



Abusa Chimwala's exorcism: Demons, Barth, and the Church of Central Africa (Presbyterian)

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Abstract

This paper relates Karl Barth's demonology to an exorcism performed by a minister of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. Despite receiving a theological education in the Reformed tradition, the minister had not formally studied demonology from a Reformed perspective. Karl Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian, illuminates what it was that the minister encountered and how this exorcism can be understood within a broader Christian cosmology. In addition, Barth's nuanced theological approach helps the minister to chart a path forward so the possessed young woman can experience freedom and life in all of its fullness.

Keywords

Barth, demon, exorcism, Malawi, Reformed

1. Introduction

The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) grew out of Scottish and Dutch Reformed/Afrikaner mission churches. These churches endowed the CCAP with a strong legacy of theological education. Zomba Theological College (ZTC), the only school that educates students from all five CCAP synods, has trained the majority of ministers using the traditional fields of Bible, theology, history, and practical theology. Like all institutions of higher learning in Malawi, ZTC teaches and assesses in English. In many ways, the curriculum and content of ZTC's education resembles a Scottish seminary from the 1950's.

The idea of decolonizing education that has taken such a strong hold on educators in places like South Africa has not touched Malawi's higher

education system in general or ZTC in particular. For instance, the recently constituted Malawian National Council of Higher Education (NCHE) continues to assume that education will occur in English and only English. For ZTC this means that while a majority of its graduates will work in contexts where indigenous languages dominate, students will only have studied in English. The church is not ignorant of the problems this system creates. ZTC has responded by introducing extracurricular classes that address issues such as local funeral customs and preaching in the vernacular. Because these classes are extracurricular, they are ad hoc. No student receives a systematic presentation of issues pertinent to the local context many will end up ministering in.

This is perhaps most true of areas that the traditional Western curriculum is largely silent on. In Malawi it is universally acknowledged that deliverance ministries, including exorcism, are something that all Christians should participate in. While all ZTC students expect that exorcism will be part of their ministries, the curriculum only touches on it twice. Firstly, it is during classes on the New Testament where exorcism is placed in a larger historical context. The other is during pastoral care and prayers for healing. Both of these instances are in English and are connected to larger curricular goals; neither is in the vernacular or directed at contemporary realities.

The most obvious response to this incongruity is curricular reform. The argument is simple: when theological education gets decolonized the Western lacunae regarding the demonic would disappear because the Malawian discernment of the spirit world would come to the fore. What this obvious response misses are neglected resources within the Western theological tradition that could help understand deliverance ministries even now. The CCAP is both African and Presbyterian. It locates itself as Reformed. Just because some parts of the Reformed tradition are blind to the demonic does not mean that the wider Presbyterian world does not offer resources for understanding exorcism. An alternative approach might be a retrieval of neglected Reformed theology.

This paper serves as an exercise in practical theology, bringing part of the Reformed tradition regarding demons into critical conversation with exorcism in Malawi. Specifically, the demonology of Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth has the possibility of illuminating an exorcism

conducted by Abusa Chimwala, a minister within the CCAP.¹ First I give a description of an actual exorcism conducted by Abusa Chimwala. From that account I tentatively answer the following three questions: What is the nature of the spirit that Abusa Chimwala encountered? What is the relationship of this particular instance to a larger spiritual cosmology? What are some steps forward? In answering each of these I draw on Karl Barth who, as a Reformed theologian, provides an understanding of demons that might help Abusa Chimwala as he makes sense of his ministry as a Malawian.

2. Abusa Chimwala's story

Before turning to Barth and the theological questions posed by exorcism it is important to capture some sense of how deliverance ministry plays out in a CCAP congregational context. The account that follows was first recounted in an interview with Abusa Chimwala. He had been recommended to me by a colleague because he was widely held to be a wise and faithful exorcist. This reputation was confirmed by a number of CCAP ministers who had consulted him on matters to do with exorcism and deliverance in their own contexts. His expertise is informally recognized. The official church does not recognize exorcist as an office although it acknowledges the gifts that Abusa Chimwala has in this area by asking him to provide teachings to a wide variety of people, both lay and ordained. Abusa Chimwala is a graduate of ZTC but has not received any formal theological training directly pertaining to exorcism. He has taught himself through trial and error, and through reading material on “spiritual warfare.”² This reading material is largely from North American charismatic circles and is neither Reformed nor African. He currently ministers within a CCAP congregation in the southern part of Malawi. Subsequent to the interview, Abusa Chimwala received a copy of my recounting of his story. He had a chance

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- 1 Abusa is a Chichewa word simply meaning “pastor”. It is a term of respect accorded to ministers in Malawi. Chimwala is pseudonym that roughly translates as “stone.” Therefore, the main character in this account is Pastor Stone.
 - 2 The books he specifically points to are Basham, *Deliver Us from Evil: A Pastor's Reluctant Encounters with the Powers of Darkness*; Gibson and Gibson, *Deliver Our Children from the Evil One*; Unger, *What Demons Can Do to Saints*; Wagner, *Ministering Freedom from Demonic Oppression: Proven Foundations for Deliverance Book One*.

to edit the account and is satisfied that it reflects his experience accurately. The analysis that follows is mine, but the account of the exorcism is his.

At the time of this story, Abusa Chimwala had a large rural area to cover with a main congregation and a number of smaller prayer houses. After visiting a prayer house some 30 km away by foot path, he returned home and was surprised to see Madalitso sitting and talking with Chimwala's wife.³ As he tells the story, he was even more surprised to find them discussing demonic spirits and attempts on his life. In Malawi, it is common to attribute physical ailments and difficulties to evil or troublesome spirits – less so murder (although it is very much within the realm of possibility to attribute death of any sort to some kind of evil)⁴. Madalitso was known to Abusa Chimwala but not well because he was new to this area. Upon his arrival he had reinvigorated the ministry which had lagged under the previous minister, making sure that he was preaching the Gospel with fervour and visiting all of the Christians for counselling and edification. Abusa Chimwala remembered visiting Madalitso's family and finding out that her grandmother was very active in her life. Still, he was quite surprised that Madalitso was in his home.

Madalitso was telling his wife, and now him, a long and horrible tale. Under the influence, even possession although that word has a looser meaning here than is sometimes thought, of a demon introduced to her by a group of local witches and wizards, Madalitso was actively attacking Abusa Chimwala, attempting to hinder his efforts at preaching the Gospel.⁵

3 To protect the identity of this young woman, I have used the pseudonym Madalitso, a name that translates as "Blessings". It is a common Chichewa name for men and women. In this case it is in the feminine; Madalitso is a young woman.

4 For a fuller description of beliefs particular to the Chewa people and Central Africa see, Wendland and Hachibmba, "Ufiti - Foundation of an Indigenous Philosophy of Misfortune"; Wendland and Hachibmba, "A Central African Perspective on Potentates, Principalities, and Powers"; van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*.

5 I have retained Abusa Chimwala's terminology such as 'witches and wizards.' This is not without theoretical problems that Wendland and Hachibamba discuss in relation to Central Africa. The term mfiti has multiple meanings including both "witch" and "sorcerer" but the connotations of these meanings are contextually derived. The term 'witchcraft' clearly carries negative connotations and is imposed upon complicated phenomenon that may or may not match the English connotations of "witch" and "wizard". For a fuller discussion of the issues involved in understanding the term mfiti see Wendland and Hachibmba, "Ufiti - Foundation of an Indigenous Philosophy of Misfortune", 185–200; A classic statement of why translations to terms such as 'witch'

Through the witches and wizards, the demon that was oppressing and/or possessing her procured a powerful charm, a spiritual weapon something like a hammer. Then, each night when most of the area was asleep, she would spiritually travel to attack Abusa Chimwala while he slept. Some might characterize this as a kind of astral projection. She would pound on his spiritual body with her hammer, but it would bounce off, ineffectual. After some time of failing night after night, the demon, through the witches and wizards, gave her an even more powerful charm, this time a spiritual string that, if broken, would cause death. Carefully one night, Madalitso spiritually entered into the manse and stretched the string across the master bedroom doorway. It was the demon's hope that Abusa Chimwala or one of his family members would trip the spiritual string and fall dead. This did not happen.

Madalitso was now in the manse because she had failed to successfully attack Abusa Chimwala not once, but twice. The full power of the demon and the witches and wizards was a double failure. There was only one conclusion that she could draw – there was a more powerful spirit present in Abusa Chimwala. She was here now, telling him all of this even though it placed her in grave danger with the demon and with the witches and wizards, because she could not go on living with the oppression she felt with the demon. She did things that she did not want to do and was commissioned to do horrible things like hurt Abusa Chimwala and his family even though they seemed to be doing good things in the community. Besides, she had seen how Abusa Chimwala was victorious in the battle with the demon and wanted to experience that victory herself.

3. What is the nature of the demonic?

This brief description warrants interrogation starting with the question “What is the nature of the spirit or demon that Abusa Chimwala encounters?” What language can we use to describe a demon? Commonly in the African context there are two avenues pursued to answer this

or ‘wizard’ are problematic see P’Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religion*; A more recent treatment of some of these problems albeit from a West African perspective is found in Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 1–26 especially Chapter 1 ‘narratives of Religion and Empire.’

question. The first is through some form of traditional or cultural belief. The second is through a neo-Pentecostal lens. Both of these have merit but neither capture the particularity of Abusa Chimwala in his context. He is a Presbyterian minister in Malawi. He may be influenced by neo-Pentecostal understandings of the spirit world, but he generally gets his theological beliefs through Reformed thinkers.⁶ Likewise, it is unavoidable for him to understand the spirit world outside of his Chewa heritage, but he has made a definitive break with that understanding, at least at a formal level. The question is, “What language can his Reformed commitments use to describe this encounter?” To answer that, we turn to Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth.

When Barth describes an exorcism in CD IV.3.1, that of Gottlieb Dittus, he turns to three languages to grasp the reality at the centre of the encounter. The first is what he calls “ancient and modern mythology”.⁷ This is the de-mythologizing approach adopted by Bultmann and his heirs. The second is through psychology but, more generally, I take this to mean the human sciences. Later, when discussing exorcism as a kind of miracle in CD IV.ii, he will connect these two, de-mythologizing and psychology, when he writes, “It is certainly not an exhaustive description of what is envisaged in the passages which deal with exorcisms to explain that they deal only with what we now call mental or psychological ailments (clothed and decked out in terms of the current mythical understanding), and that their healing is simply by what we realise, or think we realise, to be the appropriate psychic-physical treatment.”⁸ Neither the translation of an ancient mythological understanding into a contemporary idiom or a description of material realities understood scientifically are sufficient to explain all that was going on in the Biblical text. Nor are they sufficient to get a handle on the demonic in the contemporary context.

Before turning to the third language Barth uses, the theological, it is important to note that despite their limits, these two languages hold important lessons for Abusa Chimwala. During our conversations, he

6 For a scholarly account of common African perceptions of the demonic in conversation with theology see Ferdinando, *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective*.

7 Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 2004, IV.3.1:170.

8 Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 2004, IV.ii:228.

would consistently refer to the Bible. The Synoptics and Paul in particular were important for his understanding of what happened. When using Scripture as his heuristic in understanding the demonic, according to Barth, he must account for the fact that the language used is partly mythic. There is an economy of words in myth that gesture towards rather than articulate exhaustively greater truths. A literal interpretation is not allowed even if, in the end, a mythic reading is also insufficient to understand the demonic. Conversely, in the case of Madalitso, her encounter with the demon is quite a bit more involved than the Biblical record accounts for. She undisputedly experiences something, but in describing it she draws on the mythic language at hand, that of her Chewa beliefs about the spirit world as interpreted by the witches and wizards. Abusa Chimwala must be aware of the danger of naively exchanging one mythic world for another, never actually getting to the thing itself.

In addition, when describing the nature of the demon he must also account for material explanations best laid out by the human sciences. Madalitso (and interestingly Dittus) is the “victim”, a younger unmarried female within a patriarchal society. Madalitso is also poor by Malawian standards which is to say that she is the poorest of the poor since Malawi is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world. She is marginalized in at least three ways, by age, gender, and economic status. Cultural anthropology, psychology, sociology, and economics offer plausible and, in some ways, rich explanations for what she experiences.⁹ If Abusa Chimwala wishes to understand what Madalitso is telling him about the demonic he must also understand her through the human sciences.

After giving an important but limited role to de-mythologizing and the human sciences, Barth turns to the theological, but does so with humility for the exorcism “is not explained at all but can only be estimated spiritually.”¹⁰ In CD III.ii and again in CD IV.ii and *The Christian Life*, Barth will argue that this position of epistemic humility, of being circumspect about what

9 While describing a different situation, namely the rise of ‘vampires’ in colonial Zambia, White does an admirable job at demonstrating how various disciplines offer plausible but perhaps incomplete explanations for supernatural phenomena such as vampires or demons, White, ‘Vampire Priests of Central Africa’.

10 Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 2004, IV.3.1:170.

we say regarding demons, is both a result of who God is and of the fleeting evidence for who demons are.¹¹ The point of exorcism is not the demon. The point of exorcism is God and God's victory in Christ over all powers. To focus on the defeated is to give it too much credit and thus draw away from the proper worship and glory of God. Tied to this is the truth that demons come into view only when Jesus is present. Their activity can be seen, those possessed have symptoms and there are consequences to those symptoms, but the demon hides behind these symptoms until Jesus is present. Then, in direct confrontation, the demon cries out, usually some sort of witness to the authority of Jesus, and then is gone. These are very brief glimpses and we should not make too much of them.

Still, when we do see demons, when we can speak of them and Barth is clear that Christians must know and see them so that they can witness to Christ's victory, we can say that they are "the indefinable concretions of indefinable chaos as the true enemies of God and His kingdom."¹² Demons have a paradoxical existence and as such we must use the word "existence" in a very light way. They are concrete, the demon is in the young woman, and they are chaotic, not of the order of creation, but even in that concrete chaos they are indefinable. They are not concrete in that they are either God or creation (which includes the spirit world we might call angelic). They are not properly persons in that they do not fit into the theological anthropology argued in CD III.ii, a theological anthropology that is found in the humanity of Jesus Christ as the covenant-partner.¹³ The chaos they spring from, the "nothingness" that threatens to overwhelm, undo,

11 For recent critical treatments of Barth's demonology with full references throughout his corpus see Acolatse, *Powers, Principalities, and the Spirit: Biblical Realism in Africa and the West*. Acolatse, a Ghanaian teaching in Canada, puts Barth in conversation with the liberal Protestant tradition. Flett, a missiologist teaching in Australia, constructs a critical dialogue between Barth and Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong. Flett, 'Evil, Demons, and Exorcism'.

12 Of the lordless powers Barth will say, 'We must not be led astray, however, by the reservations just adduced. We have to speak about these powers. We have to do so because we see them and know about them and have to take their reality and efficacy into account. We have to do so because in all their strangeness they are real and efficacious.' Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4 Lecture Fragments*, 216; Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 2004, IV.ii:231.

13 See Paragraph 45 - Man in His Determination as the Covenant-Partner of God Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2: The Doctrine of Creation*.

corrupt, and destroy all of creation, is always at war with the good creation of God and in conflict with the covenant God has established with creation through humanity. Yet, this is an enemy that has no being proper to itself and has been overthrown by Christ's victory on the Cross.

Barth's most fulsome treatment of demons falls within his discussion of providence. In CD III.iii he first describes the positive content of the doctrine, then turns to that which threatens the preserving, accompanying, ruling will of God – “nothingness”.¹⁴ After this he focuses on angels, created messengers who witness to and fulfil God's will. While angels are not fully persons, as in they do not relate to God in the covenant in the same way as humans do, they are part of creation. They are subject to the preserving, accompanying, and ruling will of God. They find their purpose in serving that will in their own particular way. Finally, in a brief section, he contrasts demons to angels, rejecting the tradition that makes demons as “fallen angels”, and connects demons to the “nothingness” described earlier. This is important because it insists that demons are not like angels. Demons do not have a created nature but spring forth from “nothingness” as a specific and particular opposition to God's will within creation.

We cannot know for certain that what Madalitso participated in was an actual demon but given Barth's description, it is not an improbable claim. Earlier I noted that the language of possession was looser in this case. Madalitso did not claim that her will had been totally overtaken, that some other person had entered her and was acting through her. As fantastical as the idea of astral projection might seem and as dramatic as a spiritual hammer or trip wire could appear, there was no hysteric or drama present as Madalitso described the event. She was distressed, claiming that she entered into a relationship with a spirit to overthrow a local pastor, one who had recently arrived and was apparently disturbing local powers by preaching vigorously. She participated with chaos in attacking God's truth. Further, she claimed that this spirit, which never had a name nor spoke directly but had some kind of tangible presence, was oppressive. Her spirits were drained, she felt harried, never at peace, in conflict with herself in

14 Paragraphs 50 (God and Nothingness) and 51 (The Kingdom of Heaven, the Ambassadors of God, and their Opponents) form the bulk of this material Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*.

the deepest way. Perhaps even more significantly, she was out of sorts in her community. Her grandmother, her closest kin, was originally in league with the witches and wizards but was not pleased with how things had progressed. Now, Madalitso was estranged from her community. One of the things that brought her to Abusa Chimwala was that she felt a deep sense of guilt because, as she came to understand, she was attacking an innocent man. She had been duped both by the witches and wizards and by the demon. While it is impossible to tell at this distance, Abusa Chimwala's claims that he encountered a concrete form of chaos, a particularity that sprung forth from "nothingness" attempting to destroy and overthrow, are not unwarranted.

4. How does the demonic relate to a larger cosmology?

As I turn to the second question, "How does this spirit fit into a larger cosmology?", my Malawian colleagues wonder why I have spent so much time proving what is self-evident, that demons exist and that Abusa Chimwala encountered one. And they are right to chastise me and my Western mindset for being blind and deaf to the spiritual realities at work in our world. After all, while Barth is not unique among theologians, he is the rare Reformed theologian to address demonology. Theologians have operated with what Charles Taylor calls "closed" immanentism where there is no openness to the transcendent.¹⁵ With some laughter in their voices they will remind me I'm not African, that I don't have the seemingly innate African belief in the spirit world and am stuck in my Western materialist mindset.

At the same time, it is too easy to assume that Abusa Chimwala has all of the required answers to make theological sense of Madalitso and the demon. In some ways, the heritage of African beliefs that lurk in the background of Abusa Chimwala's understanding and are in the foreground with the witches and wizards, falls prey to the same problems as a closed Western materialist does. Both African beliefs and Western materialism assume that demons are part of the created realm and in doing so do not fully grasp their theological significance. Even worse, in misunderstanding the nature

15 Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

of demons, both African beliefs and Western materialism misunderstand the nature of God and the victory found in Jesus Christ.

African beliefs are difficult to pin down for at least two reasons. First, societies like Malawi are not immune to the challenges of secularism, modernism, and the imposition of colonial Christianity, all of which have changed, some would argue distorted, traditional beliefs. Any attempt to recover “traditional” African religion is doomed, for the West has been inextricably grafted into Africa. We may lament this, and many scholars are engaged in a creative “re-traditioning” which is quite possible, but simple appeals to African tradition are naïve at best and harmful at worse. Second, beliefs are local and so it is difficult to speak with any confidence of a pan “African” belief. The Chewa people believe differently than the Yao people who are different than the Tambuka, all three common in Malawi. Even within the Chewa there is a diversity. Whose tradition are we talking of, which rationality, when we say African beliefs?

With the caveat that we cannot make sweeping statements about African beliefs in place, it is still fair to say that Abusa Chimwala’s community understands spirits as real beings that have agency in the material world. There are ancestor spirits, connected to a family and at times these spirits might become malevolent depending on how they are treated. Moreover, the community also conceives of spirits in a more general way, less tied to particular ancestors or family and more tied to a parallel spiritual world. Witches and wizards are able to navigate the barrier between these worlds and in doing so can effect physical change through spiritual means. Charms, like Madalitso’s hammer or string, are a medium between these worlds and words, whether blessings or more often curses, also have this mediumistic sense.

Dissertations have been written about this, many in cultural anthropology, and that is my point. That is, even if we take these beliefs at face value, that they are not mere superstition but point to a deeper reality, they are still operating within the created realm. A human science can grasp, to some extent, what is going on because the object of study is a created reality. I think that Barth might be able to admit that African beliefs are spiritual (as opposed to material), and even perhaps helpful to chastise strict materialists

as he does in *The Christian Life*, but still contend that they are not properly theological.

In making a big deal of the distinction between created and not-created evil, I believe I am following Barth in two ways. The first is in CD III.iii. His discussion of “nothingness” is in contrast to God’s will and creation. Demons are concretions of that “nothingness”. There is a long section on angels, proving they are created; a short section on demons demonstrating that they are not. The second is in *The Christian Life* where he places the “lordless powers” within the created realm by arguing that they are alienated human capacities that have taken on their own tenuous existence. Admittedly there are a few times in *The Christian Life* where Barth calls “lordless powers” demonic but by and large he restricts the “lordless powers” to words such as powers, principalities, rulers of this age etc. “Lordless powers” come from disobedient human capacities and take on a life of their own, an evil existence that challenges the Kingdom of God, but which is ultimately extinguished by the true King, Jesus Christ. Demons come from “nothingness”, from an uncreated place that attempts to destroy and overwhelm creation but is ultimately overruled by God’s providential will in Jesus Christ.

The distinction between demons and lordless powers is critical in understanding this case. It very well may be that the lordless powers are at work, say in the gender dynamics or in the ways that there is a breakdown in Madalitso’s community, but the claim made here is more. The claim made here is that the demonic – the active aspect of nothingness – is present in its own particular way. African beliefs can account for lordless powers as can structuralist analysis; neither can account for the demonic without resort to a theological claim of Christ’s victory on the Cross.

5. What can we do to help?

And so, the final question – What can Abusa Chimwala do to help? To be clear, Abusa Chimwala did help Madalitso. As he recounts the story, it is clear that Madalitso was delivered from the evil that oppressed her. Her demeanour changed, her spirits raised, and her life started to flourish. Abusa Chimwala is a good shepherd; he brought a wayward lamb back to green pastures.

For this to be a true deliverance for Madalitso it must include at least two elements. The first is exorcism, the second a witness to the true Lord, Jesus Christ. The first is in response to the particular demon present and the second to the lordless powers that swirl around, ensnaring each of us.

Here I want to use the word exorcism in a more limited context than sometimes it is used. We may be delivered from lordless powers, in fact, Christians claim that Jesus Christ has delivered us from that, but we can't properly say that we exorcise lordless powers. Barth points to political absolutism as an example of a lordless power. We do not exorcise a political absolutism; through the proclamation of the truth, we reveal all politics as contingent, dependent on the providential will of God and the covenant made in Jesus Christ. When Jesus encounters a demon, he commands it to come out and it does; when Jesus encounters Herod he proclaims the truth in word and deed.

For Barth the truth of Jesus Christ has already exorcised this world, for the life, death, and resurrection destroys the pretensions of nothingness through a thoroughgoing revelation of God's victory. Yet, the eschatological already-but-not yet would seem to suggest that falsehood and its fount "nothingness" continue to plague humanity and thus there is need for the particular articulation of truth to falsehood, of Gospel witness to a life that cannot be overcome by "nothingness." In those instances where falsehood has deceived an individual or a group is it not appropriate to talk of "exorcism"? Not that there are rituals and prayers that are magically effective against the persons of demons. But rather, that there is a need to boldly proclaim the truth in word and deed over and against the obvious opposition found in falsehood and nothingness and that in this proclamation there is an exorcism.

And in fact, this is what Abusa Chimwala does. In fervent prayer with Madalitso, he claims her status as a redeemed child of God. He proclaims the saving will of God in Jesus Christ and invites Madalitso to step from darkness into light. She takes that step and, in that moment, feels and believes she is delivered from the demonic. Even without a dramatic vocalization, both Madalitso and Abusa Chimwala would point to that moment as when she accepted the freedom of Jesus Christ.

What Barth does to help Abusa Chimwala is to help him understand the situation before him. With the help of a Reformed demonology Abusa Chimwala can begin to tease apart actual demons from “lordless powers.” Even more, in a context where everything is labelled “demonic,” a more theologically sophisticated discernment that is both rooted in a larger theological framework and sensitive to local understandings is invaluable. A proper and effective response flows from a good and true understanding of the problem. Abusa Chimwala is quite comfortable with exorcism, but Barth’s understanding challenges him to confront evil and nothingness at various levels. The default position for many CCAP ministers would be to assume that the demonic is present. This leads to an episodic and dramatic response which ultimately proven ineffective. Madalitso needs exorcism; she also needs the work that Abusa Chimwala can do over and against “lordless powers.”

The education that Abusa Chimwala undertook within the CCAP was needlessly inadequate to his context. While it is true that much of Western theology is either sensationalist, such as the charismatic books that Abusa Chimwala used to teach himself, or dismissive, reducing demons to myths or psychological phenomena, it is also true that Karl Barth directly addresses the problem of concrete expressions of evil. As a Presbyterian church in Africa, the CCAP has an underutilized resource in Karl Barth that can give guidance and direction to an essential component of good contextual theology.

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