

## EXORCISM (1976)

### INTRODUCTION

In Autumn 1974, the Healing and Pastoral Ministry Committee of the Division of Social Responsibility considered a preliminary paper on the current interest in the occult. Shortly afterwards the issue of exorcism was raised by extensive Press coverage of a particular case in which members of the Methodist Church were involved. The Committee therefore set up a working party to consider the questions raised by the practice of exorcism and reported its intention to the Conference of 1975. The Conference encouraged the Division to undertake this study on the understanding that the Faith and Order Committee would be fully represented. The working party therefore became in effect a joint group appointed by the two committees.

Constituted in this way, the working party has recognised the need to offer pastoral comment and advice, but has been equally aware that theological, psychological and sociological aspects of the question require considerable analysis and investigation.

The working party concentrated on defining three primary views concerning exorcism held among Christians in general, and on indicating some of the ways in which they conflict. Manifestly, these views cannot all be true and fundamental principles of theological method are involved. It is the judgement of the working party that these theological issues would repay further detailed study. This is a major task which would be the responsibility of the Faith and Order Committee. The purpose of the present report of the working party is to proceed from an analysis of the differing views to offer suggestions, applicable irrespective of the position held, concerning basic pastoral care for those who think themselves or are thought to be possessed.

### THE VIEWS

Three differing views currently held by Christians are:

1. The process of exorcism involves the casting out of an objective power of evil which has gained possession of a person. This view includes the conviction that the authority to exorcise has been given to the Church as one of the ways in which Christ's Ministry is continued in the world. Some who hold this view believe in the ontological reality of evil spirits; others prefer to speak of people as being overpowered by a personal force of evil.
2. The process of exorcism is a necessary or at least an effective psychological means of reassuring those who believe themselves to be possessed. In this case, performing the rite of exorcism according to the New Testament pattern does not involve the minister  in accepting for himself the ontological reality of the spirits which are removed, although he accepts their psychological reality for the person who believes himself to be possessed.
3. A belief in demons is explicable sociologically and psychologically. It is undeniable that there are people who claim to believe in demons, but – since demons do not exist – it is their belief with which we should deal, not demons. In this case exorcism would be inappropriate, since what is to be

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The use of the word 'minister' in this report will normally (but not exclusively) mean an ordained minister.

dealt with is false belief. To pretend to accept a situation which is false is not a means of bringing people to the truth. Those who take this view stress that the normal ministry of word and sacraments, together with appropriate pastoral care, can deal with these situations. Fears and anxieties can be dealt with by the assurance of the presence and love of Christ. On this basis, the wholeness which God wills for all people can be discovered and the necessity of exorcism is excluded.

**Comment** (The figures used throughout this section refer respectively to the numbered 'Views' set out in the previous section of the report).

- (a) All three views pay full regard to Christ's ministry of healing and have the aim of bringing wholeness to people.
- (b) View 3 is clearly in conflict with view 1.
- (c) 1 and 2 may be, but are not necessarily in practice, in conflict with one another. Whether they were or not would depend upon the minister's decision about addressing an evil spirit.
- (d) 2 and 3 may be in conflict, but again may not be in practice. This would depend on whether the minister in 2 thought it sufficient to affirm the power of God through Christ, or believed it necessary to address an evil spirit.
- (e) The interpretation of the Bible is a contentious issue in this connection. Those who embrace view 1 believe they have scriptural warrant for doing so on the ground that Jesus practised exorcism. Those who accept 3 think that the language and thought-world of exorcism in the New Testament belong to a bygone culture and cannot be transferred to ours, so that there is no reason to think that in our time a Christian should claim the power to 'drive out demons'.
- (f) 1 is thought by 3 to undermine the notion of human responsibility, even if it be held that the person seeking help is often responsible for the early stages of the events leading to the crisis. 3 also considers that 1 makes impossible a rational view of providence since it divides the control of the universe between God and an objective power of evil. 3 is thought by 1 to involve an unrealistic approach to the hard facts of evil and to the limitations of man's power in face of it. Moreover, 1 judges that some interpretations from the behavioural sciences are more likely to undermine individual responsibility. 1 also affirms that a rational view of providence is consistent with the practice of exorcism on the basis of a limited dualism.
- (g) 2 believes that pastoral responsibility involves acceptance of the frame of reference of the person who seeks help. 3 holds that the only sound pastoral practice is based on reconciliation with the truth, which is that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is real whereas evil spirits are not.

## GUIDELINES

Despite the variety of viewpoint which is reflected within Methodism, certain interim guidelines can be offered to ministers giving pastoral help to those who believe themselves to be possessed, or whom the minister believes to be possessed.

- (i) These cases must remain within the context of the life and worship of the Church. Even when exorcism is practised it must be regarded as only one aspect of the pastoral ministry required.
- (ii) No minister or layman should act independently in these circumstances. The Superintendent and other Ministers of the Circuit must always be consulted as they would be in other difficult pastoral situations. The Chairman of the District should also be asked to suggest appropriate sources of help.
- (iii) There should be a thorough pastoral investigation of the case, including, save in totally exceptional circumstances, close and continuing collaboration with those qualified in medicine, psychology and the social services, including the appropriate referral of the person seeking help.
- (iv) Since pastoral guidance is first and foremost concerned to assure people of the presence and love of Christ, it is important to follow this practice in these cases also.
- (v) The ministry of bible, prayer and sacraments should be extended to those seeking help.
- (vi) The form of any service of healing for those believed to be possessed should be considered in consultation with the ministerial staff of the circuit (or in one-minister circuits with those whom the Chairman of the District suggests). Such a service should not be carried out when a person is in a highly excited state. It should not be unnecessarily prolonged. Publicity must be kept to a minimum.
- (vii) Continuing pastoral care of the person concerned should involve as essential ingredients the teaching of the faith and incorporation into the worshipping community of the Church.

*(Agenda 1976, pp. 105-7)*

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The Conference made two alterations in the last section, Guidelines. In line 3 of paragraph (iii) it substituted the words 'suitable persons' for 'those', and in line 1 of paragraph (vi) it inserted the words, 'or believing themselves' after the word 'believed'.