jesus actually touching and healing the ritually unclean!
- of Jesus enabling the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the deaf to hear!
- of ten individual healing stories in all – including three involving evil spirits!
- of one account of a Synagogue leader's daughter being raised from the dead!
- of two occasions when Jesus miraculously fed vast crowds!
- of the time when Jesus stilled a storm!

- of the time when Jesus walked on water!

(For references see below)

[References:

1. **Jesus's Healings.** Peter's fevered mother-in-law (1:29-31); a disobedient leper (1:40-45); a paralytic - forgiven and healed (2:1-12); a man with a shrivelled hand healed on the Sabbath (3:1-6); woman with unstoppable bleeding (5:25-34); a deaf-mute healed (Mark 7:31-37), and a blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-25).
2. **Jesus's Exorcisms.** A demoniac in Synagogue (1:21-27); the demoniac who called himself 'Legion' (5:1-20); The Greek girl exorcised at a distance (7:24-30)
3. **Jesus's Raising the Dead.** Jairus's daughter raised (5:22-24, 35-43)
4. **Jesus's miraculous feeding of crowds.** Five thousand (6:34-44) and four thousand (8:1-9)
5. **Jesus stills a storm** (4:36-41)
6. **Jesus walks on water** (6:47)]

We are familiar with this incredible programme – but those who heard it for the first time must have been utterly flabbergasted! And yet – after so many examples of God's intervention - no one around Jesus had ventured to say publicly that he was *the Messiah!*

c) Spiritual Blindness

Such facts should, in theory, have 'spoken for themselves', as we say, but the New Testament repeatedly teaches that it is part of the strategy of evil to try and **blind** people to God's work.

Paul taught:

'The god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, ...' [2 Corinthians 4:4]

Paul could not help but have Christ's Commission of him in mind: *'...I am sending you to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, ...'* [Acts 26:17-18]

[For more about spiritual blindness see the articles **Evangelism – the Spiritual Key** and **Spiritual Warfare and the Ordinary Christian**, also on this website.]

It is not only non-Christians with problems of spiritual-blindness! After Jesus had fed the four thousand, he complains to the disciples –

'Do you still not perceive or understand?

Are your hearts hardened?

Do you have eyes and fail to see?

Do you have ears and fail to hear?

And do you not remember?'

(Am I alone in feeling Jesus's exasperation mounting with every sentence?)

2. Jesus Opens Eyes

While it is Satan's task to blind us spiritually, it is the Saviour's joy to open our eyes.

a) Walking Trees!

As we shall see in Part III, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter eventually sees that Jesus really is *the Christ / the Messiah*. Mark aptly prefaces that crucial event with this eye-opening incident –

[Jesus] *took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village;
and when he had put saliva on his eyes
and laid his hands on him,
he asked him, 'Can you see anything?'*
*And the man looked up and said,
'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking'.*

*Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again;
and he looked intently and his sight was restored,
and he saw everything clearly.*

[Mark 8:23-25]

b) The Need for Time

This story of Jesus's patient and unhurried ministry to one who could not see, paves the way beautifully for Peter's great insight about Jesus because – unusually for a Gospel healing account – the process of regaining sight on this occasion **takes time**.

This incident prefigures the opening of Peter's spiritual 'eyes' as he begins to see that Jesus is *the Christ / the Messiah* but whose mind and eyes are, as yet, not opened to see what it would entail.

Application

- i) Spiritual learning, seeing and growing all take time.
- ii) We must pray for folk that they may have freedom from evil pressure so that they are not permanently blinded spiritually. This should be a deliberate routine before any service of worship and the proclamation of the Gospel, whether by word or sacrament. What is the point of proclaiming to those made deaf?
[See the article **Evangelism – the Spiritual Key**, also on this website.]
- iii) Folk do not automatically see and understand what is in front of them – just as there was probably a time when we didn't!
- iv) This means that we must be patient with non-Christians, and not exert human pressures on them to change according to our agenda, and our schedules of salvation.
- v) We must be patient with our Christian brothers and sisters too. They differ from us because their journey into God is not our journey into God. They and we have started in different places, and are maturing at different speeds and in different areas. Do not let the human security of being similar lead you to restrict God's diversity of growth in people, and in the richness that God intends for his Church family.
- vi) Rejoice with all those who are looking to Jesus. It is better to see Jesus as a '*tree walking*' than to be looking elsewhere like so many in society. Christians must not demand complete theological/doctrinal/verbal and moral orthodoxy too early! Things will appear clearer with time. That should be true of ourselves as well, and be something that we are actively striving for.

PART III – Evil is Alerted

1. Peter's Recognition of Jesus: *The Messiah*

As Matthew adds an important section about Peter which Mark does not have, I shall use his fuller account:

...[Jesus] *asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'*
And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah,
and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'

Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

[Matthew 16:13-16]

a) 'The Messiah'

The Jews were looking forward to the coming of God's Anointed One, *the Messiah*, to deliver them. The term *the Christ* is simply the New Testament's Greek translation of *the Messiah*. (The two terms are, therefore, completely interchangeable.)

[Here's an example of the interchangeability of the terms **Christ** and **Messiah**.

Different translations of Matthew 1:18 read –

...Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise (KJV)

Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born (New Living Translation)

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about (NIV)

...the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way (NRSV)]

Some thought that Jesus was one of the heralds of *the Messiah*, i.e. *John the Baptist* or *Elijah*. It was Peter who said '*You are the Messiah / Christ*'.

Incidentally, Peter's use of *the Christ* (i.e. preceded by the definite article) is typical of the Gospel-writers, because it was not Jesus's surname.

b) A Job Description

The Christ is a job-description, not a name.

Just as *Herod* was called *Herod the King*, or, more simply just *King Herod* so Our Lord is called *Jesus the Christ*, or, more simply just *Jesus Christ*.

It is precisely because folk tend to think that *Christ* is *Jesus's* second name that most modern translations opt for the *Messiah* translation. [Translations opting for **Messiah** include: REB, NAB, CEV, NRSV, God's Word, Community Bible, New Living Translation.]

Peter's recognition and proclamation that Jesus is the *Christ / Messiah* is the turning-point in the Gospel Stories of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

[Peter's recognition and proclamation is usually termed his 'Confession'. I have avoided that term because the public tends to equate 'confession' only with the declaration of things that are negative (i.e. 'sins'), not positive as in 'confessing the faith' (see e.g. *The Confessions of St. Augustine.*) It is a great pity. What a loss that so many should talk now only of 'Christian denominations' and not 'Christian confessions'.]

What relief and joy it must have been to Jesus when the first person whom he had called to follow him [Mark 1:16-20 and Matthew 4:18-22] was the first follower to recognise him! Peter's Recognition and Jesus's Resurrection were both defining events, the first ended Act I of the Gospel story, the second ended Act II.

2. Jesus's Recognition of Peter: *This Rock*

Immediately after Peter's affirmation of who Jesus is, Jesus affirms Peter. The above passage continues as follows –

*And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!
For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*

*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*

*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,
and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'*

*Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the
Messiah.*

[Matthew 16:17-20]

Immediately after Peter's declaration that he was *the Messiah* Jesus immediately recognises Peter's leadership and strongly affirms it. As you have read, Jesus says that -

- Peter understood not because of human insight, but because of divine revelation given him.
- Peter will, in some sense, become the symbolic *rock* on which Christ will build his church.
- Peter is given spiritual authority by Christ – symbolised by the *keys of the kingdom*.
- Peter's authority to *bind* and to *loose* will have eternal significance.

[This authority was not exclusive to Peter. What Jesus said about binding and loosing to Peter in this passage (16:19b), he would later repeat verbatim to his disciples (18:18).]

Whatever the precise meaning of these last two items (which need not concern us here) it is clear that Jesus appoints Peter to a position **above all others and closest to himself**. Jesus affirms him as his future church leader - his 'number two' in today's language.

Application

a) Peter's Recognition of Jesus

i) The passage shows that Jesus had followers who did not all agree exactly on who he was – they were still his followers, and they would become more united as they knew him better, stayed with him longer, listened to him more, and learned to obey him. The spectrum of belief among the followers of Jesus will, I suspect, always be with us, especially if we are in the healthy state of being a community that attracts newcomers.

ii) We must beware that humanly we find a security when groups are uniform in pattern, in language and in behaviour. We naturally move towards uniformity. God's living church, I suspect, moves supernaturally into variety, richness and diversity.

We need to watch the human drive towards the comfort of uniformity, it can wield an enormous influence and be a major factor in *setting your mind...on human things*.

(See Part V, section 2.)

iii) Peter's witness began not with 'I am...' but with '*You are...*' Christians are – on the whole – not very Good News to the world. The focus of witness is Christ himself; our testimony about him is but a pointer.

b) Jesus's Recognition of Peter

i) Spiritual truths are spiritually discerned. [E.g. 1 Corinthians 2:14 - *Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit...and they are unable to understand them because they are discerned spiritually.*] Peter's recognition of who Jesus was, was '*revealed*' to him by God the Father. The greater the display of man's mind in understanding things, the easier it is to dismiss those areas of reality which it cannot grasp. It is widely assumed that if science doesn't say so – it isn't! Divine revelation of spiritual truth is sounder and more lasting than any insights of science and human thinking. It will remain after history has ended.

ii) However we interpret the authority which Jesus gave to Peter (of which the *keys of the kingdom* and his ability to *bind* and *loose* are signs) it is manifestly obvious that God's church today is not marked by its spiritual authority. Such authority that it has is undermined by every sign of disunity. When Christian groups indulge in authoritarian-ism it is an evil distortion of authority, and for ordinary folk probably undermines the authority of the Church rather than strengthening it.

PART IV – Evil Speaks Out but is Recognised and Dismissed

The events of Part III were so positive – the **Double Recognition**, i.e. the recognition of each other first by Peter, then by Jesus. What a great day it could have been...
But, inextricably linked with the **Double Recognition**, there comes immediately afterwards the **Double Rebuke**.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'

But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me...'

[Matthew 16:21-23]

1. 'God Forbid, Master!' - Peter Rebukes Jesus

a) The Suffering Servant

The Bible passage quoted in the previous section concluded with Jesus's command to his disciples '*not to tell anyone*'. It was widely thought that *the Messiah / the Christ* would be a political Saviour and deliverer who would free the Jews from Roman occupation. If word got out that Jesus was *the Messiah / the Christ* the people would try to force him to meet their military expectations.

As the passage continues, Jesus reveals what sort of Messiah his Father is calling him to be – a suffering servant. This was the **very opposite** of what the people wanted. Peter spoke not only for the disciples but probably for the nation as a whole when he said, '*God forbid it, Lord! It must never happen to you.*'

We are so familiar with Jesus's Passion and Cross that it is difficult for us to identify with the disciples and recapture what a shattering and sickening idea it was. It would take them a considerable time even to begin to come to terms with it.

Jesus would make two further predictions of his Passion. [Mark 9:30-32 with parallels in Matthew 17:22-23 and Luke 9:43b-45, and Mark 10:32-34 with parallels in Matthew 20:17-19 and Luke 18:31-34.] Even after the second prediction, Luke adds bluntly *But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.* [Luke 18:34] Certainly no one grasped it the first time around!

b) Inappropriate Encouragement!

Peter, as we see in the passage above, *took him* [Jesus] *aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'* [Matthew 16:22]

Jesus's prediction of suffering sounded to Peter as if he was getting discouraged, so Peter naturally assures Jesus that things need not turn out that badly after all! It was a caring response in the circumstances. Peter wanted to encourage Jesus: failure was not inevitable! *'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!'*

Peter's protest missed the central point about the Cross and Passion which, if expressed in a similar format to Peter's protest, might read:

'God decrees it – this *must* happen to you!' Peter still had a lot to learn!

2. 'Get Behind Me, Satan!' - Jesus Rebukes Peter

We come to the crunch point of these events. As we have read in the passage above: *But he* [Jesus] *turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!'*

Why '*Satan*' ?

- Who was Jesus speaking to?
- If it was Peter, what had he done to deserve it?
- What was Jesus thinking of?
- What did it mean?
- Was it fair?

At first sight it is *extremely* puzzling. Was Jesus using language carelessly and emotionally like the person who snaps, 'I never want to see you ever again!' – but does not mean it minutes later? Or was Jesus exposing something very sinister? – that a close and caring follower of Jesus could – in some sense or other – be the mouthpiece of Satan himself?

a) Satan's Opportunity in the Wilderness

Matthew tells of only *two* occasions when Jesus is so confronted by evil that he actually speaks to *Satan* – and the first account can only have come ultimately from Jesus himself, since no one else was there at the time. I refer, of course, to Jesus's Temptation in the Wilderness. [See Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13] (See the article *The 'Wilderness Experience' Explained* on this website for a detailed account of its significance for us.)

In the Wilderness, *Jesus* got rid of *Satan* with a quote from Scripture and the command **'Go, Satan!'** [Matthew 4:10. I have departed from my usual use of the NRSV with its *'Away with you, Satan!'* since the Greek is only two words. It was an abrupt command, not a mere suggestion!]

Luke adds: *When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.* [Luke 4:13] The '*opportune time*' came at Caesarea Philippi, when Peter realised Jesus was *the Christ*.

b) Satan's Second Great Opportunity

It is an awesome sequence. Satan departs for a while but, in the words of one commentator, *'He reappears in the guise of the chief Apostle!'*

[p. 113, C.E.P.Cox's, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, SCM.'56.]

The person and the timing were chosen with strategic and demonic precision. Why did Satan not encourage, say, Thaddaeus or Bartholemew to protest? For the simple reason that they were nowhere near as strategically important or as effective as Peter was at that time. Their responses would not have carried the weight and influence that Peter's would have, coming, as it did, immediately after Jesus's commendation and appointment of him as leader.

The reason I have outlined the *context* in which the '**Double Rebuke**' incident took place is because it shows that –

- **Peter was close to Jesus and loved him, and was his leading disciple...**
- **So Peter was evil's best choice to use in its attempt to divert Jesus from his mission.**

Evil is ever active to **distort the good**.

Evil tries to **distort** Peter's thoughts (implanted by God the Father) that Jesus is *the Christ* by encouraging Peter's human assumption that Jesus should not suffer.

Evil takes Peter's undoubted leadership, and tries to **distort** his leadership of the Christian Church into a leadership over Christ *himself*. No way! The first was divine; the second demonic – however sincere and caring Peter's intentions might be!

c) Satan is Recognised

When Satan uses Peter to try and make Jesus avoid the Cross, Jesus immediately recognises that behind Peter's well-intentioned remark lies a diabolically subtle temptation to put his own well-being before his obedience to his Heavenly Father. Jesus recognised the return of Satan's third suggestion in the Wilderness. [Matthew's third temptation (4:8-10), but Luke places it second (4:5-8)]

But Jesus knew what was what and how to handle it!

- Jesus promptly and directly combats the evil as he had done in the Wilderness. Indeed, he uses the very same words and repeats his command '**Go Satan!**'

We are expected to see the parallel. This time, at Caesarea Philippi and in the presence of other people, Jesus added the words *behind me* – which I will explain below.

Jesus discerns the real, and ultimately evil, source of Peter's misguided encouragement, and knows how to tackle the source directly, firmly and with authority.

'Go, Satan!' Jesus does not parley or negotiate with evil. He does not enquire about its nature, its family history, its hierarchy, its destiny, or stop to glean some useful details for his next lecture on demonology! Jesus *deals* with evil with contempt – not with fascination or interest. [For the Biblical basis for 'contempt' see the article **Spiritual Warfare and the Ordinary Christian** also on this website.]

The earliest Christian exorcism recorded outside of the New Testament is the one word *exi* (our word 'exit' without the 't') - the command to go out. One notable authority on Christian exorcism [The late Dom Robert Petitpierre, OSB, whom I was privileged to have as one of my mentors] translated it as **Git!** Another possibility would be **Scram!** while the modern phrase **Get the hell out of here!** strikes the right notes both theologically and psychologically!

We acknowledge the reality of evil, but if we treat it with anything but contempt it can subtly ensnare us.

Get Behind Me, Satan!

Why did Jesus add the words **'behind me'**? When Matthew, earlier in his Gospel, related Jesus's call of Peter, Jesus used the very same phrase.

We are so accustomed to the translation ***Follow me*** that it is a surprise to learn that what Jesus actually said (in Matthew's account) was ***Come behind me***. Jesus did not use the verb to 'follow', just the adverb of place – ***'behind.'*** [Matthew 4:19. Greek adverb *opiso*.] The position of a follower is to be behind the leader, just as, for instance, in the east sheep go *behind* shepherds. (It is only in the west that we expect sheep to follow shepherds from the front!)

When Jesus said ***'Get behind me, Satan'*** it will have reminded Peter of his original Call to be ***behind*** Jesus and following him, not in front of him and attempting to lead him. However high Peter's position would become, it could only ever be one of subordination to Jesus, never domination over him. (The word 'domination' comes from the Latin word for 'Lord!')

If Peter has no right whatever to lead Jesus, Satan has even less! The command ***'Get behind me, Satan!'*** prohibits the distortions that Satan was trying to introduce, and maintains everything strictly under the leadership of the ***Lord Jesus the Christ***.

[There is a vast range of interpretation about what exactly was going on. What I have written is largely my own interpretation. It has, I believe, three things in its favour: it is basically simple, it fits the account and it is in harmony with Christian experience.]

d) But Who was Jesus addressing - Peter or Satan?

Matthew's account says of Jesus ***But he turned and said to Peter***.

[Matthew 16:23. Matthew softens Mark's use of the word ***rebuke*** to ***said***, and drops Mark's reference to Jesus ***looking at the disciples*** (8:33) - so making Jesus's rebuke a little less of a public humiliation.]

Although it was physically addressed to Simon **Peter**, that does not mean that it was not, in whole or in part, addressed to **Satan**. Jesus's reactions to situations were almost always those of a teacher.

[Take the sudden arrival of Jesus's family for instance (e.g. Mark 3:31-35) **Jesus** immediately used the interruption to teach about the reality of his spiritual family. This is the reaction of the born-teacher.]

So **Jesus** will have wanted **Peter** and the disciples to learn the truth about the invisible aspects of what was happening. In addressing **Peter** he made clear to all present who it was that, at that moment, was **Satan's** mouthpiece.

If **Jesus** had addressed empty space when he ousted **Satan** to save Peter embarrassment, neither Peter nor the disciples would have learned the very uncomfortable truth that **Satan** had managed to use their leader to tempt Jesus.

The command '**Get Behind Me, Satan!**' drives both Peter and Satan away from any position whereby they might lead Jesus. For Peter, in addition, the words remind him of his true calling as a follower of Jesus. In my view it was a command to **Peter** and **Satan**, to put both of them (as we most aptly say) 'in their place'.

[Some translations divide the words between Peter and Satan. e.g. *The Message* has '**Peter, get out of my way. Satan get lost.**' It is a neat invention, but I am not sure that it captures what is written in Matthew!]

Jesus's contempt of evil is captured particularly well in *The Message's* translation: **Satan get lost.**

Application

1. Peter's Rebuke

i) We know that Jesus will rebuke Peter for being the mouthpiece of **Satan** (see Part IV), so it is important to give his rebuke of Jesus careful attention:

- It was not said by an evil person, but by a good one.
- It was not said by an enemy of Jesus, but by his foremost follower.
- It was not said by someone with a dubious spiritual history in e.g. the occult.
- It was said by a caring and leading Christian.
- Furthermore, Peter was not speaking out of momentary anger.
- Peter was being thoroughly reasonable. It would have been quite unreasonable to have gone along with Jesus's remarks about persecution and death. He had come to deliver his people – not to be delivered to them!
- Peter's reaction was based on his love and care of Jesus. How often, to raise someone's spirits, have we said 'Oh, I'm sure it will be all right'?

ii) In Part V we will read Jesus's explanation, and – insofar as we are likely to make a similar mistake – we need to heed it and apply it.

iii) Sincerity and feelings are not enough to ensure that things are right. 'He/she means well' cannot be used as an excuse for letting evil go unchecked. The checking of evil will probably require someone to 'stick their neck out!' (Reminder: we are spiritually at war! We cannot expect to remain under cover the whole time!)

2. Jesus's Rebuke

i) Satan does not try to uproot Peter's God-given insight that Jesus is *the Christ* – he probably would not have succeeded! What he *does* do is encourage Peter to build a distortion on top of it – and that is sufficient for his purposes. As I have written earlier, most evil is good that has become distorted.

ii) When we acknowledge the personal reality of evil, it is important that we do not enter into any relationship with it. Jesus's example here reminds us that an authoritative word addressed to the reality is all that is needed.

iii) It is not the Christian's job to inflate evil but to diminish it, and we can unintentionally inflate evil in three ways:

- by how we feel about it,
- by how we think about it, and
- by how we speak about it.

To these we may add those times when we allow the feeling, thinking and speaking of others about evil to go unchecked when it becomes distorted and distortive.

iv) Peter was in the key position to influence Jesus. Those who are in 'key positions' at whatever level in the Christian family/Christian church are not the ones who are 'above' evil pressures, but the ones who are **strategically targeted**. Evil is not foolish! Evil acts strategically.

v) Christian success does not lift us above such conflict with evil, but puts us in the 'firing line'. The sleepy church that has no vision is going nowhere, and not advancing God's kingdom is the devil's delight!

Just as a nation's forces would attack the front line of an aggressor, so evil forces concentrate their limited resources on points of strategic importance. The Christians who will find themselves under the greatest attack will be those at the front line who are moving forward, not the hangers-on who are sitting at the rear doing nothing! The greater our spiritual momentum forward, the greater is likely to be the negative counter-attack against us.

PART V - Evil is Explained

1. A Stumbling Block

*'Get behind me, Satan!
You are a stumbling-block to me;
for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*
[Matthew 16:23]

Stumbling-block is variously translated - *hindrance, obstacle, offence, dangerous trap* [In RSV, Good News, 21st Cent KJV, and New Living Bible respectively, although **stumbling-block** is retained in the NEB, REB, NIV, and NRSV.]

It provides a dramatic contrast to the **rock**. At one moment Peter is the stone on which Jesus will build: minutes afterwards he has become the stone against which Jesus might fall! What a warning there should be for us here!

Of course, the two are linked. If Peter had not first been Jesus's **rock** it is unlikely that he would ever have been Jesus's **stumbling-block**! Or to express it more clearly: if Jesus hadn't put Peter in a senior position, evil would not have targeted Peter to tempt Jesus.

To understand the link between Peter the **rock** and Peter the **stumbling-block** we need to remind ourselves that -

- Evil is not simply a negative force (like a hurricane).
- Evil is intelligent, and acts with purpose and strategy.
- Evil is limited but it is not foolish!
- Evil is always against God's Kingdom and the Lordship of Jesus.

2. Human Assumptions versus God's Plans

Jesus, in the passage, explains in the simplest of terms how a leading Christian like Peter can become the mouthpiece of Satan. If we translate his words literally he said:

'Because you do not think the things of God but the things of men.' - or, as we might express it, *'That's your human agenda – not God's!'*

However it is translated, the truth is clear and – to my mind – terrifying!

The truth is that it is not just the few Satanists who are the agents of Satan.

We Christians can become Satan's agents when we act on human assumptions rather than discerning God's will and obeying it!

Peter was not being evil or unreasonable. He loved Jesus, and was being caring and sensible when he tried to reassure Jesus that his future need not be as bleak as he envisaged.

Application

- i) Let's begin with confession! Look back at the decisions you or others have made in the life of your local church where the 'agenda' has been human and it was assumed that it was God's will – and that God would at least be obliged to bless it!

- ii) Has 'democracy' been the assumption when decisions have been made? Has it been the majority vote of God's people that has dictated policy? Has the decision-making come from below? Or is there a genuine attempt to listen to God and to discern his will?
(Note – voting can range from creating simply the human agenda, to indicating what God seems to be saying to folk who obey him.)

- iii) Analyse the times when you have felt that Christian things have become distorted, and your reaction to them. Would you now see the hand of evil behind them? What would you do differently now were the same thing to happen?

- iv) How are things spiritually discerned among your Church leadership? What deliberate steps are made to learn to listen to God? Is obedience to God taught and explained as the very centre of Christian living?

PART VI - Evil is Eclipsed

1. Affirmation Heals Rebuking

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

*Then Peter said to the Jesus,
'Lord it is good for us to be here; ...'*

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said,

'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'

[Matthew 17:1-5]

Jesus treats Peter very kindly and carefully after his necessary rebuke of him. Jesus reaffirms Peter as the leader, and makes a point of selecting him, with two others, when he leaves the rest of the Apostles.

Jesus makes sure that Peter is present when God the Father reaffirms him for the second part of his ministry. The Father does so in words that are virtually identical to those heard at Jesus's Baptism when he affirmed Jesus for the first part of his ministry.

[Compare the voice from heaven in e.g. Matthew 17:5, just quoted, with Matthew 3:17
This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.]

The pattern of events is up-and-down. Peter begins by affirming that Jesus is *the Christ*; then Peter plummets to the depths when Jesus exposes that Satan has used him.

But Jesus takes Peter to the next mountain-top, and they both leave behind what John Bunyon might have called the Valley of Rebuking!

Peter's Confession that Jesus is the *Messiah / Christ* was undoubtedly a mountain-top experience (humanly speaking) for Jesus himself. Now in this second mountain-top experience, it is not Peter that affirms Jesus, but the Heavenly Father himself. *'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; ...'*

God the Father gives Jesus a massive and symbolic 'YES' to his obedience in accepting a Messiahship that would lead to the Cross. Among other things, the Transfiguration must in some way have underlined for Jesus the future promise of Resurrection.

Like the blind man whom Jesus healed gradually, Peter ends up being able to *see everything clearly*.

2. Relationships are Restored

Often the truth hurts, but Jesus was not afraid to hurt Peter, if that would deal with evil. Peter's hurt could be healed.

At the mount of Transfiguration Peter says '*It is good for us to be here.*' Matthew tells how the three disciples fell to the ground when they heard the heavenly voice. He then adds the beautiful verse –

*But Jesus came and touched them, saying,
'Get up and do not be afraid.'* [See 17:6-7]

At this point we could leave the story, neatly rounded-off.

- The Father's special relationship to Jesus has just been declared and demonstrated.
- Jesus's relationship to Peter and Peter's relationship to Jesus are warm again.
- Jesus, by touching the three disciples, overrides any unease James and John might have felt at his treatment of Peter, and brings any healing necessary to the three of them.

Application

i) It is difficult enough rightly to discern when evil has infiltrated our Christian ranks. When it has been discerned, then there is the pastoral difficulty of what we should then do! For the sort of evil described here is inextricably bound-up with people and their personalities.

ii) We should note Jesus's ministry.

Deal with evil very ruthlessly

Deal with people very gently

I suspect we would tend to reverse the order!

Jesus had the spiritual insight and discernment to see when evil was trying to have its own way. He was able to make a distinction and base his actions upon it.

iii) Our difficulty lies mainly in our inability to separate the two. If we do manage to separate them, then we must beware of our well-mannered tendency to make sure that people do not suffer, as that can leave evil unchecked and running amok in the Christian community!

iv) The Father at the Transfiguration not only affirms Jesus, but commands the disciples – '**Listen to him!**' This lies at the heart of this article. The human assumptions which have such a massive hold on Christians and the Church, and which make us so vulnerable to Satanic influence are because we are listening too much to ourselves and not enough to Jesus as our Lord.

PART VII - Evil is Beaten

1. Good versus Evil

We have seen two 'mountain-top' experiences – Peter's affirmation of Jesus, and then the Father's affirmation at Jesus's Transfiguration.

Between the two was the 'valley' of Peter's rebuke of Jesus and Jesus's rebuke of Peter.

We could have left the narrative on the second mountain-top, but that would have shifted the events away from us rather than nearer. It is more realistic to stay with the Gospel narrative as it descends to another valley. But in it Jesus wins his second victory.

The story, as told in Mark [9:14-29], goes thus:

A man comes to Jesus and asks him to cure his son who is an epileptic-demoniac (i.e. in this case his epileptic-behaviour was due to an evil spirit).

[Not all epileptic behaviour is due to spiritual forces. If Jesus had exorcised the lad and the cause had *not* been wholly or partly demonic, the exorcism would have been irrelevant and have accomplished nothing.]

The Father says that he had earlier brought him to Jesus's disciples but that they had been unable to heal him. Jesus asks for the boy to be brought. He questions the father, who describes his son's medical history and symptoms. Jesus ***rebuked the unclean spirit!*** The boy collapses, is delivered and is healed.

2. Discipline versus Disorder

The disciples then privately ask Jesus why they had not managed to cast out the spirit. Jesus replies that ***This kind can come out only through prayer*** (and fasting).

[Mark 9:29. Those familiar with the King James's Version will be used to the addition of ***and fasting***. However it is rarely added nowadays because, 300 years later, we know that it does not feature in the best surviving manuscripts. It is retained only in the New King James Version and the 21st Century King James Version.]

Application

- i) Our growth in spiritual awareness inevitably brings with it not simply a greater awareness of God but also of the spiritual forces working against him. It is a very common pattern in Christian experience to have one's eyes opened to recognise Christ and to find that one can then recognise the demonic.
- ii) The only reason implied in Jesus's response to the disciples about their failure to exercise authority over the evil force(s) and to deliver the lad, was their lack of prayer. The text gives no other reason. Christian experience in deliverance ministry does show that failures can often be caused by inappropriate ministry. If the disciples had treated that particular case as merely mental or merely physical and had missed its demonic dimension, then they might have prayed for God to heal the lad, and not used their authority for the expulsion of the evil spirit that was the root cause.
- iii) Spiritual realities have to be dealt with *spiritually*. Large portions of the Church, unfortunately, are not used to viewing things spiritually, but tackle them like the secular society in which they find themselves.
- iv) It is a pity that the '*and fasting*' addition was probably not in Mark's original version, for it contains a valuable truth. The value of fasting in this connection does not lie in the absence of food, but in the fact that it is a sign of the disciplined Christian life. Discipline and good orderliness are the necessary foundation of any ministry that has to deal with disorder. To take authority over evil we have in every possible way to stand above it, not alongside it. The distorted Christian life will have too much in common with evil to wield authority over it. This is particularly difficult in these times when society encourages every distortion in thought and behaviour to be enjoyed as of right.

Findings in Focus

Here in summary are some of the main things that the above study has produced and their implications.

1. Evil is **not a mere force**. Behind it is a malign intelligence that enables it to act strategically against the things of God.
2. It is limited in its power, and (perhaps because of that) it uses its power intelligently and with subtlety - **not foolishly**. It crashes in to terminate times of special blessing; it gets working among the decision-makers; it focuses on the centres of power.
3. Christians will vary in their terminology of evil. In modern terms a '**negative spiritual pressure**' would be how I would most naturally describe what Christians experience, and it is something that most Christians would recognise and acknowledge.
4. The main thing is to **recognise** such pressures for what they are, not to argue about how they should be described.
5. The main characteristic of evil is **to distort the good**, to give it a twist – but not so such that it is easily recognisable as evil!
6. God's ways and our ways are **not the same!** We who follow Christ find ourselves in a way of life which turns upside-down most of the assumptions of the 'world'. The last are first; weakness enables God's strength; lives need to be lost before they are gained; we need to grow down not up i.e. become as little children, and so on...
7. This **upside-down life** to which we are called individually and as Christian bodies and churches, is at almost total variance with 'normal' living.
8. This means that around us all the time is **an enormous 'pull' towards a typically human style of living**, with its different beliefs, assumptions, morals and motives. Certain Christian local fellowships manage to break free of this to some considerable degree, others run on the world's agenda, not God's.
9. We become **agents of distortion**, and therefore work in harmony with evil's plans, when in the Christian 'army' we stop heeding orders and do our own thing – however wise and sensible our 'own thing' appears to be. We then become the agents of Satan – usually his mouthpieces.
10. The Lordship of Christ means that his followers are soldiers and servants – both analogies are characterised by obedience. The Church, therefore, is meant to be a **Lord-obeying body** which acts as God's instrument to do his will on earth and to increase his Kingdom/rule for the final defeat of evil.

11. The **greatest safeguard** against being an instrument of evil, of distortion, is obedience. But obedience requires not simply willingness to obey, but –
 - i) a deep knowledge of the mind and purposes of the one we obey, so that we begin to be inspired to live aright – aided by the Holy Spirit.
 - ii) our being geared to spiritual-listening before human-doing.
12. In the **Cross & Resurrection we see evil overcome**. Its final defeat rests on those who, as Christ taught, take up their Cross. The battle is not just a theological issue for debating. It is real, and lives and destinies depend on it.
13. When we see evil getting its own way, it is usually because someone has allowed themselves to be its mouthpiece or its spokesperson. To pray ***But deliver us from evil*** is part of Our Lord's own instruction to us, and we fail to do so at our peril. If the Lord's Prayer is under-used – usually in the belief that informality must rule – then *informal* words must express our need for such deliverance from evil. In practice this rarely happens, which means that evil has distorted the advantages of informality for its own benefit! That is *not* the way to fight evil!
14. We need reminding of St. Paul's words: ***For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.***
[Ephesians 6:12] The '***forces of evil***' as he calls them, are '***spiritual***'. They have to be fought in the spiritual realm with spiritual weapons. It is imperative, therefore, that Christians familiarise themselves more with both – see the article ***Spiritual Warfare and the Ordinary Christian*** also on this website.
15. It is a characteristic for evil to overstep itself, and to reveal itself for what it is. The crucifixion of Christ is *the* case in point. There will come a time in situations in which some negative spiritual pressure is present when things 'come to a head', as we say. Evil oversteps the mark and begins to be recognised for what it is. In such situations which reflect the shadow of the Cross it is obviously good to know that **God has the situation in hand and the situation's Easter Morning is just around the corner.**