

Modern Society Wrestles With Differing Views Of Satan

By SHAMON OVERTON

To some, Satan is like Darth Vader leading his evil empire against the forces of good.

To others, the concept of Satan is not so clear. Denominations, churches and church members often differ widely in their interpretations of Satan in modern society.

"It runs the gamut," said James M. Eifird, a professor of biblical studies at Duke University Divinity School, "all the way from people who believe in a literal person who is Satan to those who believe this is a symbolic figure of speech and who simply dismiss the idea."

"And there is just about every notch in between those two extremes with somebody sitting in."

The issue emerged recently in the Southern Baptist denomination with an adult Sunday school lesson intended for use July 7 that brought a stream of angry letters and telephone calls to the denominational publishing company. The lesson was on Job, in which Satan strips Job of his possessions, family and health as

a test of his faith.

Written by John L. Durham, a professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, the lesson characterized Satan as God's servant rather than his archenemy.

The Southern Baptist Sunday School Board promptly apologized for the publication, calling it an incorrect interpretation of Satan and a departure from traditional Southern Baptist teachings. The board initially blamed the error on statements added to Durham's manuscripts during editing, but later said the printed lesson was "not unlike" the original version, said Lloyd Householder, communications director for the board. Durham could not be reached for comments this past week.

The lesson was distributed to 76,604 of the nation's 14.3 million Baptists. The Nashville-based denominational publishing company has received at least 155 letters and calls protesting the interpretation, Householder said.

The lesson was "diametrically opposed to what the Southern Baptists

believe," said Robert M. Tenery, the conservative pastor of Burkemont Baptist Church in Morganton and a five-year member of the Sunday School Board.

"If Satan is accepted as a servant of God, then that makes God our adversary. It basically denies the existence of a personal devil and attributes it to legend," Tenery said.

But the Rev. Roger H. Crook, a Baptist minister and professor of religion and philosophy at Meredith College, said the Sunday School Board's retraction was part of an effort by conservatives to regain control of the denomination.

"If 155 complained about a statement that's a drop in the bucket," Crook said. "They (board members) have not taken a poll to see what is the official Baptist position" on Satan.

The debate boils down to where one finds the focus for evil, he said.

It's a question of "whether I can pass the buck or accept the responsibility myself," Crook said. "Did the devil make me do it? If he did, I'm free of blame. The devil can be awfully convenient."

The differences cross denominational lines. Few churches have a doctrine stating what their members should believe about Satan, so the subject becomes intensely personal.

"The problem is you're touching on such an age-old and deeply paradoxical set of problems that no one set of

statements can completely cover it," said Russ W. Tyson, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The most popular understanding of Satan is rooted more in "Paradise Lost," John Milton's epic poem on the creation of the universe and the fall of man, than the Bible, said Eifird, who is editing a series of short books on contemporary Christian concerns.

First printed in 1667, the poem depicts Satan as an archangel who seeks to overthrow God and is banished from Heaven. On Earth, Satan becomes God's antithesis—the ruler of fallen angels waging an unholy war to win human souls.

But according to religious scholars, the Hebrews had no concept of Satan until about 586 B.C., after the Babylonian exile.

"Some say the Jews went into captivity and brought the devil back with them," said Allan R. Sharp, chairman of the Dept. of Religion and Philosophy at Atlantic Christian College in Wilson.

After the exile, two theologies on the origins of evil began to take shape and a picture of Satan emerged. The first theology, the Wisdom Movement, is represented in the Old Testament, Eifird said.

Satan is mentioned only three times in the Old Testament—in the books of Zechariah, Job and Chronicles. In each instance, "Satan is a servant of

God who had a specific duty to perform... to go up and down on the earth and come back and report to God what you and I had been up to," he said.

"Some people refer to Satan as a prosecuting attorney in the court of God."

That interpretation later proved unsatisfactory as early Christians wrestled with the sticky problem of why a good God would allow an evil presence in his court. That is when the Apocalyptic Movement began, Eifird said.

"The Hebrew people began to try to find a concrete personality to be the leader of the forces of evil in the universe as a counterpart to God," he said. "By the time you start reading the New Testament, you've got Satan... battling the kingdom of God... It's a cosmic struggle, and we humans are just a small part of it."

In modern interpretation, that apocalyptic belief is firmly entrenched in the teachings of fundamentalist churches.

"The Bible speaks of two kingdoms—the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness," said the Rev. Randy Cox, pastor of the First Freewill Baptist Church in Raleigh. "The struggle is under way today."

According to Cox's reading of the Bible, Satan reigns over the Kingdom of Darkness. He commands a host of evil demons who help him do his work—tempting people with drugs,

alcohol and wealth and gaining possession of their souls.

Satan's presence also is evident in social and political movements such as communism, he said.

"He's very real and very much a personality. And his personality is very evident in the world today," Cox said. "His purpose is to usurp the throne of God. And he is seeking to do that by capturing the crowning act of God's creation, which is man."

Man ultimately has the power to resist Satan's temptations through acceptance of Jesus Christ, he said.

The idea of an evil empire has been adopted in the political rhetoric of President Reagan, the Moral Majority and the radical right, said Tyson, of the UNC Dept. of Religion.

But in a liberal or more moderate theology, it's harder to separate the good guys from the bad guys. Satan becomes the symbolic representation for the evil forces, often psychological neuroses, within people and society, Tyson said.

"The Hebrews were very graphic in their descriptions," said the Rev. A.D. Ellison, associate pastor of the Hudson Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh. "We're heirs of that—like it or not."

According to Ellison's interpretation of the scriptures, Jesus was tempted in the desert not by some supernatural satanic being, but by his own self-centeredness. "Satan" is the force that accentuates self-centeredness in a person, he said.

"We're all two-legged Satans walking around," explained Sharp of Atlantic Christian College, a school supported by the Disciples of Christ.

"Therefore, we don't need a head honcho in charge. When you take the collection of the sins of all of us and put it together," he said, "it's a sizable and real power—an evil power in the world."

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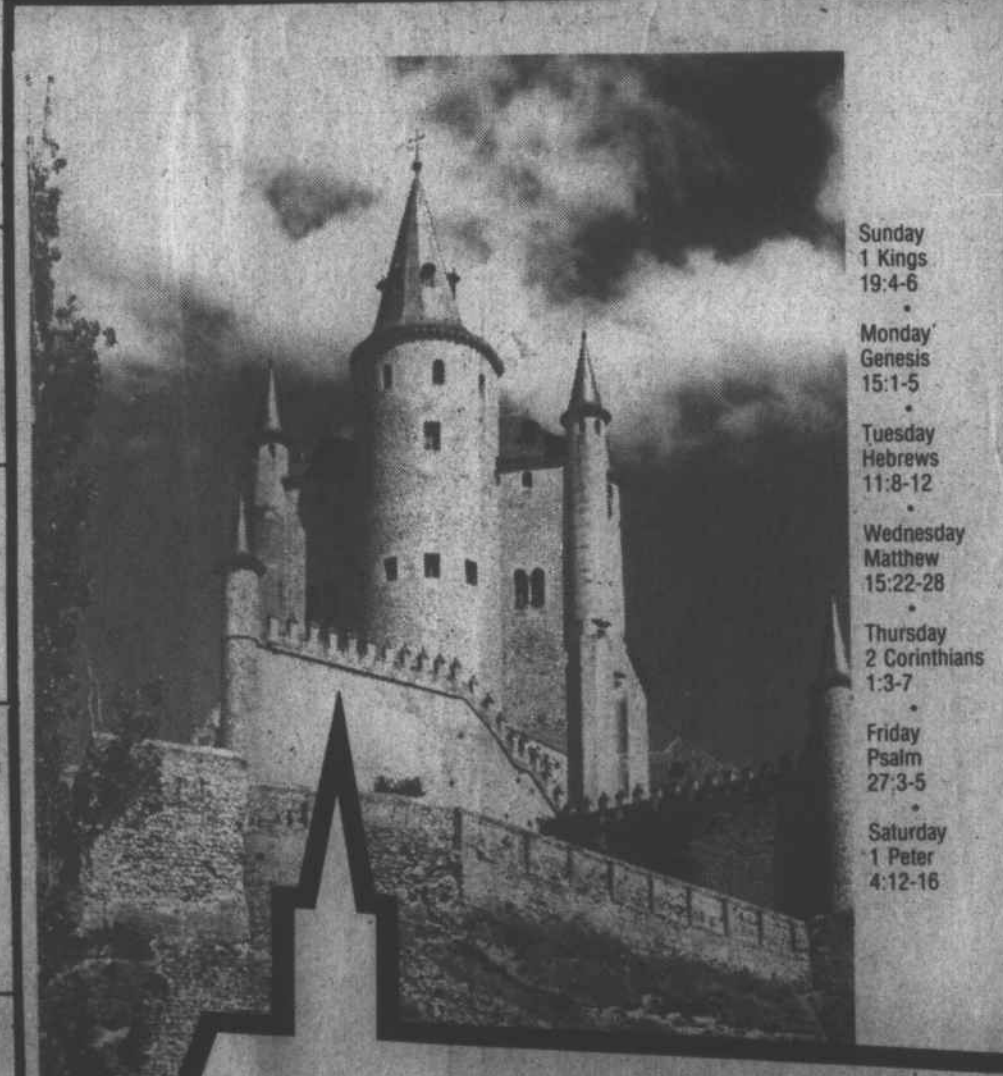
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Living And Growing

BY DR. CARL MUMPOWER
"Open Door Policy"

We need people, and there's little room for debate. People can enrich our lives in a variety of ways. They can give us comfort. They can love and support us. They can reward and endorse us. These are some of the more obvious ways that people can help us. There are others, less obvious, that are of equal importance.

People can teach us. We can and do learn much from watching how others address life. As children, we learn by observing our parent's examples. As a rule, we apply their model to our own behavior. This process goes on throughout life as we imitate others.

People can also reach us. A mind that becomes closed to the input of people is a mind that is dying. Fresh insight and information keeps our minds healthy. Stop such, and our thinking becomes distorted and narrow. People can reach beyond our defenses, open our minds, and refresh our thinking.

We learn a great deal by noting how people respond to us. A mirror can tell us how we look on the outside. People can show us how we are on the inside. Their reactions to our behavior gives us insight that is hard found in the confines of our own awareness. We need that mirror of our personhood.

People keep us down to earth. Most of our lives we try, successfully, to keep ourselves in the road. Sometimes, however, we steer off the shoulder and open the door to danger. Having people around serves as a safeguard that encourages a steady hand on the wheel. We don't always make the right decisions in life. Sometimes, the insight of others can lend a helping hand and sense of direction.

Lastly, we need people as a target for giving. Giving is important. Those of us who live through taking, live also in emptiness. Putting something into life seems a necessity if we are to get something back. People provide us with a chance to give love, energy, and personal resources. Thus, if we believe that giving to life is crucial, then, we too are people a valuable partner in that process.

Certainly people can be a source of hurt and intrusion. Much of the misery of life is people based. We should acknowledge that and that we do not close ourselves to people. Like food that nourishes the body, people with our hearts, minds, and souls. There's a need without...