

**A Response to Candy Gunther Brown's
"Harmful Spirits: From Fear to Freedom"**

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Europe-Asia Pentecostal Summit last May, we have been wrestling with the subject of demonology and deliverance. I would like to express my heartfelt thank you to Dr Candy Brown, for your exceptionally well-researched and comprehensive presentation on the ministry of deliverance, not just outside the church, but within the church as well. As I have argued in my response last year, although classical Pentecostalism claims that Christians cannot be demonised, but for most of us Pentecostals in the Global South, the deliverance ministry is an integral part of our churches.¹ Brown has clearly illustrated for us the basis and importance of the deliverance ministry, especially for Asian Pentecostal churches today.

FROM FREEDOM TO FEAR

Brown's paper is aptly entitled: from fear to freedom. This is why Pentecostals make room for deliverance within our churches, because we strongly believe that it is one of the means of freedom that Christ has demonstrated for us in the Scriptures. However, in my response today, I would like to explore the contrary theme of *from freedom to fear*. The deliverance ministry ought to be a pathway of freedom for believers, instead, excesses and flawed theology in this area have brought us back into bondage, especially for many Christians in Asia. Though set free, we have left our freedom in Christ and allowed ourselves to be imprisoned by fear again (cf. Gal. 5:1).

In his classic work *the Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis offers an astute observation:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive

¹ Chiong Xiao Ting, "Response to Sanna Urvas and Markus Nikkanen's 'Worldviews beneath Cosmological Kerygma: Demons as a Case Study,'" in *Pentecostal Voices Across Continents*, edited by Kong Hee, et al. (Regnum Books International, 2026), 132-133.

*and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.*²

This seems analogous to the worldviews Christians hold towards the spirit world. Brown has observed that Western Christians often ignore, or in the words of Lewis, perhaps even “disbelieve” the existence of harmful spirits, yet on the other hand, the church in Asia risks developing a disproportionate obsession about them. Quoting from Wonsuk and Julie Ma, Brown raises a legitimate concern that we have to be cautious in introducing demons to a “cultural context that is already crowded with myriads of good and evil spirits.”³ She rightly points out that this may result in fear instead of faith in the power of the Spirit, which is the principal issue I seek to address today.

Leading missiological anthropologist Paul Hiebert argues in his 1982 essay “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle” that Western missionaries have ignored “middle-level” experiences of people that concern “spirits, ghosts, ancestors, demons,” and are often unable to answer questions concerning sicknesses, crises and misfortunes of the present life.⁴ Although missiological theology has made much progress since then, this question remains relevant for Asian churches. Have we adequately established a rigorous theological framework in this “middle level,” that grounds believers in the Scriptures, yet not disregard the struggles and reality of the spirit world that they face every day? Are believers equipped to navigate through life’s complexities without settling for simplistic explanations like “the devil caused it” or “the devil made me do it”? As Asian Pentecostals, we hope to develop a “global, ‘three-tiered,’

² C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (The Centenary Press, 1942), 9.

³ Wonsuk Ma, “‘In Jesus’ Name...’: Power Encounter from an Asian Pentecostal Perspective,” in *Principalities and Powers: Biblical Reflections in the Asian Context*, edited by Forum on Theology (OMF Literature, 2007), 35 as quoted in Candy Gunther Brown, “Harmful Spirits: From Fear to Freedom,” paper presented during the Asia Pentecostal Summit, July 22-26, 2026, 17.

⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” *Missiology: An International Review* 10, no. 1 (1982): 44.

holistic worldview” that Dr Brown has suggested.⁵ In light of this, I would like to propose three areas that our churches should consider in our theological framework of demonology.

1. Biblical Worldview of the Demonic

The first area relates to our biblical worldview of the demonic. Because of our emphasis on spiritual warfare, Pentecostals are often accused of having a dualistic worldview, which assumes two opposing gods of good and evil.⁶ However, in denying dualism, we must also avoid monism, which downplays the genuine spiritual opposition that believers face. Hence, Frank Macchia proposes a form of “qualified dualism between good and evil,” which good is always assured victory because of God’s sovereign reign.⁷ Such a worldview ensures that we focus on Christ and His victory, without ignoring the reality of the spirit world or attributing inordinate power to the devil.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Asian cultural contexts may heighten one’s fear of the demonic. Examples include: believers are cautioned when they carry out missions—one should be wary in how and when they lay hands on others, lest demonic spirits “jump on them” or are transferred to them and consequently, they may end up being demonically oppressed themselves. This is also reflected in the prayer for the gift of speaking in tongues: when one asks the Holy Spirit for the gift of tongues, they are afraid that they may receive demonic tongues instead. These questions are regularly encountered in our Bible studies and pastoral care contexts, but listing them here is not a dismissal of the validity of every claim, but an illustration

⁵ Brown, “Harmful Spirits,” 19.

⁶ See Sanna Urvas and Markus Nikkanen, “Worldviews beneath Cosmological Kerygma: Demons as a Case Study,” in *Pentecostal Voices Across Continents*, edited by Kong Hee, et al. (Regnum Books International, 2026), 116-120 for the criticism on dualism.

⁷ Frank Macchia, “The Challenge of Demythologising the Devil,” in *The Holy Spirit, Spirituality and Leadership: Essays In Honour of Younghoon Lee*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (Augsburg Fortress, 2024), 75-76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.27024360>.

of the widespread fear that Asians may have when it comes to the spiritual and the demonic. Judith Lin also observes that in Taiwan, Christians have a prevalent fear that when they pray for the infilling of the Holy Spirit, evil spirits might “take advantage” of them instead.⁸ Instances like this appear to suggest a dualistic worldview—God is perceived as an equal force to the devil, and the devil seems to possess the ability to intervene and thwart God’s will whenever he desires. It is crucial for our churches to equip believers in understanding what Christ has done and the authority they have in Him, over “snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy,” and Jesus has promised that “nothing will harm [us]” (Luke 10:19).

2. Practices Concerning the Demonic

The second area has to do with our practices concerning the demonic. Here, I argue that discernment must be exercised to determine if a practice and its underlying belief is superstition or genuinely scriptural or biblical. Hiebert observed that Western scholars and missionaries have often dismissed traditional religious beliefs like witchcraft, divination, and curses as “superstitions to be eradicated.”⁹ However, what I am suggesting is not trivializing these beliefs, because in Asia, these “middle level” experiences are realities that we grapple with. Instead, I am adopting Sixbert Sangwa’s definition of superstition as assigning to created things “a power, authority, or determinative significance that belongs to God alone”, which essentially is a “misplaced trust and fear of created things”.¹⁰

⁸ Judith Lin, “Charismaticism in the Taiwanese Context: A Newfound Friend or a Good Old Companion?” (Presented at the 46th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, 2017).

⁹ Paul Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Baker Academic, 2000), 19.

¹⁰ Sixbert Sangwa, “When Do Created Things Become Objects of Trust? A Biblical and Educational Response to Superstition in Contemporary Christian Formation,” *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology* 2, no. 2 (2026): 2-3, [https:// 10.65655/OpenChristianPress.2026.113](https://10.65655/OpenChristianPress.2026.113).

An informal survey conducted reveals that some Asian Christians still retain superstitious practices like taking a shower after returning from a funeral because evil spirits could have followed one home.¹¹ Other examples include associating certain symbols with the demonic like snakes and dragons. One documented example from Korea illustrates this: a folk drummer was invited by a minister to put up a percussion performance in the church and their drum had a dragon shape on it. The members were frightened by the dragon because they interpreted it as a sign of the devil and eventually the dragon had to be covered up so that the performance could proceed.¹² This is a classic case of attributing power to things out of superstition and fear but not having its basis rooted in scriptural principles. Asian churches need to recognise that our culture may be predisposed to superstition, hence there is a need to carefully discern our practices and its accompanying beliefs under the authority of the Scriptures.

3. Sources of Evil

The last area pertains to the sources of evil as outlined by the Scriptures. The Assemblies of God (AG) Position Paper “Spiritual Warfare and the Believer” delineates the triad conflict that believers engage in—the “world, flesh and devil.”¹³ The spiritual warfare that believers are involved in are not one-dimensional but multi-dimensional, and the source of opposition that we encounter may not always be demonic in nature.

In this AG position paper, the world is described as Satan’s “domain” and it also refers to the worldly systems that reject God and His people.¹⁴ Apart from that, the brokenness of the

¹¹ These are informal interviews conducted by me among some members of City Harvest Church, regarding the beliefs they were raised with in their families.

¹² Roald Maliangkay, “There is No Amen in Shaman: Traditional Music Preservation and Christianity in South Korea,” *Asian Music* 45, no. 1(2014): 84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24256905>.

¹³ Assemblies of God, “Position Paper On Spiritual Warfare and the Believer,” accessed July 15, 2026, <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/Spiritual-Warfare-and-the-Believer>.

¹⁴ Assemblies of God, “Position Paper On Spiritual Warfare and the Believer.”

world due to the fall also contributes to the occurrence of physical and mental illnesses, disasters and calamities in the world. Dr Brown has cautioned that we must not misdiagnose every illness as demonisation or confuse mental illnesses with demonic activity.¹⁵ Instead, she proposes that we can integrate both psychological and spiritual care.¹⁶ A sound theological framework in this area takes all these into consideration, and deters believers from attributing every sickness (physical and mental) to demonic causes, or associating every negative event with spiritual warfare.

Secondly, the AG paper posits that believers also wrestle with the flesh, which is our fallen nature that is inclined towards sin.¹⁷ Believers are to crucify our flesh and yield to the Spirit daily (Rom 8:9-13). It is essential to understand that not every sinful behaviour is a result of demonic oppression, instead, the battle with the flesh is genuine for every believer. Such an understanding prevents believers from evading personal responsibility for sin or attributing every sinful inclination to demonic influence.¹⁸ Again, anecdotal evidence reveals that Asian Christians may have a penchant for according too much responsibility to the demonic. Some instances I have personally encountered include: attempts to cast out lying spirits when a child is found to be dishonest; women being accused of having the spirit of Jezebel based on perceived controlling personalities, among other examples. Such instances illustrate the tendency for some Asian believers to “demonise” every negative experience and therefore risk downplaying the importance of discipleship and spiritual formation.

Lastly, the AG position paper details the conflict that believers may encounter with demons, which Dr Brown has extensively covered in her presentation. Developing a clear

¹⁵ Brown, “Harmful Spirits,” 18-19.

¹⁶ Brown, “Harmful Spirits,” 19.

¹⁷ Assemblies of God, “Position Paper On Spiritual Warfare and the Believer.”

¹⁸ Brown, “Harmful Spirits,” 12.

understanding of the various sources of opposition in our lives safeguards us from becoming spiritual hypochondriacs—constantly suspicious of the presence of demons within us or others—and equips us to genuinely discern the nature of opposition that we are facing.

Implications for the Mission of Asian Pentecostal Churches

In the pluralistic and multi-religious context of Asia, our fear of the demonic may greatly hamper our outreach and missional efforts. Dr Brown wisely advises that Christians who live in religiously diverse societies must discern how we can practise the freedom from bondage while remaining sensitive to other religions, and we must avoid “demonising people,” and I would add, other religions.¹⁹ In his book *Discerning the Spirits*, Dr Amos Yong challenges Pentecostals to be open to learn more about the religions from the Spirit, as the Spirit is also at work in the world of religions, but we must wisely discern the divine from the demonic in the religions.²⁰ However, a fear of the demonic renders this impossible.

Consider this example: one of our mission teams from City Harvest Church went to a closed country to conduct an outreach among the unreached people groups, but the only available venue in the village was a Buddhist temple, which was kindly offered by the village chief for their activities. Our team conducted services in the temple and shared the gospel with the villagers and the children there. Yet many Christians would hesitate even to step into a Buddhist temple because they fear spiritual contamination or assume that doing so would expose them to demonic influence, let alone proclaim the gospel there. However, only when we

¹⁹ Brown, “Harmful Spirits,” 16.

²⁰ Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirits: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 312.

overcome our fear of the demonic can we be truly free to engage people of other faiths in the mission of Christ with confidence, discernment, and love.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dr Brown has compellingly argued the case for deliverance ministry in our churches. While I affirm her position, I posit that a robust theological framework is essential for cultivating a healthy deliverance ministry in Asian Pentecostal churches, given the context of our spirituality. The length of this response limits the extent to which I can address controversial practices in our contexts, but I cannot overstate the danger of superstition and excesses which can take us back from freedom to fear. Neglecting these dangers may result in an undermining of the freedom we have in Christ and I assert that our churches must take these issues seriously.

In this response, I have also outlined three main areas that churches and leaders should consider: our biblical worldview of the demonic, practices concerning the demonic, and discerning the sources of evil and opposition in our lives. In addition, Dr Brown has highlighted the challenges that Asian theologians may face in discerning culture and the spirit world.²¹ My hope is that these suggestions would provide a theological foundation for Asian Pentecostal churches to navigate through this culturally complex terrain. Amidst the challenges, I agree with Dr Brown that Pentecostals in Asia, especially us in Singapore, have a unique opportunity to model deliverance for the global church and to demonstrate the freedom that Christ has purchased for us.

²¹ Brown, "Harmful Spirits," 15.