

Opening the Reformed World to the Powers

By Jan H. Boer

The story below represents one of the lowest points in my entire twenty-eight-year missionary career. The conversation took place in a village in the Bakundi area during my first two years as a pastor of the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN).

"Pastor, I need your help for a serious problem I have."

"Alright, Benjamin, what is it? Feel free."

"Well, it's this way. After I go to bed at night and fall asleep, I start traveling to other places. I know this is bad, but I don't know what to do about it. I can't stop it."

"Benjamin, are you sure you are not just dreaming?"

"No, Pastor, I know this is for real. And it has not happened just once or twice, but many times."

"OK, Benjamin. Tonight I will sleep in your hut on my trekbed and I will watch to see what will happen. If you're dreaming, I'll wake you up. If you start moving, I will grab you and not let you go. Then, in the morning we will together review what actually happened."

Benjamin turned around in disgust. "Pastor, there is nothing to see or hold on to. It is my spirit that is traveling, not the body. My body will stay in bed."

With those words Benjamin left me, appalled at my attitude and my ignorance. Here was a rather common problem and I, a white, educated pastor, did not understand what was going on. Clearly I had not been of any help to him.

But what was I to say? Was this not more African nonsense, a pagan fantasy that we missionaries hoped would disappear as the gospel took hold? One thing was clear: I had failed miserably as a missionary pastor. I felt empty, helpless, powerless, ashamed.

Benjamin and I were living in different worlds. Or, better, we were looking at the world through different glasses and seeing different things. He was steeped in the African world of myriad spirits, good and bad, that regularly impinge upon the physical and social world. His was an open universe with God, Satan, and all sorts of other spiritual beings in constant interaction. I was saturated in a Dutch Reformed world with its emphasis on the lordship of

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Christ over life and the scheme of creation-fall-redemption as a way of interpreting the world. Mine was a closed universe that had unconsciously turned its attention away from the spiritual to the empirical world.

My Dutch Reformed world hardly equipped me to understand Benjamin's problem. At that time, some twenty-five years ago, I was convinced of the superiority of my own world. He was wrong, primitive, and pagan. He needed to be freed from his world and imbibe mine. That was my mission.

However, my mission did not develop in quite the way I expected. At the "home front" in Canada, my church was embroiled in a struggle with the charismatic movement. Eventually, a fine synodical report answered responsibly the issues emerging from this charismatic challenge and encouraged me to open myself to a wider universe and to reject the narrow confines of an empirical world. Here in Nigeria, I noticed time and again that church members who had gone to our Takum Christian Hospital for treatment would almost without fail turn immediately to some functionaries of the local traditional religion to find out the real truth about their sickness. From their point of view, the missionaries and their Nigerian colleagues had done a good job treating the physical symptom, but the *real* cause had not been uncovered, let alone addressed. The hospital had not concerned itself with their African questions. Who had made them sick? How had they become sick and why? How could the attack be overcome? How could reconciliation take place?

I came to realize that these questions arose from the depths of African souls who were steeped in traditions in which spirits, powers, and ancestors play decisive roles in human society. However, missionaries like myself had totally ignored these traditions as irrelevant, ignorant, primitive, and even ungodly. We all felt that the sooner they were forgotten the better. We had uncritically accepted the biomedical approach to healing and were, with few exceptions, not prepared to entertain any questions about African approaches.

As a result of this attitude, many Nigerian Christians live in two worlds. One is the world of biomedicine, where everything is based on western science and technology. The other is the traditional world of spirits, native medicine men, and various sorts of priests. They have learned that Jesus is capable of healing certain physical symptoms, but that he is powerless in many other cases. In other words, he is a rather weak and limited Savior. His followers are forced constantly to turn back to functionaries of a religion they have officially sworn off. I myself have on

several occasions successfully brought patients to native medicine men for treatment after the Christian hospital proved inadequate.

Some may think such actions smack of syncretism. To be sure, my ministry is not free from it. But what about the religio-philosophical foundations of biomedicine? The biomedical missionaries are as much in danger of syncretism because they combine the secular philosophy underlying their practice with the missionary message. In the process they ignore questions of world-view, both African and Reformed, and adopt an almost exclusively mechanical approach to healing that seriously shortchanges the African soul—not to mention the biblical concepts and practices related to healing. Although many of these missionaries are graduates of a college that strongly emphasizes the integration of faith with life and learning, none of their academic, professional, or mission training had successfully challenged them to engage in a basic analysis of their purely western and largely secular approach to reality. And all this with the blessing of their Reformed mission board and its constituency!

The Nigerian Christians, coming as they did from a holistic, animistic background, had no choice but to resort to the services of a religion they had officially rejected. The mechanistic “Christian” approach to healing bypassed their hearts, questions, and fears. They can hardly be blamed for the conclusion that Christian healing is only for certain types of sickness and then only for its symptoms, while the real cause of the symptoms must be discovered by functionaries of the traditional religion. That today Nigerian Christians are trooping in droves from the “mission churches” to the mushrooming charismatic churches that operate with a world-view that is closer both to that of the New Testament and to that of traditional Africa should not surprise us. The “mission churches” seem almost sterile in comparison.

Of course, the traditional African world-view plays a role not only in the sickroom but in all aspects of life, including the lives of Christians. It is a view difficult to comprehend for someone reared in a scientific civilization. It is a world in which some people have the strangest powers. Some can suddenly transplant themselves in mysterious fashion to other locations. Others have a strange ability to see through situations. Then there are the countervailing powers of the witch and the witch doctor. You get to know people who have the power effectively to curse their enemies or cause them to become either insane or possessed, much like the Gadarene in the Gospels. Then, when they become Christian, in an equally mysterious way, they undo the spell while removed from their victim by many miles. In short, you find yourself in an incomprehensible world of mysteries and powers for which empirical science has no explanations and for which most expressions of the Reformed faith have no room.

When western missionaries first come in touch with this world of strange powers, they tend to dismiss most of it as superstitious hocus pocus that will disappear as the gospel takes hold—as I did in the case of Benjamin. They tend to regard it as a product of Satan and his deceivers. But as the

years go by and you encounter this world-view daily in Nigerian Christians who are fully rational and respectable people, it becomes increasingly difficult to dismiss. People whose opinions in other areas of life you respect, people with whom you have fellowship on a regular basis, people who have become your colleagues and with whom you work daily—how can you dismiss their opinions in this area as mere superstition? This whole world-view is just too consistent, too widespread, and its effects too pervasive to be dismissed so casually and easily.

I decided it was time to begin a more serious study of it. Eventually, I would like to study under some practitioners of these powers. In the meantime, I have searched for literature dealing with these phenomena. A lot of this, of course, is treated in the field of parapsychology, a discipline that enjoys little respectability among most serious

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students. I came across Douchan Gersi's *Faces in the Smoke*, a serious account of amazing powers he himself witnessed and experienced in a wide range of cultures. I was also led to Victor Ernest's book, *I Talked with Spirits*, about his experiences in the mysterious world of spiritism, an account he published after he became a Christian pastor. These corroborate much of what the African world-view affirms. It is one thing to accept that many of these phenomena actually exist or are practiced. It is another thing to put them into a perspective that is consistent with the Reformed world-view that I treasure. Is that even possible?

I “accidentally” stumbled across a helpful discussion in a classic expression of a Reformed world-view: Abraham Kuyper, no less, in his *Pro Rege*. Kuyper argues that these strange powers are remnants of the original power given to the human race with which humankind was to pursue the Cultural Mandate. The Fall led to a loss of most of these powers, but various cultures have retained remnants. Over time these remnant powers have been distorted and are thus used for negative purposes. We see their restoration in Christ, who performed his miracles not as the Son of God but as the first fruit of restored humankind. His powers, strange as they may seem to us, were expressions of restored *human* powers, powers that were also available to his disciples—and even to us today. It would take us too far afield to summarize how Kuyper relates this thesis to science, which, according to him, is the main expression of human creative power today. However, here is a holistic, Reformed perspective that already early in this century made room for these phenomena so common in the cultures that confront us missionaries.

Although Kuyper's works are seldom regarded as relevant and, therefore, rarely studied in the missionary community, his perspective has not gone unnoticed. J. H. Diemer has further developed it in his book *Nature and Miracle*: "Signs and wonders are happenings in which the original power of men over creation shows up again." In restored fellowship with God through Christ, even today's believer can perform signs and wonders. It is a native human ability. Yet western Christians have lost this ability and even deny its possibility, while these very powers are utilized by people in many other cultures, though often in distorted fashion. Being products of that western society, missionaries have been quick to denounce these powers as demonic without realizing that they are not only natural to the human race but that they can be and are to be redeemed in Christ. The heritage of the Enlightenment, rationalism, and scientism has filled our hearts and minds more than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I find this perspective helpful, especially with a view toward the "mission churches" in the south, many of which have atrophied as a result of the western missionary heritage. They have no defense against the onslaughts of charismatic groups who operate with stark varieties of supernaturalism and dualism and who generally share a concept of the Holy Spirit, of redemption, and of the lordship of Christ that has led most of them to a heretical contempt for God's creation. This perspective enables us to account for phenomena that too many have disparaged as mere superstition and to regard them in a more positive light. But it does require that we move the goal posts of our Reformed world-view and enlarge our tent.

I would like to close with nine theses that summarize my thinking on the nature of spiritual powers and provide a basis for further discussion:

1. The power to perform miracles and other works beyond the ken of present day science was given to humans at creation in order to fulfill the original calling: the Cultural Mandate. In this sense spiritual powers are a normal part of human existence.
2. Due to the Fall, many creation powers waned, fell into disuse, but were retained by small minorities in all cultures. Sometimes they are used for the good of humans; often they are distorted and used to oppress.
3. Due to the influence of the Holy Spirit through centuries of exposure to the biblical teaching, it dawned on the Christian community that it ought not to fear the powers of the natural world but seek to understand and utilize them. This became the initial impetus to modern science. The writings of early Christian pioneers in modern science testify to this spiritual foundation. Thus science is the dominant way in which Christ's promise in John 14:12, that his followers would do greater works than he, was fulfilled in modern times.
4. Science appeared so successful and compelling that in time people tended to reject other ways of engaging the powers. Missionaries and new Christian com-

munities ridiculed the practitioners of miraculous powers and healing in Third World cultures, which resulted in tension in the mission churches.

5. The miraculous powers for healing and liberation practiced by Third World peoples are increasingly being recognized as the charismatic movement grows and the limitations of science become more apparent.
6. Charismatics cut the miraculous powers off from the created order and insist on their being purely spiritual gifts. They operate with a basic dualism and cannot account for these powers being available in all cultures and religions other than as the work of the devil and deceit.
7. The spiritual powers of which charismatics have been talking for so long are natural powers, restored and reformed through Christ. The miracles of both the Old and New Testaments are expressions of human powers restored by God.
8. The so-called supernatural gifts are natural abilities that needed the touch of the Spirit for renewal and revival. The supernatural aspect of the gift lies in this renewal, not in the ability itself.
9. Science is not a threat to the idea of miracles. An event experienced as a miracle in a Third World situation or described as such in the Bible may be amenable to scientific investigation. The spiritual and empirical are merely different aspects of one reality. ❖

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