

## BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

Jesus' words in the synagogue left the people amazed. His confronting of the man with the unclean spirit left them dumbfounded. Jesus' world was a demon-haunted world. Men and women in the ancient world believed in demons. Demons for them were intensely real. The first century world was one of pain and suffering. There was no relief from pain. It was a world of natural disasters that took a heavy toll on life. Disease, even the slightest illness, could be fatal. There was a high rate of infant mortality. Life expectancy was in the middle forties. Because they had no idea of the causes of natural disaster, calamity, or disease, they associated them with demons. It is difficult for our modern world to realize the power and influence that demons had upon first century human life.

But when it comes to evil and demons, is there that much difference between the first and twenty first centuries? We cannot dismiss evil as a first century phenomenon. It operates as an active force in our world as well as in our souls. In a real sense, in a tragic sense, our world is a "demon-haunted world." We can talk about barbaric acts of cruelty in the hostile and violent ancient world, but similar acts of human brutality have been produced in our day, on our streets, and in our homes. It is far more tragic, because today it is done on such a larger scale. Does it appear to you, or is it just part of my imagination, that the latest acts of brutality and evil seem to go one step beyond the one previous to it?

It was in the mid-twentieth century that someone said, "You put the Zygon gas in the cylinders. I'll make sure the doors are closed and the vents are sealed." Someone gave that command at Auschwitz. They were cold, detached words. They were barbarous and cruel, and precipitated an act of brutality that defies description. "Look out! Tanks have broken through! Tear gas is seeping in! Here, you take the kerosene. You go that way. Here's the torch!" Someone at Waco gave the command. An inferno erupted. Was this an act in the barbaric, demon-haunted ancient world? Hardly. "This is the street. Turn left and proceed slowly. Pull up to the entrance of the building. Get as close as possible. Set the timer. Let's get out of here. All hell is about to break loose." An explosion rocks Oklahoma City. One hundred and seventy men, women and children are blown to pieces. A barbaric action of human destruction conceived, planned, and carried out by the human will that is controlled by a destructive force, seeking to tear down what is good and decent, determined to make one less than human.

In the last 75 years we have witness the Holocaust of World War II, genocide in Cambodia, Jonestown, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, child abuse in America, branch Dravidians, ant the bombings at New York's Twin Towers and Oklahoma City. Who would deny that our time is not possessed of an evil spirit? Look how powerfully destructive an evil spirit like greed can be when it is let loose in human life. Our

environment is suffering from economic exploitation resulting from greed. A passion for wealth has produced a disregard for the world of nature and human survival. Greed can be so destructive to human life. Tonya Harding was a talented and gifted figure skater who competed for an Olympic gold medal. She was surrounded by vultures who wanted a share in the pot of gold that she might win at Lillehammer. Her mother, who had been married seven times, stood at rink-side with a hair brush to beat her daughter if her performance fell short of her expectations. Tonya's ex-husband, a hoodlum, helped to concoct a bizarre attack on her chief competitor, Nancy Kerrigan. The story, which captured national attention for weeks, ended like most stories of greed. The characters self-destructed and the pot of gold vanished. Joseph Conrad reminds us that "the belief in the supernatural source of evil is not necessary. Men alone are quite capable of every wickedness."

Jesus came to Capernaum. It was a small, poor village several miles from Jerusalem. It was the Sabbath day, and as was his custom he entered the synagogue for worship and prayer. He had an opportunity for teaching and the people were astonished at his words. The word "astonishing" prompts a question: Are we sufficiently "astonished" at Jesus' teaching? The reason we do not astonish the world more may be that we are not sufficiently astonished ourselves. If we were more astonished we would do more astonishing things. They were astonished at Jesus' teachings, because he taught them as one who had authority. Suddenly, there was a commotion. A man with an unclean spirit cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus must have been startled. The people were spellbound. Silence prevailed. Everyone was looking at Jesus, breathlessly waiting for his reply. Was this an interruption or an amplification of what Jesus had been teaching? Have you ever noticed how in our teaching we are interrupted by the very things we are teaching? I was locking up the church one Sunday before Christmas last year when I discovered a beat-down man standing in the hallway. When I asked him what I could do for him he asked me, "Excuse me, but are you the preacher here?" it was obvious by his appearance that he was in need of help. I could have said to him, "Look my friend, I just preached a great sermon on Christian commitment. I can't be bothered with you." Instead, I asked him what he was in need of and gave him gas money to help him get home. That was a perfect test of what I had just been talking about.

At church we sing "O how I love Jesus." Then we go home. When the church asks for us to increase our giving we change our tune to "Jesus paid it all." No sooner do we leave church that we are confronted with the very things that church is all about—love, generosity, forgiveness, and acceptance. Wham! There we are confronting these things before our very eyes. Someone has said this is where the rubber hits the road. Jesus is interrupted in his lesson of powerful and authoritative teaching by a screaming man with an unclean spirit. The power of Jesus' speech, words, and teaching are transferred to the power of his life to reach out to a desperate man. Jesus' power works for good among those caught in the grip of evil who lack the power to overcome evil by themselves. This is where Jesus gained his authority. He practiced what he preached. He had authority because he connected faith with ethics and belief with practice. What would have happened if, after that great

teaching, he could not assist this man and left him possessed of an evil and unclean spirit? The crowd and the disciples would have just drifted away. Jesus would have become just one more among so many. But Jesus' authority is to be found in his ability to back up his words and teaching with action. Jesus had the authority to do what he said he would do. Why doesn't the world take the church seriously? Because we fail to practice what we preach.

What is significant about this story that took place on the Sabbath in that synagogue in Capernaum? Jesus healed a man possessed of an evil and unclean spirit. Why is that so significant? Because it brings hope to us. Paul Tournier, the Swiss doctor and counselor, stated, "Doubtless there are many doctors who in their struggle against disease have had, like me, the feeling that they were confronting not something passive, but a clever and resourceful enemy." Jesus met that enemy that day at Capernaum. He won!