



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Devil Made Me Do It

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The suggestion that I write this paper came from my sister, Glenda. She told me that she got the idea when she was reading a book about AIDS. In it, a doctor told of a patient, who, though he was HIV positive and knew it, did not tell his wife and ended up infecting her. When he was called to account for being so uncaring and irresponsible, he excused and defended himself, saying, “This is the work of the devil.” He might have said, “I’m the victim here. The devil made me do it.” Interestingly enough, he was quick to let people know that he was a Christian. He was quite active in his church and was a respected member of the community in which he lived. What had happened to him and his wife wasn’t his doing. It was the devil who did it. The man was not to be blamed. After all, he had been victimized. At least that is how he insisted it was.

Somewhat coincidentally, the September, 1995, edition of THE READERS’ DIGEST had an article entitled, “The Devil Made Me Do It.” After several examples of “irresistible forces” cited as the cause of aberrant – even criminal – behavior, the article states, “The problem with all this is that you can’t run a society, or cope with its problems, if people are not held accountable for what they do.” As I understand it, the point of the article is that, today, we are depicting ourselves as a victimized people. Something or somebody else is always the cause of any unacceptable behavior. We do not hold ourselves accountable.

I think we probably would agree that far too many of us try to explain away our personal responsibility by putting the blame somewhere else than on self. The devil is a good “fall guy” and readily available to relieve ourselves of the blame and responsibility.

However, I don’t think my sister so much in terms of the devil as a victimizer – or an alleged victimizer. I believe she was thinking more in terms of the power of God versus the power of the Devil, seeing both as ultimately powerful entities locked in eternal battle to determine who would prevail and be sovereign over all the people of the world.

Considering the nature of the story, it was logical for my sister to cite the book of Job, noting that God stepped aside and allowed the Devil free reign with his power to try to make Job curse God and die. The one stipulation was that the Devil could not take Job’s life. That made sense. If, in the exercise of his power, the Devil took Job’s life, then Job would be unable to curse God and die.

The Job story is, indeed, about the issue of the power of God versus the power of the Devil – and the faithfulness of a person who accepted full responsibility for his being, his beliefs, and his behavior. Even so, in a very real sense, Job can be seen as a victim. After all, what happened to him wasn’t his doing, even though his friends were certain that he had to have done something to bring disaster upon himself. It appears that the Devil was staking his power on the assumption that Job would see himself as being victimized by God, and would be so outraged that he would curse God and die.

I’m really dealing with two issues here. One has to do with what I believe about the power of God and the power of the Devil. The other has to do with what I do with

my responsibility for myself and my actions. The issues do – or may – involve each other, and I want to try to keep my thinking straight so that I don't confuse them and mix them with each other.

I think I can deal with the first issue fairly concisely.

First, I need to deal with what I believe about God and about the Devil – not everything, but certain aspects as they relate to this issue of power. Who is God, and who – or what – is the Devil? I am aware that the only really correct answer to my question is, "I don't know." That is because both are beyond my capacity to identify in any complete sense. Anything I say by way of defining is, at best, incomplete, partial, and, perhaps, biased.

I do believe that God is all-powerful and the source of power – even the power ascribed to the Devil. I believe that God is all-wise and that the wisdom is evidenced in the way the creation is set up. The particular aspects to which I am referring are that the creation is one of opposites and relatives, and that it is required that I (we) make decisions involving every dimension of my (our) life (lives). Everything I know is in terms of comparison with something else. I am good. I am bad. Compared to what? I am powerful. I am not. Compared to what? I am tall. I am short. Compared to what? I know only in terms of something else. Nonetheless, I must make decisions. I can't not do so. Only I can never know, in an absolute sense, whether or not my decisions are correct ones. This, too, is relative. And, in so far as I can tell, God is very wise to have created it – me – us – this way.

Even when I perceive that God gives the Devil power over Job, I see that God, ultimately, remains in charge. Even when God gives me the power – and the requirement – to make decisions, and even though I am fully responsible for every one of them, God remains in charge. And, although it sounds contradictory, I, also, remain in charge.

To me, the Devil is the name used to personify and exemplify all that which tries to stand in opposition to God, and what God has opened to us as the fulfilling way of life. The Devil is the opposite of God and all that God represents.

So God, in God's wisdom, opens the way for me to experience the total richness of the life God has given me by making me a decider. That means that I can decide against the way of life God opens to me, as well as for it. I can choose for the Devil and against God. Interestingly enough, in this life I find that I face a great deal of pressure to decide against God and God's way. It is handy to be able to personify that pressure by naming it the Devil.

So adversity – extreme adversity – befalls Job, and Job faces a decision. Does Job choose to see it that God has visited all this adversity on him, and so choose to turn against God?

The pressure on me, however, is different from the pressure on Job. God had

allowed the Devil to see if he (the Devil) had enough power to bring sufficient adversity into Job's life to cause him to turn against God. I am not being used by the Devil in that way. I am confronted with the pro and con decisions in my life that determine if I am on God's side or the Devil's. I am also confronted with being responsible for those decisions and the outcome of them. Sometimes I rebel against having that kind of responsibility.

Why must I always be the one who decides? Why must I always be the only one responsible for my decisions and my actions? Why isn't it accurate to see myself as a victim sometimes? Why can't I blame the Devil – or somebody or something – for bad things that happen to me? If I concede that I am responsible for myself and my actions, what do I do with that responsibility?

When a couple comes to me for counseling, sooner or later the time comes when they must make some decisions. Frequently, each person is very clear that the other one in their relationship is the one with the problems. Therefore, each tends to be waiting for the other to make the decisions that will resolve the problems and facilitate the restoration of the equality of the relationship. I, of course, try to point them back to the reality that each must make his/her own decisions. In that setting, I often hear the question, "Why must I always be the one who decides?"

"Why must I always be the one who decides?" An implication of the question is that only one of the couple needs to be a decider, which, of course, simply is not the case. Inevitably, each decides. It can't be any other way. And, however much I may wish I could escape the truth of it, I am the only one responsible for my decisions and actions – as is the case with each of us. It is true, of course, that I am influenced by your decisions and actions. It is true that I often decide and act in response to your decisions and actions. However, I remain responsible for mine, even as you remain responsible for yours.

Does that mean that I am not ever a victim? Of course not. Sometimes, as in the case of Job, bad things happen to me that are not of my doing. For instance, I was involved in a car accident. According to the rules of the road, I was the innocent victim. In fact, I was driving properly. I had my car under control. The driver of the other car, who was drunk, simply drove into the side of mine. Of course, going back as far as I might choose to, I could trace my decisions and actions that put me in that place at just the time when the driver of the other car could hit my car. I did decide. I did act. The accident did happen. However, based on the traffic rules that were applicable, it was not my fault. I was correct to blame the other driver and hold him accountable.

So, in that case, the car accident happened to me. Nothing was involved that would lead me to try to excuse myself, nor to say, "The Devil made me do it."

On the other hand, suppose I was the driver of the other car. It was clear that I made decisions and took actions that caused the accident, but I don't want the responsibility of the blame. In the setting, I might well have explained that it wasn't my

fault saying, “The Devil made me do it.” Sure, I had decided to stop at the bar and “have a drink or two.” Of course, I had stayed too long and had too many. Without doubt, I was too drunk to get behind the wheel of a car. But none of that should make any difference. It was the Devil who made me do it. I’m the victim here as much as anyone else. That’s what I tell myself, and anyone who is in range of my voice.

“The Devil made me do it.”

It appears that the power of God is manifested quite differently than the power of the Devil. God functions to encourage and enable us to rise to the full potential of our beings as children of God. In all sorts of ways, God provides us with the opportunity to learn and practice the principles of Life that lead to satisfaction and fulfillment. In an ultimate sense, God sent Jesus, the Christ, into the world both to teach and live those principles faithfully all the way to death and resurrection. And God left – and leaves – us totally free to decide for ourselves the kind of life we will live.

Not so the Devil. By hook or by crook – by any way possible – the Devil enters into our lives to try to persuade us to turn against God and God’s way. The Devil introduces us to doubt and uncertainty; to the idea that we have the right to the “goodies” of life, no matter what the cost to anyone else; to the suggestion that we need to “take care of ourselves first,” no matter who is hurt or deprived; to the notion that we have to be “on guard” and suspicious of everything and everybody – including God – lest we be used or abused; to the enticement that all power will be ours if we but worship him.

Who is the Devil? I do not know, except to see him as the embodiment of all that would pressure me to try to be my own god in conflict with and in opposition to God who created me and who loves me unconditionally.

When I sell my life to the Devil, I take on the impossible task of trying to preserve my life – impossible because I have already chosen death. I have fallen victim to the seducer who promises me the universe if I but choose to try to preserve my life by turning to my own strength and resources and away from the life God has already given me.

In a very real sense, the Devil made me do it. But no, he did not. Every step of the way, I decide and I act. The responsibility for how I live my life rests with me. I am not the victim, and no one else is to blame.