



CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture



DELIVERANCE MINISTER

04// Matt Frost

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DOES SUPERNATURAL STUFF PUT PEOPLE OFF JESUS?



I wanted an exorcist on the cover of this issue of *Catalyst*. Actually, I wanted *The Exorcist*: black robes, casting shadows, chanting Latin – drama! I know, I know. Controversial. Horror films, even classics taking Christian faith more seriously than it almost ever is by Hollywood, are not a universal favourite of the Church. And, on top of that, the whole tradition of the movie exorcist is so Catholic, so formal. So subtly (but importantly) different from what ‘we’ do. People would complain.

I understand why. It’s part aesthetic squeamishness, part fear of evil, mostly embarrassment – at the issue of the supernatural generally, not just its darker aspects. I think that’s because so much of the Christian world’s engagement with the supernatural side of our faith (and by that I mean the parts that do not chime with a rational materialist worldview) is over the top, melodramatic, unselfconscious and terribly unBritish. We worry about what that means for our witness. At worst, we selfishly worry about people thinking we’re nuts. At best, we worry that, by

professing belief in things that are by definition outside of the parameters of what the world understands as ‘real’, we will put people off Jesus.

But when I read the Bible, it seems to me (and my training is in philosophy, not theology, so I’m ready to be told I’m wrong) that Jesus walked around believing in the supernatural. He talked to demons (rather than to mental illnesses or epilepsy). He healed and regenerated cells and tissue that had no rational hope of improvement. He defied the physics of density and buoyancy to walk on liquid, and he ignored the fundamental principle of conservation of matter to create food out of nothing. The God of the Bible, Old Testament and New, intervened, and his interventions are, to a rational materialist world, inexplicable – both in terms of purely human sciences and purely humanist ethics.

It is good to guard against superstition within the Church, and it is reasonable to consider the effect our stranger exuberances will have on our apologetics. But if we believe in a God who created

all that is, known and unknown, and if we believe that worshiping and praying to that God has any value at all, surely all other bets are off? If believing that our God became human and literally died and came back to life is crucial to our message, surely that will be the bigger stumbling block? Compared to that fundamental starting point, particular and local miracles, while encouraging, seem quite small, and exorcisms and deliverances, no matter how terrifying, are no stranger than existence being spoken into being from the void.

More than that – in a culture whose arid epistemology can, for some, drain the wonder and mystery from life, could the hard-to-explain and strange-to-imagine not be an attraction, rather than a detraction, for those considering our faith?

Jonathan Langley
Editor

Mobilising the *Mission Catalyst* community

We love *Mission Catalyst* and we know (well, we hope) you do too. On that basis, we’d like to ask you two favours to help us.

1 The law is changing and we need your help

You’ve probably already heard about new legal regulations called **GDPR**. The changes coming as part of GDPR will mean that BMS will have to get specific permission to contact some supporters – without which, we might not be able to send you things. As new guidelines come out in 2018 we’ll be contacting supporters specifically, but if you wanted to get ahead of that curve and give us permission now, that would be so helpful.

Just go to www.bmsworldmission.org/supportcatalyst and fill out the permission to contact form.

2 Mission Catalyst is free and we value your support

We don’t charge for *Mission Catalyst*, and we don’t intend to any time soon. But several readers have expressed a desire to practically support the space for debate and deeper thinking that *Catalyst* provides. In response, we’d like to ask you to consider making a one-off donation to the work of BMS – not to support *Mission Catalyst*, but to support the life-transforming work that *Catalyst’s* mission thinking springs out of.

Some magazine subscriptions cost more than £3 an issue. A gift to BMS of just £9, you could make a real difference in the lives of some of the most marginalised and least evangelised people in the world. There’s no pressure – we would prefer you to be reading, thinking and engaging regardless – but if you want to show your support for *Catalyst*, please go to www.bmsworldmission.org/supportcatalyst

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THE GUARDIAN JOURNALIST ON MY SHOULDER

WHEN CONSIDERING THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE WEST, A CULTURE OF SCEPTICISM CAN MANIFEST AS CONVINCINGLY AS ANY SPECTRE.

I'm not sure when it started, but for some time now I've been going to church with a *Guardian* journalist. When I took out my subscription with the *Guardian* I intended to follow Karl Barth's perhaps apocryphal advice: "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." I thought it would be that simple. Then the *Guardian* hack started having his, and sometimes her, say. By now it is my normal experience to hear a comment piece in composition while I engage in most worship events. Observations are made, questions asked, scepticism expressed. I have to say, he gets in the way.

The commentary often lingers on the weak links of even good hymnody and the mixed metaphors and bad rhythms of songs that fill our services.

While we sing *Amazing grace*, a personal favourite, the commentary starts.

"Twas faith that taught my heart to fear..."

"The Christian faith has always worked by instilling fear that only it can relieve. Has it never occurred to them that if the Church stopped railing against the weak of mind, there would be little need of the descending offer of grace?"

When testimonies are given, alongside my real longing to say amen to a brother or sister's experience of faith, I note a pre-emptive cringe as I hear the journal sharpening her pencil in anticipation.

"They celebrate the curative effects of 'antibiotics and prayer', without a thought that one renders the other superfluous. The healing of a frozen shoulder and the provision of a parking space are causes for praise and a blind eye is turned to the evident sufferings on view in the congregation, let alone outside the church and in the newspaper."

As we read the Bible together she



comments: "they tiptoe through their scriptures, neatly avoiding genocide and misogyny and alight on poetry and parables." When beliefs are articulated, through sermon or creed, he is almost

no confessed faith, in multiple ways during daily life. We all know that faith is an option, a take on life, that is not shared by most people.

If such is the case, then Paul Ricoeur

“ When testimonies are given, I feel a pre-emptive cringe ”

indignant with incredulity. "In a world that is well explained and investigated by science, how can these Christians still believe in the incarnation of God, the resurrection of the dead and the future possibility of a new heavens and a new earth?"

While at worship, in the community of believers, I have smuggled in a sceptic. It is not that I am convinced by the journalist's text, simply that I am aware of it. My experience is what Charles Taylor terms a "shift in the conditions of belief" within a secular age. He argues that western society is characterised by a lived awareness that God is contested; that this is daily conveyed to people of faith, and those of

was right to suggest that faith in these sceptical times needs a second naiveté, one that can thrive beyond the desert of critical thinking, because there is no way back to an original innocence. The questions and comments are out of the bag and we can't pretend we didn't hear them. Nor can we pretend that, at times, they're not good questions.

I take a *Guardian* journalist to church on Sunday and make my confession that Jesus is Lord to the sound of pencil on notebook and aware of her knowing smile. I've got used to her, her comments and questions. I hope, at least, that this means my worship prepares me for witness, which is part of the reason for going to church.

Matt Frost is Senior Pastor at Cirencester Baptist Church. A veteran of deliverance ministry in the UK and abroad, he has also conducted many healing services and prayed for healing and deliverance at Victoria's New Age festivals.



Q&A

MATT FROST

DELIVERANCE MINISTRY

DELIVERANCE, EXORCISMS, THE HOLY SPIRIT AND OTHER MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SUPERNATURAL, FROM A UK MINISTER'S PERSPECTIVE.

What do people misunderstand most about deliverance and exorcisms?

For Christians, there are probably two opposing things that cause misunderstanding in this area. The first is that our views are so shaped by the culture in which we live that we can easily dismiss the presence and work of evil spirits, or try to explain it away by psychological or psychotherapy means. The second is the undue fear, that voice in our head that says "I can't do this" or "I don't know how to do it" or even, "If I do this, what will it unleash and will I be able to cope with it?"

For non-Christians, they usually either find it easier to dismiss all spiritual

matters as 'nonsense' (especially amongst educated people), or they believe in the existence of evil but can't or won't address it, perhaps because of a frightening experience in their life like playing with a ouija board in their youth. It is amazing to me how many people have gone to spiritualists or mediums (especially after a bereavement) but yet claim they don't believe in anything spiritual within the church context.

Is there a danger that we go too far in the direction of either ignoring the supernatural or seeing it in everything we encounter?

Yes! CS Lewis had a famous phrase in *The Screwtape Letters* that "Satan hails a materialist and a wizard equally" – that is to say, there are people who want to reject it all completely and concentrate only on things of this world, and on the opposite side are those that really delve into it all. In our culture, even amongst Christians, the former attitude is more prevalent – it is easier to ignore or forget about that side of our spiritual lives. In other cultures, however, it is very different, and I have experienced that first hand.

What experiences of the supernatural convinced you it was real, and did you

always understand it the way you do now?

Before I became a Christian, I think I was always open to spiritual matters: I wanted to read true stories of ghosts and people's experiences of ghosts and poltergeists. I was always asking myself as a teenager, 'what is this stuff?' I grew up in a totally atheist home so I was exploring these matters by myself and was always interested in the paranormal world. I think when I met a friend who introduced me to the Christian life, it made me more open to what he had to say.

When I became a Christian, I was involved in a very charismatic church, and the Holy Spirit was very evident there, so I witnessed his work – there was a definite expectation there that spiritual gifts were available and were ours to be used. If I became aware of an evil spirit I knew it had to go, and that I could command it to go, in Jesus' name. I read a lot of books on the subject, particularly the works of John Wimber. I was at university at this time, and went with a friend to India (his father was a pastor who oversaw several churches in southern India), and that opened my ideas to the battles within the spiritual world.

I don't think that my understanding of spiritual battles and deliverance has actually changed much over the years; this is probably because my basic roots have firm foundations: that evil spirits are real, that they can be present in people (non-Christians and sometimes Christians), places, houses and even objects. I have gained wisdom and insight from my many experiences and from the things I have witnessed, but at the heart of it I believe the same truths as I did as a new Christian.

Have you ever experienced something dramatic during a deliverance, or anything that you felt out of your depth with?

I don't think I have ever felt out of my depth; I always prepare prayerfully and always go with at least one other person, and as I said my belief in this ministry and in my authority to do it has firm biblical roots.

Have you ever had a negative experience during a deliverance?

Only in the sense that after sometimes praying for hours, and successfully casting out several spirits, the work is unfinished – I have two or three times felt that the person being prayed for is not 100 per cent at peace and that God's work in them

in this matter is not yet finished. I feel frustrated for myself – it is 'messy' – and I feel disappointed for them. But I have learnt to accept that occasionally there is more work to be done than I can do in one session. We once prayed over a man

can pray *specific* prayers. That is one of my main prayers for our church: that we don't allow the devil to hide amongst us.

This western attitude is a result partly of fear, and partly of the desire to explain everything cerebrally.

“ CS Lewis said: 'Satan hails a materialist and a wizard equally' ”

and cast out 40 individual demons, but it seemed that, every time we prayed, more would emerge – so that was very exhausting and frustrating. But no, I have never experienced anything more dramatically negative than that.

Why is it that the supernatural seems so much closer to the surface outside the UK?

That is due to our worldview in the West – our cultural differences. In the post-Enlightenment worldview there were two voices: the atheist view (that no spiritual world existed, that it is all 'mumbo jumbo') and the European Church view (that there is only one God and he is the only spirit we need to consider). In the last 200 to 300 years in Europe, the devil is frequently denied discussion as a practical (rather than theological) entity – something we can ignore and not talk about.

In other parts of the world, however, spiritual matters and entities are respected and acknowledged; it is a reality, and an ingrained part of the culture in many

As a leadership, we in our church are open to the Holy Spirit and to the use of his gifts by all Christians – whether that be acts of healing, or deliverance from evil spirits, or prophecies. Of course we tread carefully and sensitively: newcomers and visitors to our church – especially if they are not Christians – can sometimes be alarmed by anything spiritual or supernatural, so we are gentle in our approach when necessary; no 'nutters' here!

Churches that are open to supernatural experiences sometimes tend to have quite right-wing theologies and attitudes to politics and society – why is that?

Well, firstly I think I disagree with the basic premise of that question – our church is not right wing (nor is it even political!) and many of the local churches in our community would, like ourselves, perhaps be even identified by others as left-wing if anything. We are very community and socially-minded, supporting food banks, homeless projects and so on.

“ We once prayed over a man and cast out 40 individual demons ”

countries around the world, even in richer, educated places.

During my time in India I saw things that I knew back home would be considered bonkers, but in India were considered normal. What this says to me is that we in the West are in greater danger than those countries – if we hide behind our culture and dismiss the works of the devil, then we can't expose his activity. But we need to expose the devil's activity so that he can't hide and also so that we

However, I do see where this question is coming from, and I believe that such a trend is much more in evidence in the United States, for example – particularly in the evangelist churches. The more liberal churches over there seem to be more left-wing. I guess this is another area where the answer lies outside the Church itself and more in the general culture of that place and of this time.

Interview: Julie Hallowith

JESUS AMONG The Witches

WITNESS WITHIN PAGAN CONTEXTS MIGHT BE MORE
CONTROVERSIAL THAN ANY OTHER FORM OF INCARNATIONAL
MISSION. BUT WITH UP TO 200,000 PAGANS ESTIMATED TO
BE LIVING IN THE UK, THIS REFLECTION FROM CHRISTIANS
LOVING THE COMMUNITY IS TIMELY AND IMPORTANT.

Modern Paganism is one of the fastest growing new religious movements in the UK and the USA. So far this year, my husband Glyn and I have attended 14 Pagan events around the UK, the latest being the annual 'Witchfest' in Brighton, which is supposedly the largest gathering of witches in the world.

I imagine this has already begun to feel a little uncomfortable for some people reading this, and that certain questions have come to mind! That's okay! I can pretty much guarantee we have been asked them before! We have also experienced rejection, fear-based reactions, and suspicion from some Christians who cannot get their heads around our missional living. Thankfully, this is beginning to change as more people are recognising the phenomenal growth of Paganism and associated spiritual paths. As Christians, we can either find ways to connect and understand, or the wide chasm between us and our Pagan friends will continue to grow, along with the suspicion and wariness on both sides.

So what do Glyn and I do? We are former BMS mission workers and pastors. We run an organisation called Kasama and we also spend a lot of time on the road, attending various festivals and events. I am a henna artist and a Gothic and



Emma and Glyn Moreton

Steampunk hat designer, so it is very easy for us to be present at 'alternative' events, as my rather quirky style fits the scene. We have other Christian friends who attend psychic fairs and 'mind, body, spirit' events and may offer Ruach cards [a Christian take on Tarot] and dream interpretation as their way of connection.

Our way is simply by being The Henna and Hat Lady, which is the name of my travelling stall. Over the years this has involved a huge outlay of love, prayer, learning, time, energy, finances and miles of travel in order to be present at various events.

The UK Pagan Federation defines Paganism as: *"a follower of a polytheistic or pantheistic nature-worshipping religion. The Pagan outlook venerates Nature and the worship of many deities, both goddesses and gods."*

Our pagan friends are not embarrassed talking about the supernatural. Seeing the world as spiritually alive and that they are a part of it means conversation around the supernatural is... natural! There are sacred rhythms behind all the natural cycles and Glyn and I agree with this worldview – we believe that the natural world is alive, connected, and brimming over with the Spirit of God. There are areas of differing belief, but so long as respect and listening happens, we usually discover we have a surprising amount in common. We have learnt so much from our conversations with our Pagan friends and have found ourselves enriched on every level.

Still, it is hard for some Christians to 'get' what we are about. We are commonly described as 'bringing the light into the darkness'. However, in reality it is often Christians who are seen as 'the darkness'. Why? Because of the collective wounds of a huge number of people carrying hurt and disappointment due to their treatment by Church and Christianity. Many people now turn to Paganism as a way to express and explore their spirituality on a more free and tolerant path.

When people discover we are followers of Jesus (our preferred identifier, as "Christian" is not helpful), we can initially be treated with suspicion and sometimes a little hostility. People may fear we will treat them as they have been treated



before (interestingly, I have not met one person who is negative about Jesus). Our response? We apologise. Our first response is always to say “sorry” for whatever has happened – no explaining, being defensive or correcting. We simply say sorry that in the name of God their experience has been so painful and damaging. This can be quite profound and disarming, as well as healing and reconciliatory step. We spend a lot of time apologising!

Pagan events attract spiritually open people. There are usually practitioners of various types, rituals taking place, and healing areas. The atmosphere can feel spiritually charged with tangible manifestations from the various activities. Where do we fit in? We have our stall and in conversation speak openly about being followers of Jesus. I have hand to hand contact with people as I henna – people often start to share their stories and ask me about mine. We never hide who we are. We find many people have highly tuned ‘radars’ and will quickly discern if someone is authentic or has a hidden agenda. Our agenda is simply to be friends, and be the love of Christ. Nothing more – nothing hidden. We love our friends and they know that. God works in and through us in very creative ways – we don’t have to try and engineer Jesus into conversation – he is present and speaking to people. And it seems that the presence of Jesus is magnetic. People are drawn to where we

are and we often find our stall becomes a crowded hub of sharing, hats, prayer, henna and connection!

One way we find the Holy Spirit working creatively is with words of knowledge or prophecy. It is common for us to be chatting with someone and God will reveal something to us about their life. We ask people if they would like to hear what we believe God has said, and inevitably they do. We will then often offer to pray for them. No-one has ever said no. Praying for people and sharing with them like this is not unusual – in fact

with her. I went to her house and found her waiting for me in tears by the road. She rushed through the cars and said, “I know we are on different paths but what you said about God and forgiveness won’t go away. I can’t forgive and I need help. Please pray for me right now in the name of Jesus that I can be freed from this awful hurt I am carrying – I need to forgive.” So, in the middle of the traffic, we prayed, and the Holy Spirit met her there and then in a beautiful way!

God has specifically called and equipped us for this missional journey – it is not for

“ Our Pagan friends are not embarrassed talking about the supernatural ”

it is very ordinary in these settings, as they are spiritually active environments. It is always exciting when people come and find us at a later event, to remind us of what was said and give us updates of their situations.

A little while ago I shared with a lady about forgiveness. She is a well-known singer in Pagan circles and not particularly warm towards Christianity (or, evidently, the idea of forgiveness!). However, she came back to me and asked me to meet

everyone. It is more challenging and costly than any of our overseas placements were! However, we are committed to this road because we know God has planted us on it. We have seen how God generously reveals his love to those who are open – regardless of spiritual identity. He isn’t freaked out by something having the label ‘Pagan’ or ‘Wiccan’. I think he just sees thirsty people looking to connect with something bigger than themselves.

African theology and the SUPERNATURAL WORLDVIEW

UNDERSTANDING HEALING AND DELIVERANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY IN BRITAIN.

I always find it very interesting when I survey the many western works and scholarship on Systematic Theology. What surprises me about these volumes, written by heavyweights in terms of scholarship and academic credentials, is the lack of material on demonology (the study of angels and demons)! Many works on Systematic Theology will have theology, christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, eschatology and, of recent,

and its relationship of continuity rather than discontinuity with the Christian faith. Part of the argument was that just as the Jewish religion was a *Praeparatio Evangelica* (preparation of the gospel), that is, Judaism prepared the way for the gospel to be received, so ATR prepared Africans for the reception of the gospel. In essence, Africans were already spiritual before Europeans shared the gospel, thus making

“ *It is imperative that we engage in healing and deliverance ministries* ”

missiology, but no special consideration for demonology. Could it be that western theologians, with all their intellectual prowess, have reduced God's doctrines to evidence-based research? In essence, has theology been reduced to only our five senses? African theology has a different perspective to share on these matters, as it definitely believes in the supernatural world, where spirit beings are real and can affect how we live on earth.

African theology has come a long way since its emergence in the African post-colonial era of the late 1960s. Back then, its main pre-occupation as articulated in West Africa or anglophone West African countries was the inculturation of Christianity to African worldviews. The particular concern of this discourse considered the nature of African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Christianity a continuation rather than a discontinuation of ATR. While various African theologians articulated this point of view, their voices were far from identical.

While the task of relating Christianity to African Religions and culture pre-occupy the beginnings of African theology, by the early 1970s it began to consider liberating Africans in terms of socio-economic development and political emancipation. African theology of liberation began to articulate for political and economic freedom of Africans. The main task here was to free Africans not just from neo-colonialism but also from the many African dictators. Since the mid 1980s we have also seen the explosion of African women's theology with the main concern being the liberation of African women not just from European



influences, but from African patriarchal heritage which still oppresses women.

The current state of African theology is that, while in the past there was a distinction between African theologies of inculturation and African political theologies, due to many changes on the continent this is no longer tenable. In addition, the fact is that African charismatics and pentecostals with a clear understanding of a spiritual worldview have dominated the Christian scene in the continent over the last 40 years. This has given rise to a distinctive African evangelical theology which is pentecostalist in nature. While discussions are still ongoing about the nature of the contribution of African pentecostals and charismatics to the African theological enterprise, one thing that is clear is that African pentecostals have taken the lead in reverse mission.

They are now among the numerous Christians from the Majority World who are planting churches and doing mission in Europe and North America. The

someone is ill, one understanding is that there is a spiritual force behind the illness or sickness. This is why within the African Traditional Religion people will consult the witch doctor or herbalist whenever they have a problem. The African view of the relationship between the supernatural and natural worlds, where spirits can affect the natural world, is similar to the worldview that was prevalent at the time of Jesus. This is why Jesus engaged in healing and deliverance (Acts 10: 38).

Jesus preached, taught, fed the poor and healed people (Matthew 9: 35-38). The 'Nazareth manifesto' (Luke 4: 18-19), a key text used to describe the engagement of the Church in socio-economic and political issues, can also be interpreted as being valid for healing ministry. An examination of the context of that passage reveals that Jesus engaged in casting out demons and healing people after reading that text (Luke 4: 31-41). If Jesus' mission involved casting out demons and healing the sick, then



“ Jesus engaged in healing and deliverance ”

history of African churches in Europe is still in the making, but within a period of about 70 years they have made an impact and contributed to world Christianity. As African churches and African New Pentecostal Churches in particular are growing in Britain, how does their spiritual worldview shape their theology?

Healing and deliverance is one of the significant missiological contributions of African pentecostal churches to the theology of mission. However, I am not implying that they have a monopoly on this ministry. There are British evangelicals and charismatics who also engage in healing and deliverance.

The belief that the supernatural world is real and affects the natural world is very strong among African pentecostals. The supernatural world is perceived as a world of spirits, both good and evil. African culture is very religious, and this affects every sphere of life. Therefore there is no sacred and secular divide within African religion and culture.

Another implication of this religious worldview is that it understands that some problems or issues have a spiritual cause and can therefore be solved by a spiritual solution. For example, if

it begs the question why most of our conversations on the *Missio Dei* ignore or don't emphasise this aspect of his mission. It appears that we have what I refer to as a selective hermeneutic, where we emphasise certain elements of Jesus' mission, such as feeding the poor, but ignore his casting out demons. God's mission cannot be reduced to only social action, because Jesus engaged in healing ministry as a sign of God's kingdom on earth (Matthew 11: 1-6). It is therefore imperative that, in participating in God's mission, we engage in healing and deliverance ministries.

African pentecostals are very good at exercising this aspect of God's mission by setting people free from demonic oppression and illnesses. This is enforcing God's kingdom on earth in dark places and spaces where the enemy wants to rule. *Missio Dei* is about proclaiming God's kingdom, whether in the physical by liberating people from unjust structures and oppression, or in the spiritual by healing the sick and casting out demons. This is the New Testament model of mission, and one that the apostles were faithful in exercising (Acts 2: 42-47; Acts 3: 1-10; 16: 16-18).

CHRISTIANITY: A SUPERNATURAL- FREE ZONE?

IS THE SUPERNATURAL JUST TOO WEIRD FOR CHRISTIANS? AND CAN OUR APOLOGETICS BE ENRICHED BY WHAT PARANORMAL FASCINATION SHOWS US?

I spoke at a science conference at the University of Bath last year, called 'Seriously Strange', organised by the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP). This 'charity and learned society' regularly examines claims of the supernatural, and the weekend covered ghosts, pre-cognition, time-slips, re-incarnation and other spooky stuff which defies conventional wisdom. Some ASSAP members are sceptics out to debunk; others have had real-world experiences of the paranormal (hauntings and poltergeist encounters are particularly common at the moment). Others are classic fence-sitters, open to hearing proof. Yet, what all the delegates shared in common, was how they viewed *me*.

When the MC announced me as an ordained Baptist minister I saw a confused twitch in many faces. People nudged each other, brows crinkled. Afterwards a steady stream of delegates came to explain their surprise. In a nutshell, it was this: 'I never thought I'd see a minister *here* – I didn't think Christians were interested in the supernatural.'

Just read that last part again. Let it sink in. Christianity is an extremely paranormal belief-system, which centres on a creator-God whose Son beats death and rises from the grave. Yet the Church, which represents this wild faith to the world, is assumed to be a supernatural-free zone.

To understand why, we need to first acknowledge that the supernatural still has great currency in our culture. Look at the TV channels filled with ghost-hunting shows and the cinema audiences lining

up for supernatural horror movies. Type 'ghost hunt' into Google and observe the explosion in paranormal investigation groups. Or check your social media feeds.

“ *I didn't think Christians were interested in the supernatural* ”

It's not just cats falling into fish tanks that go viral. It's the videos of a creepy Jesus statue opening its eyes, or a family photo where a long-dead child is standing in the mirror. Anything that hints at another world gets shared and re-shared, debated and thrilled at – and not just to debunk it. Even the scientifically-minded can be surprisingly eager to believe. A recent ASSAP survey found that more Brits believe in ghosts today than ten years ago. So why isn't church on their supernatural radar?

Well partly it's our fault, because in an effort to be credible in today's world, we've chiselled the paranormal edges off our faith. Christian magazines, books and preachers have warned us that 'Science is replacing religion!' and that 'Rock-

hard rationalism is the biggest threat to Christianity!' So, we respond with a rock-hard rationalist faith. We play down miracles, we disown mystery and we plough our energies into apologetic arguments instead. Surely a circuit-board spirituality that follows the rules of logic will be the key to convince our rational world? It does convince some, sure. Yet what this ASSAP crowd is showing me is

that even the scientifically-minded like having logic challenged, but they also like to test it.

It's nothing new. We see a spookily-similar cultural dynamic with the birth of Victorian spiritualism. Back then, religion wasn't the key to our future

anymore – it was science, rationalism and industry. Sound familiar? Yet, like today, the hunger for the supernatural refused to vanish. The great gothic novels thrilled and enthralled the increasingly jaded Victorians with stories of spirits at the window. The science-loving public wondered: *what if there is another world after all?* When they turned to the Church for supernatural evidence, they were told to wait. Proof of the afterlife would come, rest



Peter Laws writes *The Reverends's Review* column for *Fortean Times*

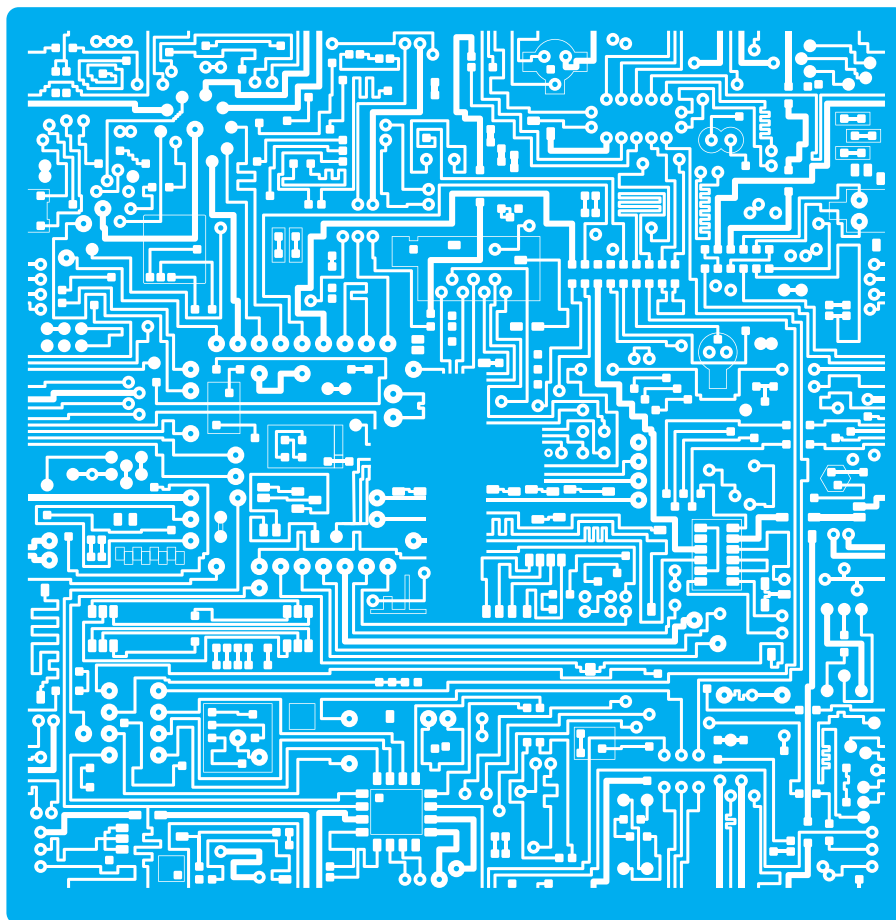
assured – you just had to die first to see it. Until then, you had to trust in an invisible God. It's no wonder that Spiritualism caught on. It sought to prove the afterlife before death. This was a form of spirituality that could be tested in any lab or lounge. Just gather in a circle, knock on the table and see if anything knocks back. The idea of an observable, testable mysticism captured the global imagination and still highlights something the Church must remember today. Despite the pulpit rhetoric, most modern people don't want science to completely replace the supernatural. Ideally, they'd love to hold on to *both*.

Most of the people here at the ASSAP conference have spent nights in haunted locations looking for spooks. Yet, almost like ritual objects, they use high-tech equipment to meticulously log anomalous activity. It's the perfect combo of supernatural exploration via real-world, observable results. What's more, it places no moral or societal demands on the witness. This 'scientific supernaturalism' seems to be an ideal form of faith for the modern age.

How might we respond? Well, we certainly shouldn't abandon apologetics. Logic and reasonable argument do wonders for our witness, but we mustn't forget how thrilling it can be when logic is challenged. So, let's show how our rational faith can sometimes break the rules. Let's preach on the miracles and the spookily accurate prophecies of the Bible, and celebrate the paranormality of our faith. But let's also fill our Church with supernatural stories of our own. In a world where the paranormal gets clicks, why aren't we praying for more miracles? And when they come, let's tell everyone.

Sometimes God can answer prayer amazingly, yet we say a nice thank you to him in the notices. If someone gets healed in your church, why not tell the local newspaper, or invite the town to a party to celebrate the supernatural God at work? Or is our lack of miraculous ambition (and our celebration in prayer alone) because we're scared God is too rational to break the rules, these days? Instead, let's pray for God to do weird and inexplicable things, then when they happen, we don't sit on them. We unleash those stories into the community and watch them go viral.

Ordinary people are fascinated with spooky things, and yet when was the last time you heard a church sermon on ghosts



“Can circuit-board spirituality convince our rational world?”

– or at least an evening service series on subjects like hauntings, UFOs, psychic powers etc? Sadly, many of our churches dismiss interest in this stuff as demonic, and I was shocked at how many of the paranormal researchers at ASSAP had tried church in the past and were told that they'd have to drop all interest in the unexplained. This is odd, when the Bible itself contains many strange moments, including when God seems to even allow the dead to contact to the living. Can't we at least discuss these mysteries in church, accepting that they are fundamentally fascinating to us as humans? This is pastorally important, since people in our communities *do* sometimes report strange paranormal experiences in their homes. Anglicans and Catholics have a denominational response to hauntings and even exorcism (requests for which are apparently on the rise).

Baptists... not so much.

The ASSAP delegates were shocked I cared about the subjects they cared about, and we talked into the early hours about many spooky topics, but what they asked about, more than anything else, was my faith in Jesus. This wouldn't have happened if I'd swung in on a rope 'to save them from darkness'. Our shared fascination with the paranormal became a connection, and together we reminded each other that Christianity is steeped in the stuff and can be 'seriously strange' too. Perhaps if we pray for God to release supernatural experiences in our churches – and if we don't lazily dismiss our culture's fascination with the paranormal – we might speak to the millions in the middle ground who are neither 100 per cent atheist, nor 100 per cent believers, but are simply spiritual seekers, looking for observable evidence.

Gill Thurgood

Minister in Training at Guiseley Baptist Church, Leeds; former Tearfund adviser on integral mission on the Mosquito Coast, Honduras; and former BMS World Mission worker in Iquitos, Peru

THE MISSIONARY & THE HAUNTED WELL

THE LOCALS BELIEVE A WELL IS HAUNTED. A WESTERN WORKER IS SCEPTICAL. CULTURAL PRECONCEPTIONS ARE AT PLAY, BUT WHOSE ARE TO BLAME?

During our time in the Peruvian Amazon we were involved in training pastors and church leaders from remote river communities. Most communities had neither electricity nor running water, relying on a nearby well. It was common for people to go to the well at sunset to take a shower.

One evening, we were informed that a friend of ours from one such community had been found unconscious and trembling by the well after showering, apparently having been “attacked” by an evil spirit. Afraid, his family called us for advice.

As a mission worker I was faced with the challenge of how to respond appropriately, knowing local Christians recognised me as a teacher, yet aware our assumptions and experiences of the spirit world were very different. In the Amazon region, spirits are an accepted part of everyday life and the idea of wells being haunted is generally accepted by many. On a number of occasions, Christian friends had nervously shared stories of haunted wells and other unusual spiritual activity, cautious about sharing too much for fear of ridicule.

Recognising my very limited experience of haunted wells and evil spirits, yet believing that all Christians have authority over demonic powers in

the name of Jesus, I set about gathering together a group of local Christian pastors to go to the community in question to pray for the young man and his family, and over the well itself. I was surprised when this was met with resistance; the pastors were apparently afraid to go anywhere near the well and urged me not to get involved.

Their reaction raised the question of how to journey with Christian leaders who

remains a ‘foreign’ message.

So how do we evaluate whether cultural values and beliefs are consistent with the gospel and, perhaps most importantly: who decides? How do we present a gospel that is global and universally true, yet also specific to local context? A gospel that confidently confronts an apparently haunted well?

For the indigenous people of South America, the spiritual world is already

“ We need to resist the temptation to reduce truth to a formula ”

preached that Jesus is Lord over all powers and principalities, yet in reality did not appear entirely convinced of that.

One of the greatest challenges of working in a culture other than our own is identifying those beliefs and practices that are a product of our culture, and separating them from those we believe to be essential to the gospel. Though difficult, if this is not taken seriously then a situation is likely to arise where the gospel is received at a superficial level, but never internalised and applied appropriately to real life. The danger is that the gospel

very important, with people traditionally using hallucinogenic plants as a way to greater spiritual awareness. This belief system differs hugely from the secular, rational worldview which so often subconsciously influences the belief system of mission workers from Europe and the United States.

In recent years much has been written on the subject of spiritual warfare, demonstrating a whole range of beliefs. While some have proposed the existence of a highly organised structure of demons operating over geographical territories,



others have argued that evil exists more at structural level, resulting in injustice and oppression.

Though evil spirits may appear to be more prevalent in areas where people have a lower level of education, Nigel Wright points out that not all who believe in demons are uneducated, and that even many intelligent people claim spiritual warfare to be the only explanation for their unusual experiences. Unfortunately, most of the material that has been written on the subject of the demonic springs out of a European or North American context, with very little addressing directly the experience of indigenous Christians in the Amazon region.

As I grappled with the questions raised by this incident, I concluded that one 'truth' that can be universally and fearlessly proclaimed for all cultures and all times is that God is greater than all powers and authorities, no matter what we believe to be going on in the spiritual realm. And through Jesus we do have authority. Our aim should therefore be to walk alongside local Christians as they seek to develop their own understanding of the spirit world, internalising and applying the revelation of God's power directly to their circumstances without



needing to translate from a different culture or language first.

Just as the professed faith of the pastors did not initially reflect their experience and belief in evil spirits, there are times in my own life where what I say I believe in terms of the lordship of Christ does not always match my inner convictions and

feelings. This realisation has continued to challenge me profoundly as I reflect on the meaning of personal integrity.

We did pray for the young man involved. And we did eventually go to the well as a group to pray. As far as I'm aware there have been no further spiritual incidents there since!



Chris Duffett

Founder of The Light Project, street evangelist, author and former Baptist Union of Great Britain President

TREASURE HUNTING: a supernatural ministry of clues

*MIRACLES AND HEALING, SUPERNATURAL WORDS
FROM GOD AND THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT –
THEY'RE HAPPENING ON BRITAIN'S STREETS TODAY.*

We hadn't eaten all day, so a late night trip to the chip shop felt like a great idea.

My mind was on my chips, but my heart suddenly went out into the kitchen. A thought came into my mind that I should go pray for the cook, for healing for his back. In the neon glow of the menu boards, I called out to him and asked about his back. "Why do you ask?" came the gentle reply. I explained that I prayed for people to be healed and that I believed in miracles. He looked curious, so I went on to talk about Jesus being the one who heals through me and how much he loves us. The cook, who said he was a Muslim and also believed in Jesus, did not want prayer, and went back to work in the kitchen. I resumed my position patiently waiting while the chips fried. While I

waited, the owner of the shop arrived and walked through to the kitchen. A moment later he rushed back to the counter, pointing at me.

"Are you the man who takes away people's pain?" he asked. I gently explained that I pray for people in the name of Jesus. "Good," he confidently replied. "Then you must pray for me." He bowed his head and, with tears in his eyes, told me that he was hopelessly addicted to gambling and that he needed healing. How he had been ruined by this cruel illness. With the rest of the men watching, he grasped my hands and I prayed for healing over him across the greasy counter. Afterwards, I explained how he could call out to Jesus whenever he felt tempted, and how powerful Jesus is to help us. In that

moment we both felt God's power.

Praying for miracles has become a normal part of my life wherever I go. Be it travelling for my ministry with The Light Project, running the rural cafe in our village or sitting in the pub with friends, I believe in asking for the impossible to happen.

The most spectacular way that I have seen him answer is through 'treasure hunting' – a simple way of asking God for clues about the people he wants us to meet, writing them down and then, in small teams, going out and searching for the people he has prepared for us: the 'treasure!' The 'clues' we receive from the Holy Spirit are found by asking five questions of the Lord: 1) Where do you want me to go? 2) What do the people who I'm going to meet look like? 3) What are their names? 4) What do they need prayer for? 5) Is there anything else you want to say to them?

Over my years of treasure hunting, I have witnessed people overwhelmed



Prophetic painting: bringing the supernatural to the streets

with the sense of being known and loved by God, as well as people learning about Jesus and his existence for the first time. I think of the woman from Holland who was visiting Milton Keynes, out shopping with her family, who had never been to church or prayed before but knew without a doubt that the clues I had written of 'bus station' and 'red coat, white furry collar, black boots' (sounds like I was looking for Santa) and prayer for 'healing for severe stomach pains' were for her. As we prayed, she felt overwhelmingly known by the God who she previously hadn't believed in. She had suffered with severe stomach pain for over four years and, that day, felt God 'all over her.' Afterwards, her husband asked to see the clues on my piece of paper. Randomly, I had drawn a picture of a lighthouse on the note. In his shopping bag was an ornamental lighthouse.

One afternoon in Clacton On Sea we asked God for some clues as to who we were going to meet. One team member received the clue 'purple scarf. "As if!" I thought, seeing as the sun was shining and it was very warm. Who would wear a scarf in summer? Fast forward 30 minutes, and after praying for the lady with the purple scarf (as well as her care assistant who was pushing her in her wheelchair), I once more realised that God really does so wonderfully love to speak, even if it appears very random. The lady in the wheelchair was so happy to be prayed for she gave two of the team a big kiss! Her

care assistant watched this encounter unfold in front of him and called me over to ask for prayer. The pain in his left arm was healed and he then asked us to continue to pray for his knees.

'Purple scarf' is a strange clue to have on a treasure hunt, but on this summer's day I had also felt led to write 'Halloween' as a description of someone I would meet. Later on, I bumped into a man on a

other ways too! Most weeks down our local pub I paint 'prophetic pictures' for people. To help people connect with the idea, I call them 'prayer paintings', and recently I painted for a man who felt so overwhelmed by it he couldn't speak for quite a while afterwards. The picture itself was a mess, a scene of a storm and a small boat with the name 'peace' right in the middle of the large waves. Alongside the

“ Praying for miracles has become a normal part of my life ”

mobility scooter which was adorned with skulls, grim reapers and other gory horror scenes! He matched other clues and was happy to be kept in our prayers, although didn't want me to pray for him there and then. This didn't put me off and the adventure continued as our clues led us to a bloke enjoying a pint in the beer garden of the local Wetherspoon's. He said that he was 'up for anything' to help him with his back and we laid hands on him and prayed a simple prayer asking God to meet with him. The guy was so happy to be prayed for that afterwards he shook all of our hands and said thank you.

Treasure hunting usually follows the pattern of asking God for clues, but God is very much able to speak in

painting I had written 'get in the boat!'

It turned out that thirty minutes previously the man had been asked a question by his friend who sat opposite him enjoying a pint. "What do you want out of life?" He replied that what he really longed for above anything else in life was "peace in the midst of the storm".

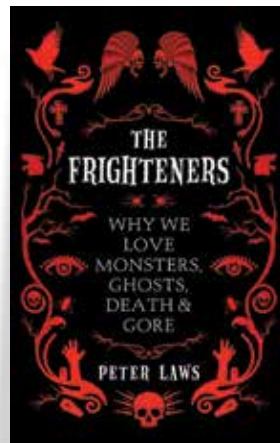
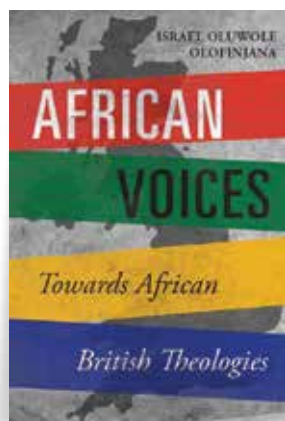
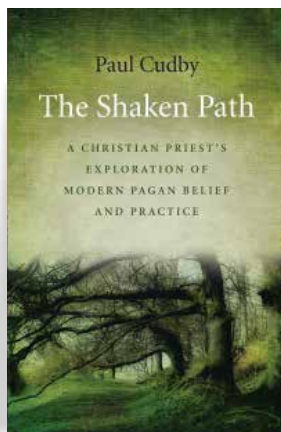
When he was once more able to speak, he asked me: "How did you know that?"

"I didn't," I replied. "But I do believe in a God who knows us and loves us. Do you want me to explain more?" I spent the next hour or so talking with him about Jesus.

God meets with people in tangible ways. Seeing that happen brings me more joy than almost any other experience.

THE SUPERNATURAL

Few people are likely to agree with everything on this list. The many points of view about the supernatural make working out our own perspectives even more important.



TO READ

DELIVER US FROM EVIL An Uneasy Frontier in Christian Mission

A Scott Moreau (Editor)
The Lausanne consultation in Nairobi in the year 2000 examined, among other issues, the extent of demonic influence over humans, and western money's influence on spiritual warfare in Asia. A fascinating exploration of spiritual warfare.

THE SHAKEN PATH A Christian Priest's Exploration of Modern Pagan Belief and Practice

Paul Cudby
Catalyst contributor Emma Moreton recommends this book to understand the world in which she ministers. She also recommends kasama.org.uk to see an actual online community exploring some of these issues.

AFRICAN VOICES Towards African British Theologies

Israel Olofinjana
An introduction to African theology, including understandings of the supernatural, by *Catalyst* contributor and expert on African British Theologies.

THE FRIGHTENERS Why We Love Monsters, Ghosts, Death and Gore

Peter Laws
Baptist minister and *Catalyst* contributor behind the Flicks the Church Forgot podcast, Peter Laws explores our fascination with the darker side of the supernatural. Available March 2018.

PHILIP A Novel

Chris Duffett
A contemporary evangelist (and

former BUGB President, *Catalyst* contributor and all-round nice guy) fictionalises the biblical evangelist – convinced that the Holy Spirit intervenes now, as then, in a supernatural way.

PARANORMAL BELIEFS A Sociological Introduction

Erich Goode
What are the cultural and social influences on worldviews that take the supernatural seriously? This analysis impressed Peter Laws.

MIRACLES (Collected Letters)

CS Lewis
The great apologist and author affirms God's personal involvement with his creation.

TERRITORIAL SPIRITS AND WORLD EVANGELISATION

Chuck Lowe
An examination and critique of

'territorial spirits' theology from intertestamental and empirical perspectives.

TO WATCH

LAKELAND The Movie

A documentary about Todd Bentley and the 'Florida Outpouring', where believers felt that the Spirit acted supernaturally in charismatic revival services. Find it on YouTube.

THE EXORCIST

William Friedkin (Director)
A classic Hollywood film about the dark side of the supernatural, based on a Catholic novel. Not for sensitive viewers or people attached to their taste for pea soup.

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