



# The Enemy is the Devil: The parables of Jesus and Christadelphian satanology

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## **Glossary of Terms**

**Apologetics:** the practice of defending a position (often religious) through the systematic use of information

**Article:** A part of speech used with a noun to indicate the type of reference being made by the noun. In English there is an indefinite article ('a' or 'an') and a definite article ('the'), whereas in ancient Greek (and Hebrew) there is only one article. In New Testament Greek the article can denote definiteness but also has many other functions, so it does not exactly correspond to the English word 'the'.

**Christadelphians:** A religious movement and community founded by a British physician, Dr. John Thomas, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century which apparently consists of about 55 000 members worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The word Christadelphians means 'Brethren in Christ.' The group aspires to be faithful to the original doctrine and practice of Jesus and the apostles, and takes a high view of biblical inspiration. Their theology differs from Christian orthodoxy on a number of points, and in no area is it more unique than the matter of the devil and Satan.

**Exegesis:** A systematic process by which one arrives at a reasonable and coherent interpretation of a text (in this case, a biblical passage)

**Hebraism:** A linguistic feature typical of Hebrew which is carried over into another language

**Intertestamental:** Pertaining to the period between that covered in the Old and New Testaments, from roughly the fourth century B.C. to early first century A.D.

**Pleonasm:** the use of more words or word-parts than is necessary for clear expression, e.g. black darkness or burning fire

**Satanology:** The branch of theology dealing with the devil and Satan

**Septuagint:** A Greek translation of the Old Testament (abbreviated LXX) which was completed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. and was widely used by Jews at the time of Christ as well as early Christians, including the New Testament writers

**Synoptic:** An adjective used to refer collectively to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (in view of their similarities in content)

**Transliterate:** the conversion of a word or text from one language or script to another without translating it

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<sup>1</sup> *Christadelphians*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christadelphians>

## 1. Introduction

This work is a study of the contribution of three parables of Jesus to the Christian doctrine of the devil and Satan (sometimes collectively referred to as satanology). In particular the objective is to examine whether these parables offer support for Christadelphian satanology, which primarily takes the devil and Satan primarily as personifications of sin and rejects the view that Satan is a supernatural personal being.<sup>2</sup>

The parables to be studied are: (1) the parable of the strong man ([Matt. 12:29](#); [Mark 3:27](#); [Luke 11:21-22](#)), which must be read in context of the Beelzebul Controversy; (2) the parable of the sower ([Matt. 13:3-9, 18-23](#); [Mark 4:2-9, 13-20](#); [Luke 8:4-8; 11-15](#)), and (3) the parable of the tares ([Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43](#)). Before looking at these parables and Christadelphian interpretations thereof, some preliminaries about the biblical devil are in order.

Greek grammarian Daniel B. Wallace argues that the noun *diabolos* as used in the New Testament is a “monadic noun,”<sup>3</sup> meaning one-of-a-kind: it only has one meaning.<sup>4 5</sup> Although the lexical meaning, ‘slanderer’, does tell us something about the devil’s character, the word’s meaning in the New Testament is primarily *referential* rather than *lexical*. That is, the Greek term *ho diabolos*, like the transliterated Hebrew term *ho satanas*,<sup>6</sup> had been imbued with a specialized meaning based on their occurrence in the Old Testament<sup>7</sup> and subsequent reflection in intertestamental Judaism.<sup>8</sup> The terms *ho diabolos* and *ho satanas* therefore do not denote an

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<sup>2</sup> Pearce 1986: 13.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace 1996: 249.

<sup>4</sup> The references to undignified people as slanderers in [1 Tim. 3:11](#), [2 Tim. 3:3](#) and [Titus 2:3](#) are not exceptions since *diabolos* functions adjectivally in these texts (Wallace 1996: 224). This is noteworthy since Christadelphian expositions of the devil tend to treat these passages as foundational to a correct interpretation of *diabolos* in the New Testament (e.g.; Roberts 1884: 116; Williams 1892; Watkins 1971: 8-9).

<sup>5</sup> The one possible exception is [John 6:70](#), where most English translations render *ex humon eis diabolos estin* as ‘one of you is a devil’. However, Wallace argues (1996: 249) that it should be rendered ‘one of you is **the** devil’ (as the New English Translation does), with a non-literal meaning pointing to possession or inspiration by the devil and parallel to Mark 8:33. The absence of the article in the Greek is not a barrier to taking *diabolos* as definite here (cf. 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 20:2, where *diabolos* has no article but is clearly definite). The foremost lexicon of New Testament Greek is in agreement with Wallace on this point (Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 226).

<sup>6</sup> That the term *ho satanas* carries a specialized, referential meaning as opposed to a merely lexical meaning is obvious from the New Testament writers’ decision to transliterate the Hebrew word rather than translate it, even when writing to Gentile audiences (as in Mark’s Gospel).

<sup>7</sup> There is wide agreement among biblical scholars that the Hebrew word *satan* refers to a heavenly being in four Old Testament passages: [Numbers 22:22-32](#), [Job 1-2](#), [Zech. 3:1-2](#) and [1 Chr. 21:1](#) (cf. Brown 2011: 203). In all of these, the Septuagint translators rendered *satan* with the Greek word *diabolos*. In Job 1-2 and Zech. 3:1-2, where *satan* is a noun with the article (*ha-satan*), the Septuagint translates *ho diabolos*. Since the identity of the *satan/diabolos* is not otherwise given in these two texts, the presence of the article is exegetically significant (unlike, for instance, in [Esther 7:4 and 8:1 LXX](#), where *ho diabolos* simply refers to the slanderer identified in the immediate context as Haman). It is thus evident that Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 (and possibly 1 Chronicles 21) are the ultimate sources of the term *ho diabolos* in the New Testament, even though the concept underwent considerable theological reflection in the intertestamental period.

<sup>8</sup> Although not a monadic noun in the New Testament, a useful parallel can be seen in the Greek noun *angelos*. Although lexically it simply means an envoy or messenger, it was the word usually used by the Septuagint translators to translate the Hebrew *malak* in references to the transcendent messengers of

idea **invented** by Jesus or the New Testament writers, but an idea **adopted** and **refined** by them. This point is acknowledged by Christadelphian writers such as Heaster,<sup>9</sup> although ‘refine’ is hardly a strong enough word for the fundamental alteration of the doctrine he perceives.

Because the terms ‘devil’ and ‘Satan’ have a single, unified meaning in the New Testament, a study of the references to the devil and Satan in the parables of Jesus contributes not only to understanding these terms in the parables themselves, but to understanding these terms throughout Scripture. That is, one must not deal with these (or any) texts about the devil and Satan in isolation.<sup>10</sup>

If further evidence is needed to convince the reader that the devil, Satan, and other equivalent terms in the New Testament denote one specific theological idea, consider the following contextual parallels between the parables to be studied and other New Testament texts about the devil and Satan:

- Just as Jesus’ parable about the strong man implies the binding of Satan, so Revelation 20 describes Satan being bound.
- Just as the parable of the tares ends with all causes of sin and evildoers cast into the furnace of fire, so the judgment scene in [Matthew 25](#) has the devil, his angels, and the wicked departing into everlasting fire, and so [Revelation 20-21](#) has the devil and evildoers thrown into the lake of fire.
- Just as the Beelzebul Controversy ([Mark 3:22-30](#) and parallels) links Satan with demons and the parable of the tares describes the devil as an enemy (*echthros*; [Matt. 13:39](#)), so [Luke 10:18-19](#) links Satan with demons and refers to him as the enemy (*echthros*).

Furthermore, the parables discussed below equate different terms for Satan. In the three Synoptic renditions of the parable of the sower, Mark refers to *ho satanas* (Satan), Matthew to *ho poneros* (the evil one), and Luke to *ho diabolos* (the devil). This has been called a Rosetta Stone<sup>11</sup> showing that these three terms are equivalent and interchangeable, a point recent Christadelphian writers have also acknowledged.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the parable of the tares equates ‘the devil’ with ‘the evil one’ ([Matt. 13:38-39](#)). Other contextual parallels in the New Testament reinforce the equivalence of these terms and others.<sup>13</sup>

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God known in English as angels. Consequently, within the New Testament it takes on the specialized, referential meaning ‘angel’ roughly 90% of the time – far more frequently than its lexical meaning of ‘messenger’ or ‘envoy’.

<sup>9</sup> Heaster 2012: 95. It is not clear how Heaster can claim here that the Jews had taken over the “pagan notion of a personal ‘Satan’”, since it is a Hebrew noun taken from the Old Testament, where it always denotes personal beings.

<sup>10</sup> This is true throughout the New Testament but especially of texts within the same book or from the same author.

<sup>11</sup> Snodderly 2008: 125.

<sup>12</sup> Whittaker writes that the parallel accounts of the parable of the sower in Mark and Luke are “a good illustration of how the NT makes no appreciable distinction between” the devil and Satan (Whittaker 1984(2): n. 12.)

<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere in the New Testament, Revelation explicitly equates ‘the devil’ with ‘Satan’ ([12:9](#); [20:2](#)). By using the language of murder, John implicitly equates ‘the devil’ with ‘the evil one’ ([John 8:44](#) cp. [1 John 3:8-12](#)), and by using the language of cosmic power, he implicitly equates ‘the ruler of this world’ with ‘the

Some Christadelphian writers have affirmed that the devil and Satan form a unified concept in the New Testament. For instance, Peter Watkins concludes that “the whole subject is to be regarded as one recurring New Testament figure.”<sup>14</sup> However, this premise has not prevented Christadelphians from approaching the New Testament record in a piecemeal fashion, interpreting the devil and Satan in various ways in different contexts – and sometimes even within the same context!

In the Christadelphian resource *Wrested Scriptures*,<sup>15</sup> for example, Abel takes the devil or Satan in various passages to refer to ‘sin in the flesh,’ God, Judas,<sup>16</sup> Peter,<sup>17</sup> an unidentified adversary, a group of disaffected priests in the post-exilic period, “the binding effect of sin through diseases,” the chief priests in Jesus’ day, the Jewish chief priests and Gentile world rulers collectively, “rebel Jewish adversaries who were undermining the apostle Paul’s influence in the Corinthian ecclesia”, and the Roman magistracy. If one accumulated all Christadelphian interpretations of all the devil and Satan passages, the list of different meanings of these terms would no doubt grow considerably longer.

Besides this, the most important early Christadelphian treatises on the devil deal with ‘the devil’ and ‘Satan’ in separate sections as though they were two distinct doctrines,<sup>18</sup> and more recently the Abel claimed that ‘the devil’ and ‘Satan’ can carry distinct meanings within the same immediate context!<sup>19</sup> It appears that Watkins’ principle of “one recurring New Testament figure” has not been followed in practice.

## **2. The Parables of Jesus in Christadelphian apologetic works on the devil**

The following is a survey (not exhaustive) of the extent to which the three parables under consideration (as well as the Beelzebul Controversy) have been discussed in apologetic works setting forth or defending the Christadelphian understanding of the devil and Satan.

The *Wrested Scriptures* website’s purpose is to provide explanations of Bible passages which non-Christadelphians ostensibly wrest to arrive at false doctrinal conclusions. The resource contains a sub-section on Satan and demons, but does not deal with the occurrences of the terms Satan and devil in the Beelzebul Controversy, or any of the parables of the strong man, sower or tares. This omission is tantamount to a claim that the parables of Jesus do not contain any difficulties for the Christadelphian view of the devil.

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evil one’ ([John 12:31](#); [14:30](#); [16:11](#) cp. [17:15](#); [1 John 5:19](#)). Again, in Ephesians Paul implicitly equates ‘the ruler of the power of the air’, ‘the devil’ and ‘the evil one’ ([Eph. 2:2](#) cp. [6:11-12](#) cp. [6:16](#)).

<sup>14</sup> Watkins 1971: 34.

<sup>15</sup> Abel & Allfree 2011: <http://www.wrestedscriptures.com/b07satan/satan.html>.

<sup>16</sup> See note 5 above on [John 6:70](#).

<sup>17</sup> So [Mark 8:33](#) and [Matt. 16:23](#). Most scholars now agree that Jesus was not simply calling Peter an adversary: “the apocalyptic character of the narrative suggests a stronger reading” (Witherington 2001: 243). The consensus is that Jesus was in some sense referring to Peter as a tool of Satan (Witherington 2001; Stein 2008: 403; Wessel & Strauss 2010: 832; Doehorn 2013: 99).

<sup>18</sup> Roberts 1884; Williams 1892.

<sup>19</sup> cf. [John 13:2, 27](#). Abel & Allfree 2011:

<http://www.wrestedscriptures.com/b07satan/luke22v3and22v31andjohn13v2and13v27.html>

In his book *Christendom Astray*, Robert Roberts makes a brief comment on the parable of the sower,<sup>20</sup> but makes no mention of the parable of the tares or the parable of the strong man. He does briefly discuss the Beelzebul Controversy but claims that Jesus assumed Beelzebub's existence for the sake of argument.

In his pamphlet *The Devil: His Origin and End*, Thomas Williams makes no mention of the parable of the sower, the parable of the tares, or the parable of the strong man. Like Roberts, he mentions the Beelzebul Controversy, observing that Jesus refuted the Pharisees' blasphemy but not acknowledging that Jesus offered any positive teaching about Satan on that occasion.

In Peter Watkins' book on the devil, he neglects even to mention the parable of the sower. He quotes Matthew 13:39 in a list of *diabolos* texts<sup>21</sup> but offers no analysis of the parable of the tares. He offers a brief analysis of the Beelzebul Controversy<sup>22</sup>, which he considers important to a sound understanding of Satan and demons (see below), but makes no mention of the parable of the strong man.

In Fred Pearce's pamphlet *Do you believe in the devil?* he makes no mention of the parables of the sower, tares or strong man, nor does he mention the Beelzebul Controversy.

Christadelphian apologist Jonathan Burke wrote a 196-page response<sup>23</sup> to Anthony Buzzard's critiques of Christadelphian doctrine on Satan<sup>24</sup> and demons.<sup>25</sup> Burke offers an exegesis of the birds in the parable of the sower,<sup>26</sup> as well as of the Beelzebul Controversy (in which he, like Watkins, neglects to even mention the parable of the strong man).<sup>27</sup> Burke also makes no mention of the parable of the tares, but in fairness to him he was responding to Buzzard, who had not raised that passage in his article.

Duncan Heaster's monumental 542-page book *The Real Devil* is the most comprehensive Christadelphian text on the subject of the devil. He offers passing comments on the parable of the sower,<sup>28</sup> and later devotes a brief sub-section to the parable within his chapter on 'Misunderstood Bible Passages.'<sup>29</sup> He offers two interpretations of Satan in this parable, one being 'evil desires' and the other being the Jewish system inasmuch as it opposed the gospel. He does not indicate which explanation he prefers. He mentions the parable of the tares several times in passing,<sup>30</sup> stating that the Devil here is to be taken "in the sense of the desires of sin," but nowhere offers a detailed exegesis of the parable.

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<sup>20</sup> Roberts 1884: 115.

<sup>21</sup> Watkins 1971: 7.

<sup>22</sup> Watkins 1971: 32-35, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Burke 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Buzzard 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Buzzard 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Burke 2007: 76-77.

<sup>27</sup> Burke 2007: 68-69, 92-94; the latter section is largely a repetition and defense of Watkins' argument.

<sup>28</sup> Heaster 2012: 169-170, 400-401.

<sup>29</sup> Heaster 2012: 410-411.

<sup>30</sup> Heaster 2012: 169-170, 410, 421, 499, etc.

He discusses the Beelzebul Controversy,<sup>31</sup> and following in the Christadelphian tradition he argues, “Jesus was not saying He believed in Satan or Beelzebub...but He was using the language of the day to confound the Jews.”<sup>32</sup> Heaster also refers to the parable of the strong man frequently. He first interprets this parable to mean that “the ‘Devil’ as [Judaism] understood it was now no more, and his supposed Kingdom now taken over by that of Christ” (through miracles).<sup>33</sup> That is, he was exposing errors in the Jews’ beliefs, “without correcting them in so many words.”<sup>34</sup> Later on, however, he indicates that the parable refers back to Jesus’ victory over sin in the wilderness temptations,<sup>35</sup> and ultimately to his victory over sin in his death.<sup>36</sup>

In summary, Heaster appears to appreciate the importance of Jesus’ parables to understanding the biblical devil to a greater degree than other Christadelphian apologists. Incredibly, of the books or pamphlets surveyed above, his is the only one to even mention the parable of the strong man! Nevertheless, considering the length of his work, his cursory treatment of the parable of the tares is disappointing. The organisation of his material along thematic lines rather than according to scriptural passage makes it difficult to piece together his exegesis of certain texts, especially given his tendency to offer more than one interpretation of a passage rather than staking a position.

Overall, the neglect of Jesus’ parables in Christadelphian apologetic writings about the devil and Satan amount to a silent assertion that these parables lie on the periphery of biblical satanology. They are not used as proof texts for the Christadelphian position, nor are they typically seen as ‘difficult passages’. They may be thought to fit Christadelphian satanology but they have had no appreciable role in the development or maintenance of Christadelphian satanology.

The marginalization of these passages is surprising given the central importance of Jesus’ teaching in formulating sound Christian doctrine, and the central importance of parables in Jesus’ teaching:

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. ([Mark 4:33-34](#) NRSV)

To understand the teachings of Jesus concerning the devil and Satan, it is crucial that we pay careful attention to the meaning of these three parables. The task is made easier by our privileged position of having a canonical interpretation left on record for two of the parables. In the case of the parable of the strong man, we have no canonical interpretation but the parable occurs within a dialogue which sheds much light on the subject matter.

### **3. Some principles for interpreting parables**

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<sup>31</sup> Heaster 2012: 280. Some of the references below to the parable of the strong man also discuss the Beelzebul Controversy.

<sup>32</sup> Heaster 2012: 405.

<sup>33</sup> Heaster 2012: 95, 294, 407.

<sup>34</sup> Heaster 2012: 274, 290.

<sup>35</sup> Heaster 2012: 390-391, 407-408.

<sup>36</sup> Heaster 2012: 407-408, 499.

Before delving into an exegesis of the parables, it is important to briefly highlight some important principles for the interpretation of Jesus' parables. Bailey provides a useful overview of this subject.<sup>37</sup>

Parables (especially short parables) have frequently been described as “extended metaphors.”<sup>38</sup> Hultgren, however, provides a fuller definition:

“A parable is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between God's kingdom, actions, or expectations and something in this world, real or imagined.”<sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup>

Bailey makes the following important observations:

“Parables are distinguished from other literary figures in that they are narrative in form but figurative in meaning. Parables use both similes and metaphors to make their analogies, and the rhetorical purposes of parables are to inform, convince, or persuade their audiences.”<sup>41</sup>

The context of the Beelzebul Controversy is clearly one of persuasion whereas the parable of the tares appears to be more informational in nature (cf. [Matt. 13:13-17](#)). The parable of the sower seems to have aspects of both purposes.

Bailey stresses the need to understand the historical and cultural setting to the parables of Jesus as a prerequisite for correct interpretation. He further emphasizes the need for analysis of the structure and details of the parable. The crucial insight here is that “Details in the parables serve as background for the central truth in the foreground.”<sup>42</sup> This means that while details often play important roles, on the other hand they may simply add colour to the story. It is thus important not to overanalyze a parable as though it were an allegory in which every single element conveys a spiritual truth. A classic example of such over-exegesis is Augustine's approach to the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which every minute detail from the robbers, the ‘half-dead’ state of the victim, and the inn were interpreted as metaphors for some spiritual reality.<sup>43</sup>

To assist in identifying the main point of a parable, Stein suggests asking the following seven specific questions:

1. What terms are repeated in the parable? Which are not?
2. Upon what does the parable dwell, i.e. to what or to whom does the parable devote the most space?
3. What is the main contrast found in the parable?
4. What comes at the end of the parable? (This has been called the ‘rule of end stress.’)

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<sup>37</sup> Bailey 1998(1).

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance: Kjargaard, 1986: 196; Gowler 2000: 110.

<sup>39</sup> Hultgren 2002: 3.

<sup>40</sup> Bailey (1998(1): 30) similarly defines a parable briefly as “a figurative narrative that is true to life and is designed to convey through analogy some specific spiritual truth(s) usually relative to God's kingdom program.”

<sup>41</sup> Bailey 1998(1): 30.

<sup>42</sup> Bailey 1998(1): 34.

<sup>43</sup> Teske 2001.

5. What is spoken in direct discourse in the parable? (Frequently what is most important in the parable appears in direct discourse.)
6. What characters appear in the parable? Which are the least important? Which are the two most important characters? (Usually a parable zeroes in on two characters to establish its main point)
7. How would you have told the parable? If Jesus told it differently, does this reveal anything?<sup>44</sup>

Let us keep these principles in mind as we move on to the specific passages under consideration.

#### **4. The Beelzebul Controversy**

##### **4.1. Text and Context**

The Beelzebul Controversy occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels. Matthew and Luke's versions are very similar while Mark's has certain differences. In all three accounts, the immediate cause of the controversy is a charge leveled at Jesus by the scribes from Jerusalem, that he was possessed by Beelzebul<sup>45</sup> and cast out demons by the ruler of the demons. The threefold occurrence of this charge in Matthew suggests it was used frequently against Jesus ([Matt. 9:34](#); [10:25](#); [12:24](#)). In Mark, the whole episode follows Jesus' appointment of the twelve and his giving to them of authority to cast out demons ([Mark 3:14-15](#)). Thus the broader question Mark seeks to answer is "where this authority of Jesus came from."<sup>46</sup>

In Matthew and Luke, the controversy immediately follows an exorcism performed by Jesus. In Matthew, the controversy is followed by the scribes' and Pharisees' request for a sign, prompting further stern warnings from Jesus. Luke, however, locates the request for a sign alongside the charge of possession by Beelzebul, thereby linking the two. For Matthew and Luke, the focus is on Jesus' authority and work but also on his opponents' spiritual blindness even in the face of remarkable miracles. Importantly, an examination of the context in all three Gospels shows that **in none of them is the meaning or reality of Satan and demons the issue at hand.**

It is the content of Jesus' response to this accusation that most interests us. In Mark the account of the controversy reads thus:

2 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." 23 And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. 28 "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever

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<sup>44</sup> Stein 1981: 56.

<sup>45</sup> Following most modern translations I use the term Beelzebul. An exact transliteration of the Greek term would be Beelzeboul (see Carson 2010: 294). Beelzebub is certainly not correct.

<sup>46</sup> Stein 2008: 177.

blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— 30 for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.” ([Mark 3:22-30](#) NRSV)

Luke’s account is also quoted since it has important details missing in Mark. Matthew’s version ([12:24-29](#)) is close to Luke’s and is thus not quoted here, though the reader is encouraged to review it.

15 But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.”  
16 Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. 17 But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. 18 If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. 19 Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 20 But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. 21 When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. 22 But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder. ([Luke 11:15-22](#) NRSV)

## **4.2. Christadelphian exegesis**

### **4.2.1. Beelzebul as a non-existent pagan god**

Early Christadelphian apologists Roberts and Williams observed that Jesus refuted the blasphemous accusation with a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. However, they both identify Beelzebul here with the pagan god Baal-zebul ([2 Kings 1:2-3, 16](#)), whence they conclude that the being referred to by Jesus’ opponents was a “heathen fiction.”<sup>47</sup> They thus implicitly deny that Jesus offered any positive teaching regarding his exorcisms and their relationship to Satan.

Contemporary biblical scholars admit some uncertainty as to the etymology of the term Beelzebul or Beelzeboul as used in this account. Several recent commentators including one Christadelphian affirm that the meaning of the term is “head of the house”<sup>48</sup> or “lord of the dwelling,”<sup>49 50</sup> which would make it agree with the references to the house in Mark 3:27 and Matt. 10:25. It is possible that the term ultimately derives from Baal-zebul the god of Ekron.<sup>51</sup> However, the scribes, being strict monotheists ([Mark 12:32](#)) could not possibly have claimed that Jesus was possessed by a fictional heathen god. Rather, by the first century this term had become an epithet for the devil: “simply another name for Satan.”<sup>52 53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Roberts 1884: 125; Williams 1892.

<sup>48</sup> Carson 2010: 294.

<sup>49</sup> Stein 2008: 182.

<sup>50</sup> Whittaker 1984(1).

<sup>51</sup> A hypothetical basis for this connection is the widespread belief among the Jews and early Christians that pagan idolatry was animated by demons ([Deut. 32:17 LXX](#); [Psalm 96\[95\]:5 LXX](#); [1 Cor. 10:20](#)). See, for example, discussion in Rosen-Zvi 2011: 154.

<sup>52</sup> Stein 2008: 182.

Jesus himself uses the terms ‘Beelzebul’ and ‘Satan’ interchangeably in his discourse,<sup>54</sup> so Jesus himself makes this connection and indeed it is Jesus, not his opponents, who introduces Satan into the dialogue. Jesus may have made this shift in terminology because the term ‘Satan’ was more well-known and biblically based.

The use of the term Beelzebul in this account therefore furnishes no positive evidence for the claim that Jesus rejected any belief in such a prince of demons. Recognizing this, more recent Christadelphian exegetes have moved away from this contention and argued that Jesus did affirm the reality of Satan and demons but in a figurative way that did not correspond to the beliefs of his opponents.

#### **4.2.2. Jesus’ parabolic language as purely hypothetical**

Whittaker argues that the reference in Mark 3:23 to Jesus speaking in parables “precludes any assumption of the Lord’s personal belief in the existence of Baalzebul, Satan or evil spirits.”<sup>55</sup> Whittaker’s remark is technically valid insofar as Jesus’ explicit remarks about Satan are concerned. He is building on “his listeners’ assumption of a hierarchy of demons”<sup>56</sup> and assuming the scribes’ charge to be true for the sake of argument in order to refute it. This is clear from the Greek grammar, in which Mark 3:24-25 and Matt. 12:27-28/Luke 11:19-20 contain first class conditions (assumed for the sake of argument) while Mark 3:26 has a second class condition (assumed *contrary to fact* for the sake of argument).<sup>57</sup> Logically Jesus’ argument does not require him to have affirmed the reality of Satan, demons or his own exorcisms.

Of course, there is abundant evidence elsewhere in the Gospels that Jesus affirmed the reality of Satan, demons and exorcisms. This is most prominent in [Luke 10:18-20](#), which was spoken neither to opponents nor to crowds but to disciples. However, even in the present passage there are two features of Jesus’ discourse which show he affirmed the reality of Satan, demons and exorcisms.

Firstly, the two conditional statements in Matt. 12:27-28/Luke 11:19-20 are antithetical. This implies that either Jesus was casting out demons by Beelzebul, or Jesus was casting out demons by the finger of God (Spirit of God in Matthew). In either case, Jesus was casting out demons! Since he makes no effort to redefine what casting out a demon means, we have no reason to give the expression any other meaning than that which was current in his day, i.e. the sense used by Jesus’ enemies in their accusation. Of course, it is the latter proposition that Jesus was affirming to be true, and for him it was not a minor issue but an important confirmation of his message about the kingdom of God.

Secondly, there is the parable of the strong man (which, as noted earlier, is usually neglected in Christadelphian exegesis). In Mark the parable is introduced with “But” (*all’* in Greek), which is

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<sup>53</sup> The use of the term Beelzebul for the ruler of the demons is found in one other extant ancient text, the Testament of Solomon. Its date of composition is uncertain but thought to be between the first and fifth centuries AD. As such its use of the term Beelzebul may be dependent on the Gospels.

<sup>54</sup> Stein 2008: 183.

<sup>55</sup> Whittaker 1984(1).

<sup>56</sup> Stein 2008: 183.

<sup>57</sup> Stein 2008: 184; Wallace 1996: 693.

“a strong adversative and introduces a contrary explanation of why demons are being exorcised in the ministry of Jesus.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, in telling this parable Jesus is no longer defending himself but has taken the initiative. He now confirms that “Satan’s realm, though not at war with itself, is indeed under attack.”<sup>59</sup> Matthew introduces the parable with  $\bar{\epsilon}$ , (“Or again”), which means “look at it another way”, meaning Jesus is repeating the thought from 12:28.<sup>60</sup> Luke’s amplification of the parable likewise shows that he intended it as a positive explanation of the purpose of Jesus’ exorcisms.

Given the context there is little doubt that the “strong man” who is bound in this parable refers to Satan (a point conceded by Heaster<sup>61</sup>) or that his “goods” refer to the demons. Whittaker too takes the strong man as a reference to Baalzebub, but he then assumes without argument that the binding of the strong man consisted of “Jesus’ personal victory over sin in his own life.” In this context Beelzebub/Satan clearly refers to a personal being, “the ruler of the demons,” and no basis has been provided for taking the term as a personification of sin.

The binding of the strong man may refer (provisionally) to Jesus’ victory in the wilderness temptations,<sup>62</sup> which is recounted in all three Synoptic Gospels shortly before his first exorcisms. This possibility is contemplated by Heaster.<sup>63</sup> However, as I have argued previously, the grammar and context of the temptation narratives conclusively demonstrate that the tempter was an external, personal being.<sup>64</sup>

#### **4.2.3. Satan and demons as an elaborate New Testament parable**

Watkins and Burke take a different approach to Whittaker, one which acknowledges Jesus’ affirmative teaching about Satan and demons here but regards it as figurative. Watkins proposed, based on the reference to ‘parables’ in Mark 3:23, that “The subject of Satan and demons – or the devil and his angels – must be thought of as one elaborate, sustained New Testament parable.”<sup>65</sup> This view is defended by Burke, who explains (concerning Satan and demons):

“The gospel writers do not deny the existence of these beings, but regard them in a way which is entirely different to that of the superstitions of the day. Whilst accommodating the language and terminology of demon beliefs, they use it to present the truth which is in direct contrast to the superstitions of their contemporaries.”<sup>66</sup>

For these writers, Mark’s statement that Jesus “said to them in parables” (Mark 3:23) is a detail crucial to the correct interpretation of Satan and demons, not only in this passage but throughout the New Testament! Hence for Watkins, “by using this word ‘parable’, Mark gives us

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<sup>58</sup> Stein 2008: 184.

<sup>59</sup> Wessel & Strauss 2010: 747.

<sup>60</sup> Carson 2010: 335.

<sup>61</sup> Heaster 2012: 95.

<sup>62</sup> So Wessel & Strauss 2010: 747.

<sup>63</sup> Heaster 2012: 390-391.

<sup>64</sup> Farrar 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Watkins 1971: 34.

<sup>66</sup> Burke 2007: 94.

a vital clue” indicating that the subject of Satan and demons is one elaborate, sustained New Testament parable. Burke likewise affirms that

“when Christ spoke of satan<sup>67</sup> and demons, he did so in parables – that is, he did so in a manner which sought to teach the truth of these matters in a manner which required others to seek them out, rather than speaking of them plainly.”<sup>68</sup>

A flaw in Watkins’ argument that is immediately apparent is that he uses the word “parable” in the singular whereas Mark refers to “parables”, plural. It is thus impossible that Mark is referring to “one elaborate, sustained New Testament parable.” Rather, Mark is referring to the parabolic illustrations that Jesus uses in his argument: the analogy of the kingdom divided against itself, the house divided against itself, and the plunder of the strong man’s house. Except for the parable of the strong man, these parables are not allegorical (as Watkins and Burke’s view requires), but consist of “making a comparison” or “speaking proverbially.”<sup>69</sup> The parable of the strong man is allegorical, but there Satan is the one symbolized, not the symbol! This contradicts the idea that Satan is himself allegorical.

Recalling Bailey’s principle of seeking the central truth of a parable, we must recognize that the central truth here is the locus of Jesus’ authority as an exorcist, not the nature of Satan. Thus, the mere use of the word “parables” here gives no support to the idea that the very term “Satan” denotes a parable, here or anywhere else in the New Testament.

Furthermore, the notion that the use of the word “parables” is vital to understanding Satan here and elsewhere is undercut by the fact that neither Matthew nor Luke explicitly refer to these sayings of Jesus as parables (Matt. 12:25; Luke 11:17).

### 4.3. Summary

The opening question in Mark, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” and the conditional sentences involving Satan in all three Gospels show that Jesus’ focal point here was to refute the accusation that he was casting out demons by the prince of demons, **not to correct a flawed theological understanding of Satan**. To claim otherwise is to divorce this discourse from its context.

This passage offers little in the way of explicit teaching about the nature of Satan. However, as we have seen Jesus does here offer a twofold affirmation of the reality of Satan and demons. Importantly, in doing so he says nothing that contradicts the view of the scribes and Pharisees that Satan is a personal ruler of demons, except for possibly expressing a preference for the term ‘Satan’ over ‘Beelzebul’.

In summary, this text links Jesus’ satanology with the personal satanology of the day without providing any support for the Christadelphian notion that Jesus subtly refined Satan into a personification of sin using an elaborate, sustained parable.

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<sup>67</sup> It is odd that Burke consistently declines to capitalize the word ‘satan,’ even in cases where he believes Jesus was accommodating or interacting with the Jews’ belief in Satan as a personal being.

<sup>68</sup> Burke 2007: 92-93.

<sup>69</sup> Wessel & Strauss 2010: 746.

## 5. The Parable of the Sower

### 5.1. Text and Context

Like the Beelzebul Controversy, the parable of the sower (sometimes called the parable of the soils) is found in all three Synoptic Gospels, as is its canonical interpretation. This parable is about “the word of the kingdom” (Matt. 13:19) and forms part of Matthew’s collection of kingdom parables. It describes four kinds of soils which provide four different results for the seed sown in it, only one of them positive. This corresponds to the various ways that people respond when they hear the word. The canonical interpretation of the parable is allegorical,<sup>70</sup> meaning that each element of the narrative corresponds to a spiritual truth.

The subject of the devil and Satan is only peripheral to the overall purpose of the parable; the devil is mentioned in connection with one of the four kinds of soil. For sake of space I only quote the portion of the parable and its interpretation in each Gospel that concerns the devil:

2 He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up... 13 And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ([Mark 4:2-4, 13-15](#) NRSV)

3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up... 18 “Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ([Matthew 13:3-4, 18-19](#) NRSV)

4 When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: 5 “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up... 11 “Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. 12 The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ([Luke 8:4-5, 11-12](#) NRSV)

The first type of soil is the path, which leaves the seed exposed whence it is devoured by birds or (in Luke) trampled underfoot. The interpretation indicates that this devouring and trampling represents the spiritually destructive activity of an entity referred to by the equivalent terms *ho satanas* (Satan), *ho poneros* (the evil one) and *ho diabolos* (the devil). In Mark Satan comes “immediately” and takes away the word. Matthew uses a stronger verb, *harpazo* (“snatches away”, NRSV) which connotes suddenness and violence.<sup>71</sup>

### 5.2. Christadelphian exegesis

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<sup>70</sup> Stein 2008: 194.

<sup>71</sup> Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 134.

As noted earlier, numerous Christadelphian apologists have neglected to mention the parable of the sower in their writings on the devil (Williams, Watkins, Pearce, Abel). Those who have analyzed this parable have proposed at least three different interpretations of what Satan means, which will each be discussed in turn.

### 5.2.1. Satan as a generic human adversary

Whittaker comments on this parable that

“The enemy is called Satan because he is an adversary to Truth, and the Devil because he is anti-God in his attitude, and “the wicked one” because he is a man of evil influence (as in [Mt. 5:39](#) s.w.).”

His interpretation is not entirely clear, but the reference to “a man of evil influence” coupled with the comparison with the generic “one who is evil” in Matt. 5:39 suggests that he takes Satan in this parable as a reference to any generic human opponent of the word of God. This interpretation fails to take account of the article,<sup>72</sup> especially with *satanas*. The reference is not to a satan but to the Satan or Satan. As discussed earlier, Mark’s use of this transliterated Hebrew term in a text written mainly for Gentiles implies that its meaning is referential and not merely lexical. We cannot render it “an adversary”; we should leave it untranslated like Mark did.

Furthermore we must interpret the term in light of its other use in the Gospels. In Luke this parable contains the only reference to *ho diabolos* outside the temptation narrative. Similarly, in Matthew and Mark, the only references to Satan (by any name) prior to this parable are the temptation narratives and the Beelzebul Controversy. In light of the principle that the devil and Satan is a unified concept in the New Testament (a point conceded by recent Christadelphian writers) we cannot take Satan in this parable to mean something other than what Satan means in the temptation narrative and the Beelzebul Controversy.

Ewherido’s comment is worth quoting here:

“Matthew’s *ho poneros* (13:19) instead of *ho Satan* in Mark 4:15, corresponds to the identity of the enemy responsible for the bad seed in the interpretation of the parable of the Tares in verse 38a, despite Matthew’s choice of the word *ho diabolos* in verse 39. Matthew’s redaction here sustains a consistent identity for the devil throughout the discourse (cf. [5:37](#); [6:13](#))<sup>73</sup> and also reflects the evangelist’s characterization of the opponents of his community as *hoi huioi tou ponerou* in [13:38b](#).”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> For a discussion of the significance of the Greek article for understanding the devil and Satan in the New Testament, see Farrar 2012: 25-27.

<sup>73</sup> It is, of course, debatable whether Matt. 5:37 and 6:13 refer to “the evil one” as opposed to “evil” in an abstract sense. The KJV has had a huge cultural influence especially upon the Lord’s Prayer. However, there has been a definite shift in scholarship in favour of the former reading. In both places the NRSV, NKJV, NLT, NET and HCSB translate “the evil one,” and the NASB, RSV and ESV offer it as a marginal rendering. For arguments in favour of interpreting “the evil one”, see Carson 2010: 208; Wallace 1996: 233.

<sup>74</sup> Ewherido 2006: 118-119.

Whittaker's interpretation therefore must be rejected and it is not surprising that other Christadelphian apologists have offered different interpretations.

### **5.2.2. Satan as the Jewish opposition to Jesus**

Heaster offers two possible interpretations of Satan in the parable of the sower. One of them is as follows:

“The parable of the sower connects the Devil with the fowls which take away the Word from potential converts, stopping their spiritual growth. This would aptly fit the Judaizers who were leading the young ecclesias away from the word, and the Jews who “shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men...neither suffer ye them that are entering (young converts) to go in” ([Mt. 23:13](#)).”<sup>75</sup>

Burke gives a more detailed defense of this interpretation of the parable. He points out that the Satan here “is something which is represented by plural entities (the birds), and which removes the gospel from people's hearts, in order that they might not believe.”<sup>76</sup> He asserts that this language is incompatible with the orthodox view of the devil's work, and then offers his own exegesis:

“The most natural interpretation of this passage is that the birds represent those people who are in opposition to God, and who lead away those who are hear the gospel but who fail to understand it.

For such people as these we need look no further than the religious leaders of Christ's day, who were constantly perverting the minds of those who followed Christ to listen to his teachings, and who attempted to prevent people from being converted by him.”<sup>77</sup>

There are a number of problems with Burke's argument. First of all, like Whittaker he offers an interpretation which he would admit is unique in the Gospels. He does not claim that ‘Satan’ in the wilderness temptations or the Beelzebul Controversy refers to the Jewish religious leaders; thus he has the Evangelists introducing a new concept of Satan here without giving the slightest indication that they are doing so. How can this possibly be the most natural interpretation of the passage?

Burke's main exegetical argument comes from the fact that the birds in the parable are plural. This is an example of over-exegesis; sometimes the minor details simply add colour to the story rather than carrying a spiritual meaning. Given the quantity of seed that a sower would typically have sown, it would not make sense to describe a single bird devouring all of it.

Moreover, regardless of how one interprets Satan here it must be acknowledged that there is a numerical mismatch between the plural birds (and trampling feet, in Luke) and the singular Satan, devil or evil one. Burke's interpretation of Satan as “people” matches numerically with

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<sup>75</sup> Heaster 2012: 169.

<sup>76</sup> Burke 2007: 76.

<sup>77</sup> Burke 2007: 77.

birds but not with Satan, the devil or the evil one. When *diabolos* is used of people (plural) the word occurs in the plural and without the article (1 Tim. 3:11; 2 Tim. 3:3; Titus 2:3).

It is even more difficult to see how the evil **one** (singular) could refer to people (plural). Furthermore, the article is used with *poneros* here to denote evil in an absolute or ultimate sense. A group of people could hardly be described as “the evil one” in such a transcendent way. The Jewish religious leaders may be identified as **children of** the evil one (Matt. 13:38), but never as the evil one.

One also observes that none of the three versions of the parable explicitly posit a one-to-one correspondence between the birds and Satan (unlike the plain statement in the parable of the tares “the enemy that sowed them is the devil”). Rather they equate the ‘coming and devouring’ done by the birds (and trampling by the feet in Luke) with the ‘coming and taking away the word’ done by Satan. Thus, while it is possible that the birds and feet represent Satan himself, it is also possible that they represent his work, which may be carried out by himself personally or by his demonic agents. Stein and other commentators note that in ancient Judaism, birds are used repeatedly as a metaphor for the work of Satan ([Jubilees 11:10-11](#); [Apocalypse of Abraham 13:3-7](#); [1 Enoch 90:8-13](#); [Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 107a](#); cf. [Rev. 18:2](#)).<sup>78</sup> Indeed, these birds are antithetical to the Holy Spirit, who is depicted as a dove ([Mark 1:10](#)).<sup>79</sup>

Burke’s objection that an orthodox interpretation of the devil in this parable creates confusion needs to be articulated more fully if it is to have any force. According to the orthodox view, Satan is a spirit being who can indeed possess people and work in their hearts, as can his demonic accomplices. In other passages where such activity is described ([Luke 22:3, 31](#); [John 13:2, 27](#); [Acts 5:3](#)), Burke interprets Satan as the personification of evil desires.<sup>80</sup> Thus his position that Satan in the parable of the sower refers to external humans is inconsistent with his own approach elsewhere.

In summary, the interpretation of Satan in the parable of the sower as the Jewish religious leaders has virtually nothing in its favour. It is far more reasonable to interpret Satan here in a way consistent with the earlier important references to Satan in the temptation narratives and the Beelzebul Controversy.

### **5.2.3. Satan as the evil desires of the heart**

Robert Roberts left a passing comment to the effect that the bad soils in the parable of the sower correspond to people with evil hearts, which leaves no place for the Satan of orthodox belief.<sup>81</sup>

Heaster offers a more substantial defense of the view that Satan in the parable of the sower refers to the evil desires of the heart.

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<sup>78</sup> Stein 2008: 217. The Hebrew term *Lilith* used in Isa. 34:14, which may have originally referred to a species of nocturnal bird (Judith 2009: 90-91), had by the first century B.C. become the name of a female demon, as the Dead Sea Scrolls indicate (4Q510-511). See also Ewherido 2006: 119; Carson 2010: 360.

<sup>79</sup> Bailey 1998(2): 180.

<sup>80</sup> Burke 2007: 74ff, 108-109.

<sup>81</sup> Roberts 1884: 115.

Heaster presents the parable of the sower as a passage popularly misunderstood to mean that “Satan is a person who stops us being righteous,” and offers the following comments:

1. If this is so, then there is nothing we can do to stop Satan hindering us; “we are of all men most miserable” ([1 Cor. 15:19](#)).
2. “Your Word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against You” ([Ps. 119:11](#)). Jesus showed the power of the Word in overcoming the Devil in the wilderness. There is no way that a personal being can be more powerful than God’s Word, otherwise there is no point in God giving us the Word to fortify ourselves – “put on the whole armour of God (e.g. ‘the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God’), that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil” ([Eph. 6:11, 17](#)).
3. Satan “coming” does not mean it is a personal being: v. 19 describes “the lusts of other things” – i.e. the true Devil – “entering in”, as though they, too, physically moved.<sup>82</sup>

The first two comments above are straw-man arguments. The Scriptures make it clear that the devil is a defeated foe (e.g. [Luke 10:18-20](#); [John 12:31](#); [Rom. 16:20](#); [Rev. 12:12](#)) and that God has provided the tools for overcoming his schemes, as Heaster’s citation from Ephesians makes clear. However, Ephesians was written to believers, for whom the Word of God is effective, whereas the seed that falls on the path in the parable is snatched away immediately, before the word can be received (cp. [Mark 4:16-17](#)).

Heaster correctly states that Satan “coming” does not necessarily refer here to physical movement on his part (though it does in the temptation narratives<sup>83</sup>). The verb translated “come” here, *erchomai*, does frequently take on figurative meanings, such as in [Mark 4:22](#) (“come to light”). Nevertheless, the language of the birds “coming” in the parable, and the language of Satan “coming” and “snatching away” in the interpretation read most naturally with respect to an external entity.

The appeal to [Mark 4:19](#) does little to mitigate this. Of the thorny soil it says, “but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing” (NRSV). Even though these three things do not physically enter a person, their sources are external (the world; wealth; other things).

Heaster then offers his own interpretation:

- “1. It is our giving way to our own evil heart that is the only thing that can stop the Word acting on us as it should. Our lack of effort to apply the Word of God, which springs from our evil desires, is therefore our “Satan”. We are our own Satan / adversary.
2. Matthew 13:19 says that the reason for “Satan” taking away the Word from the hearts of these people is because they do not understand it ([Mt. 13:14–15](#)). The arena of the conflict is clearly the human heart and understanding.

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<sup>82</sup> Heaster 2012: 411.

<sup>83</sup> See Farrar 2013: 8-10. The verb used in the temptation narratives is *proserchomai* which explicitly refers to physical movement with very few exceptions.

3. See 2–4 “The Jewish Satan” for another approach to this parable.”<sup>84</sup>

On what basis may we take the transliterated Hebrew term *ho satanas*, as written to a Gentile audience, to refer to our own evil heart or our evil desires. The word is referential in meaning, and *satan* never takes on such a meaning in the Old Testament. Nor does it take on such a meaning elsewhere in Mark. Even if we translate the term (which Mark did not) as ‘the adversary,’ it is not an obvious step to take ‘the adversary’ to mean ‘our evil desires.’ The same is true of ‘the slanderer’ (*ho diabolos*) and ‘the evil one’ (*ho poneros*). Such an inference demands positive evidence which the text does not provide.

It is true that the arena of the conflict is the human heart. Indeed, Jesus here teaches that there is a relationship between Satan and the evil desires of the heart: Satan can enter the heart and influence the heart, and the evil inclination of the heart facilitates this (cf. [Acts 5:3-4](#)). However, Satan is not literally the evil inclination. Again, there is no reason to describe the evil inclination even figuratively as coming into the heart. This would conflict with the imagery of [Mark 7:15-23](#), where Jesus states that “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile”, whereas “evil things come from within, and they defile a person”.

That Heaster closes his exegesis by referring to an alternative approach (the ‘Jewish Satan’ view discussed above) suggests that he himself is not fully convinced of his interpretation.

### **5.3. Summary**

Christadelphians unanimously assert that Satan or the devil or the evil one in the parable of the sower does not refer to a supernatural personal being. However, over the century and a half of their history they have failed to reach a consensus on what it *does* mean.

This shows that the parable of the sower is more problematic for Christadelphian satanology than most Christadelphians are aware. The best interpretation of this parable is that the three bad soils depict three enemies: Satan, the flesh, and the world.<sup>85</sup> Of course, there is a redundancy if Satan actually *is* the flesh or the world!

## **6. The Parable of the Tares**

### **6.1. Text and Context**

The parable of the tares (sometimes referred to as the parable of the wheat and weeds) is unique to Matthew among the canonical Gospels.<sup>86</sup> Like the parable of the sower, it is one of Matthew’s kingdom parables. The parable and its canonical interpretation read as follows:

24 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy

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<sup>84</sup> Heaster 2012: 411.

<sup>85</sup> Bailey 1998(2): 180.

<sup>86</sup> A version does appear in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, which some scholars regard as at least partially independent of the version in Matthew (see, for instance, Jones 1995: 321 n. 130). However, since the Gospel of Thomas is not authoritative either for Christadelphians or the broader church, its version of the parable will not be considered in this study.

came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ 28 He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29 But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” ([Matthew 13:24-30 NRSV](#))

36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” 37 He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!” ([Matthew 13:36-43 NRSV](#))

This parable is highly significant for understanding Jesus’ satanology because it serves the specific purpose of explaining the origin of the conflict between the wicked and the righteous. It seeks to answer the question, “Where did the conflict originate, and whose responsibility is it to deal with it?”<sup>87</sup> The scope of the question is cosmic, since the field is “the world.” Furthermore, while the devil’s role in the parable of the sower is marginal, “the enemy” is one of the main characters in the parable of the tares.

In his study on interpreting parables, Christadelphian writer Stephen Pinfield offers the helpful observation that the parable of the tares is a detailed allegory, where “there is a straightforward one-to-one correspondence between the symbol and the symbolised.”<sup>88</sup>

Since Jesus explicitly identifies the enemy who sowed the tares as “the devil” (*ho diabolos*), it follows that this parable contains teaching about the devil.

## 6.2. Christadelphian exegesis

As we saw earlier, there is almost a complete disregard for the parable of the tares in Christadelphian apologetic writings on the devil and Satan. Between Roberts, Williams, Watkins, Abel, Pearce and Burke, not one offers an exegesis of the enemy in this parable. Even

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<sup>87</sup> Bailey 1998(3): 276.

<sup>88</sup> Pinfield.

in Heaster's 542-page study he offers only very brief passing comments. He states that he takes the devil "in the sense of the desires of sin"<sup>89</sup> but offers no rationale for this interpretation.

We have to turn to studies specifically about this parable to find detailed Christadelphian exegesis of the enemy that sowed the tares. In his study of the parables of Matthew 13, Mercer states that "The tares sown among the wheat show the opposition to the teaching of Jesus by his contemporaries"<sup>90</sup> but does not comment on the meaning of "the devil."

Like Duncan Heaster did with the parable of the sower, Julio Scaramastro offers a twofold interpretation of the devil in the parable of the tares: "1. sin-in-the flesh and 2. The leaders of the Jews who were dominated by sin-in-the-flesh."<sup>91</sup>

Scaramastro interprets the symbols of the parable largely with recourse with other parts of Scripture and does not offer a thorough analysis of the parable as a literary unit.

Whittaker does provide us with a well-researched and insightful Christadelphian exegesis of the parable of the tares. He offers the following comment on the crucial clause, "The enemy that sowed them is the devil":

"This is now interpretation and not allegory. So it is not difficult to understand why some have deemed this to be one of the clearest proofs of the existence of a personal superhuman Devil.

It almost seems as though the Lord was prepared beforehand for such a misunderstanding, for in the parable itself (v. 28, see RVm), he was careful to phrase it: "A man, an enemy hath done this", the rather awkward pleonasm emphasizing the need to identify with some evil human influence at work in the early days of the church."<sup>92</sup>

He goes on to describe "a deliberate underhand attempt by Jews to wreck the infant church from within," and it is apparent (though not explicit) he identifies "the devil" in this text as the ringleaders of this conspiracy.

We now have before us two Christadelphian approaches to this passage: one which identifies the devil as sin in the flesh or the desires of sin, and one which identifies the devil as the Jewish opposition to Jesus. These will be considered in turn.

### **6.2.1. The devil as the desires of sin**

The proponents of this view (Heaster and Scaramastro) do not offer much exegetical justification for their position. Scaramastro uses other New Testament passages where the word *echthros* (enemy) occurs to deduce its meaning here, whereby he runs afoul of the word study fallacy, more specifically that of "parallelomania."<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Scaramastro corrals just about every

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<sup>89</sup> Heaster 2012: 499.

<sup>90</sup> Mercer 2002: 219.

<sup>91</sup> Scaramastro.

<sup>92</sup> Whittaker 1984(3).

<sup>93</sup> Carson 1996: 43f.

use of the word *echthros* in the New Testament except for the one that is most relevant to the case at hand ([Luke 10:19](#))!

In the absence of any positive arguments for taking the devil in the interpretation of the parable of the tares as the desires of sin, we can move on to pointing out problems with this view.

Firstly, as in the temptation narrative and the parable of the sower, we have the language of the devil (or his symbol) coming and going: the enemy “came” and then “went away.” Within the narrative of the parable, the place to which the enemy came is the field, which represents the world (Matt. 13:38). The clear implication is that the devil referred to in this text has an origin or abode which is external, not only to the individual but to the cosmos! This is a serious problem for either of the Christadelphian interpretations of this parable, but fits perfectly with the traditional view of the devil as an angelic being.

Secondly, if we consider the allegorical symbols explained by Jesus we can see that all of them correspond to clear, concrete realities (see table below). Furthermore, with the exception of the field and the harvest (which establish the spatial and temporal setting of parable’s interpretation), all the other elements symbolize personal beings. Moreover, leaving aside the enemy, we observe that the other two symbols which are characters in the story (the sower and the reapers) symbolize supernatural beings, while the two symbols which are ‘things’ in the story (good seed and tares) symbolize human beings. This symmetry suggests that the enemy, who is also a character in the story, also symbolizes a supernatural being.

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Field	World
Harvest	The End of the Age
Sower of Good Seed	Son of Man
Good Seed	Children of the Kingdom
Enemy Who Sowed Tares	Devil
Tares	Children of the Evil One
Reapers	Angels

A third and even more serious problem is that observed by Whittaker: the reference to the devil is not in the parable itself but in the interpretation. Thus the term is not allegorical but literal. In fact, Matt. 13:39 totally undercuts Watkins’ claim that the devil is an elaborate New Testament parable; for if Watkins’ claim is true then Jesus here interprets a parable with a parable. It appears that Jesus gave a simple, straightforward answer to the disciples’ request that he explain the parable (Matt. 13:36). However, his answer is far from straightforward if we take the words “the enemy that sowed them is the devil” to mean, “the enemy that sowed them symbolizes the devil which is itself symbolic (by means of an elaborate and sustained parable) of sin in the flesh.”

### **6.2.2. The devil as the Jewish leaders**

Both Scaramastro and Whittaker have suggested that “the devil” in Matt. 13:39 refers to the Jewish leaders, or in Whittaker’s case, more specifically to the leaders of a Jewish conspiracy to

wreck the early church. Whittaker offers a piece of positive evidence in favour of this interpretation, which is rather technical and requires close examination.

### 6.2.2.1. The argument from *anthropos* in Matthew 13:28

Whittaker observes that the Greek of the sower's reply to his servants in Matt. 13:28 reads *echthros anthropos touto epoiesen*, literally "an enemy man has done this" or "a man, an enemy did this."

Most English translations do not translate the word *anthropos* for reasons to be explained, but Young's Literal Translation renders, "A man, an enemy, did this" while the NASB offers "enemy man" as a marginal rendering.

Having seen how the Greek literally reads, the questions that concern us are:

- (1) Are the majority of English translations correct to omit the word 'man' in this clause?
- (2) Is the word *anthropos* exegetically significant in the parable?
- (3) If so, what effect does this have on the canonical interpretation of the parable?

To understand the first question, we need to understand the function of the word *anthropos* in this verse. BDAG, the most respected lexicon of New Testament Greek, gives the fourth definition of *anthropos* as, "practically equivalent to the indefinite pronoun, with the basic meaning of *anthropos* greatly weakened: someone, one, a person."<sup>94</sup> One of the sub-definitions is when *anthropos* occurs "without the article" and is used "pleonastically with a noun." This is clearly the case in Matt. 13:28, so we have identified the sense of *anthropos* here. What we can already see that the emphasis on the humanness of the referent is greatly reduced.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century theologian John Gill described the phrase *echthros anthropos* in Matt. 13:28 as "an Hebraism, such as in [Esther 7:6](#), "the man adversary and enemy" is this wicked Haman; and signifies a certain enemy".<sup>95</sup> It is worth noting that [Esther 7:6 LXX](#) has the same pleonasm of nouns as Matt. 13:28 (although in reverse order): *anthropos echthros*. Esther 7:6 LXX is translated in the NETS, "So Esther said, 'A man who is an enemy! Haman is this wicked one!'" Here, there is no emphasis on the maleness or humanity of the enemy; it is of no exegetical significance since it is obvious that Haman is a man. For a similar pleonastic example see [Lev. 21:9 MT](#) and [LXX](#), where the Greek has the pleonasm *anthropou heireos* (literally 'a man priest', which is redundant since all Levitical priests were men).

Gill's assertion that the pleonasm of *anthropos* with another noun is an Hebraism fits the relatively common occurrence of this grammatical feature in Matthew, a book written by a Jew and primarily for Jews. Lambrecht mentions this "strange combination of two nouns" (without the article) in five places in Matthew's parables ([Matt. 13:45](#), [18:23](#), [20:1](#), [21:33](#) and [22:2](#)), commenting that "We may assume that in all those passages Matthew qualified the general

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<sup>94</sup> Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 81.

<sup>95</sup> Gill 1763.

phrase ‘someone.’”<sup>96</sup> To this list, BDAG adds [Matt. 11:19](#), [13:24](#), [13:52](#) and [27:32](#).<sup>97</sup> Let us briefly examine each of them alongside our text, Matt. 13:28:

Matthean Text	Context	Greek expression	Literal translation <sup>98</sup>	Meaning <sup>99</sup>
11:19	Narrative Dialogue	<i>idou anthropos phagos</i>	“Look, a man, a glutton”	“Look at him, a glutton”; or “Look, a glutton”
13:24	Parable	<i>anthropo speiranti kalon sperma</i>	“A man sowing <sup>100</sup> good seed”	“Someone who sowed good seed”; or “a person who sowed good seed”
13:28	Parable	<i>echthros anthropos touto epoiesen</i>	“A man, an enemy, did this”	“An enemy has done this”
13:45	Parable	<i>anthropo emporo zetounti kalous margaritas</i>	“a man, a merchant, seeking goodly pearls”	“a merchant in search of fine pearls”
13:52	Parable	<i>anthropo oikodespote hostis ekballei</i>	“a man, a householder, who brings out”	“the owner of a house who brings out...”
18:23	Parable	<i>anthropo basilei os ethelesen sunarai logon</i>	“a man, a king, who did will to take reckoning”	“a king who wished to settle accounts”
20:1	Parable	<i>anthropo oikodespote hostis exelthen hama proi</i>	“a man, a householder, who went forth with the morning”	“a landowner who went out early in the morning”
21:33	Parable	<i>anthropos tis en oikodespotes hostis ephuteusen ampeloma</i>	“a certain man, a householder, who planted a vineyard”	“a landowner who planted a vineyard”
22:2	Parable	<i>anthropo basilei hostis epoiesen gamous to huio autou</i>	“a man, a king, who made marriage-feasts for his son”	“a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son”
27:32	Narrative	<i>heuron anthropon kurenaion onomati simona</i>	“they found a man, a Cyrenian, by name Simon”	“they found a man from Cyrene named Simon”

From the above, we can observe that the decision not to translate the word *anthropos* literally in Matt. 13:28 is consistent with the decision in other similar texts in Matthew’s Gospel. Indeed, in the nine other instances of this grammatical feature identified by Lambrecht and BDAG, only in

<sup>96</sup> Lambrecht 1992: 59.

<sup>97</sup> Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 81.

<sup>98</sup> Literal translations are taken from Young’s Literal Translation.

<sup>99</sup> Meanings are taken from NRSV and/or NET.

<sup>100</sup> As Arndt, Danker & Bauer note, *speiranti* is technically a participle and not a noun

one case have the NRSV and NET rendered the word “man” in English (Matt. 27:32, where ‘man from Cyrene’ reads as naturally as ‘Cyrenian’).

It is obvious that the word *anthropos* serves like an indefinite pronoun in most of these texts, since “man” is redundant. In the historical context of first century Palestine, sowers (whether good or bad!), kings, householders, merchants and landowners could be assumed to be men.

Furthermore, consider the seven other instances where the *anthropos* + noun pleonasm occurs in Matthean parables. Even if we insisted on a literal translation, and even if we insist that the word man explicitly distinguishes the individual involved as a human male (as opposed to a human female or a non-human being), in no case would this have any implications for the interpretation of the parable. That the character in the parable is a human male does not imply that he symbolizes a human male. This can be seen from Matt. 21:33, where the landowner symbolizes God, and Matt. 22:2, where the king symbolizes God (cf. [Luke 15:11](#)). Even in Matt. 13:24, the sower symbolizes the Son of man which in Matthew alludes primarily to a heavenly being who comes with an army of angels in judgment (although of course he is the human Jesus)<sup>101</sup> (see [Matt. 10:23](#); [13:41](#); [16:27](#); [24:27-30](#); [25:31](#); [26:64](#); cf. [Dan. 7:13](#)).

Let us return then to *echthros anthropos* in Matt. 13:28. Just as many translations do not translate *anthropos*, so many commentators pass over this grammatical feature without comment,<sup>102</sup> while others take note of it but see no exegetical significance.<sup>103</sup> Morris sees the word as putting “some emphasis on the fact that what had happened was of human origin”<sup>104</sup> in the parable story, though not in the interpretation.

Gundry sees the word *anthropos* as setting “the ‘hostile man’ in sharp antithesis to the ‘man who sowed good seed’”<sup>105</sup> (note above how the *anthropos* + noun pleonasm also occurs in v. 24). This observation is supported by Stein’s approach to parables (see above) in which we need to look for the main contrast. For Gundry, the interpretation of this antithesis is that “it sets the Devil in opposition to Jesus the Son of man (vv. 37, 39).”

The only commentator I could find who offers support for Whittaker’s interpretation is Overman. He argues that the while the interpretation of the parable says the enemy is the devil, the addition of *anthropos* to *echthros* in 13:28

“suggests a more human opposition to the householder and his servants. In this version of the story human enemies, not evil ones, have sown bad seeds in the fields of the household. Matthean opponents are to be blamed for the *corpus mixtum* that presently characterizes the Matthean church. Yes, the evil one, the devil, is ultimately responsible, Matthew would believe, because his opposition is in actuality ‘children of Ghenna’

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<sup>101</sup> See Sim 2005: 93ff.

<sup>102</sup> Keener 1999: 385f; Meier 1980: 146-147; Lachs 1987: 223-224; Hultgren 2002: 292f; Bruner 2004: 28.

<sup>103</sup> Carson 2010: 363.

<sup>104</sup> Morris 1992: 350.

<sup>105</sup> Gundry 1994: 264.

(23:15). Yet the human agency involved in this Matthean internal struggle between good and bad influences and instruction cannot be avoided in 13:28.”<sup>106</sup>

Note that even Overman does not identify ‘the devil’ as a human entity. In any case, however, his argument is not convincing here. As we have already seen, when the word *anthropos* is used pleonastically with another noun its usual emphasis is greatly weakened. Furthermore, when used in other parables in Matthew it has no exegetical significance, and is sometimes used of characters who symbolize God. If the word *anthropos* were crucial to the symbolic meaning of the enemy we would expect Matthew to have repeated it in the parable’s interpretation in v. 39.

In summary, it is probable that the word *anthropos* in Matt. 13:28 is merely a Hebraism which places no emphasis on the character’s humanity. Even if, on the other hand, it does emphasise the character’s humanity, this could be to emphasise the enemy’s contrast with the sower of good seed, and certainly does not imply that the enemy symbolises a human (or humans).

#### **6.2.2.2. Problems with the ‘Jewish leaders’ interpretation**

Having set aside the argument from the occurrence of *anthropos* in Matt. 13:28, it can be seen that the interpretation of “the enemy, that is the devil” in this text as the Jewish leaders is no less problematic than the “sin in the flesh” view.

First of all, since Christadelphians affirm that “sin in the flesh” is the primary meaning of the elaborate New Testament parable of the devil, if the devil does not take that meaning here, it must have a localized meaning. Accordingly, the main clue to the devil’s identity would be the lexical meaning of *ho diabolos* (since Matthew gives no further explanation of the term here). However, lexically *ho diabolos* (the slanderer) is almost synonymous with *ho echthros* (the enemy). Jesus’ interpretation is then, “The enemy who sowed them is the slanderer,” which is virtually a tautology.<sup>107</sup> He may as well have said, “The enemy who sowed them is the enemy.”

From this it is clear that *ho diabolos* takes a referential meaning in Matt. 13:39: the parable’s interpretation alludes to an entity already known to the reader by the term *ho diabolos*. Thus, to support the “Jewish leaders” interpretation, Christadelphians must produce evidence that *ho diabolos* was a well-known term for the Jewish leaders (or other classes of apostate humans) in late antiquity. As far as I know no such evidence exists, either in the New Testament or other Jewish or Christian writings of the day.

Secondly, against the identification of “the devil” as a group of evil humans is the interpretation of the tares as “the children of the evil one”, a class of evil humans who are distinct from the devil. “The children of the evil one” very likely does refer at least partly to the Jewish leaders, since similar terms are used for them elsewhere, such as children of Gehenna ([Matt. 23:15](#)) and children of the devil ([John 8:44](#)). If the Jewish leaders are subsumed within the “children of the evil one” then they cannot also be “the devil.”

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<sup>106</sup> Overman 1996: 198-199.

<sup>107</sup> The word *echthros* is used to describe Satan in [Luke 10:19](#) and another close synonym, *antidikos*, is used to describe *ho diabolos* in [1 Peter 5:8](#).

Finally, as was observed above, the language of the enemy coming to and going from the field (which symbolizes the world) points to the enemy's otherworldly nature and origin.

### **6.3. Summary**

A close examination of this parable and its interpretation rules out the idea that the devil is a symbol of sin in the flesh – not only in this passage but throughout the New Testament!

The 'Jewish leaders' interpretation also suffers from an utter lack of positive evidence, and conflicts with significant details of the parable and its allegorical interpretation.

### **7. Conclusion**

If you have stuck with me this far, we have just been through a very detailed study together of three biblical passages which have two important things in common. First, they all contain teachings of Jesus in the form of parables. Second, these parables contain elements which symbolize the devil and his work (the strong man who is bound and his goods plundered, the birds which devour the seed on the path, and the enemy who sowed tares).

What we have found is that, rather than being an elaborate New Testament parable, as Christadelphians have claimed, the devil is a reality. He appears not in the parable narratives (which are metaphorical or allegorical) but in the parable interpretations (which are real and literal).

This point has gone unnoticed by Christadelphians, perhaps in part because these parables have been neglected in the major Christadelphian works on the devil.

To sum up the theological implications of our study we can do no better than to quote at length from Bruner:

“Jesus and the early church believed in the devil. We saw this enemy at work in the first parable sweeping away seed that was sitting on footpath soil; we see him at work now in the second parable spoiling the good sowing of the Lord. No reading of the Gospels can escape the impression that the earliest disciples of Jesus believed, and believed that Jesus believed in the existence of an Evil One who sought to thwart the purposes of God. We saw this Evil One's strategy classically in the Temptations of chap. 4. Since then the devil has been relatively in the background – except for the semi-systematic discussion in the Spirit Controversy story in chapter 12. But suddenly now in chap. 13 the devil is prominent again, striking at either the root of faith (Sower, vv. 1-23) or at the fruit of love (Weeds, vv. 24-30).”<sup>108</sup>

And again:

“Jesus and the early church believed that the depths of evil are profounder than human foibles, that the mystery of iniquity is larger than human miscalculations. Devil-less theology takes from the church the dramatic matrix within which Jesus himself saw

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<sup>108</sup> Bruner 2004: 28.

reality enmeshed. A demythologized rather than a remythologized devil, a rationally denied devil rather than a Christ-conquered devil, is a dangerous reality. The devil does not cease to exist because we say he ceases to exist; he reappears in more subtle forms. 'The Christian devil,' if we may put it that way, is a devil in chains, but a denied devil is unchained fury."<sup>109</sup>

Christadelphians have made positive contributions to theology, such as their emphasis on the hope of physical resurrection, an earthly kingdom of God and the continuing role of natural Israel in the purpose of God. However, in the matter of the devil and Satan their doctrine is in error. I call on Christadelphians to undertake a comprehensive review of their teachings on the subject of the devil and Satan, and in particular the clause in their statement of faith which makes belief in a supernatural, personal devil a barrier to fellowship.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Bruner 2004: 41-42. Note that Bruner proceeds to balance these words with a warning against placing too much emphasis on the devil in the teaching and life of the church.

<sup>110</sup> Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith, Doctrines to be Rejected, clause 11.  
<http://www.christadelphia.org/reject.htm>

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