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# Faulty Thinking: Separating the Spiritual and the Physical - Chapter 4 of "Counseling and the Demonic"

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### **FAULTY THINKING: SEPARATING THE SPIRITUAL AND THE PHYSICAL**

Satan is a wily adversary who approaches us where we are most vulnerable. If we are to be effective in combating him, we must avoid two common contemporary errors. The first is to spiritualize such issues as mental disorders, ignoring the physical aspects. The second is to materialize the problem, thus ignoring its spiritual dimensions. Each of these approaches is fundamentally reductionistic. Each contains an element of truth, yet both deny a significant aspect of reality as well. To adequately deal with the problem of the demonic we must recognize and steer clear of both of these errors.<sup>1</sup>

In the material which follows we will consider dualism, the concept of causality and its relationship to divine action,

materialism as a worldview—and Satan’s tactics, and the influence of adaptation on our awareness of satanic influence. We will also discuss the existence of two spiritual kingdoms, the role of sin in the world and the Fall, personal sinfulness, and Satan’s involvement in this process. And we will briefly address the nature of persons.

### DUALISM

A basic philosophical perspective within our culture is dualism, the view that reality is divided into two entities, the material and the spiritual. This view has been strongly influenced by Plato, the early Greek philosopher.

Briefly, Plato’s view was that there are two worlds, the material world in which we live, and the rational world of ideas. For Plato, the material world was but a shadow of the rational world; to him the world of ideas was far more real than the material realm.<sup>2</sup>

In contemporary American thought, we see at least two viewpoints that are outgrowths of Platonic idealism. In one, matter is believed to be the only form of existence; reason is viewed as an epiphenomenon, something that occurs only as an extension of the material essence and that cannot exist without the material. This view, common among atheists and agnostics, involves materialistic reductionism, and often is referred to simply as materialism.

The second version is more common among Christians, in part as a reaction to materialism. It is the view that the immaterial is primary and the material is illusory. Many of us are influenced to some degree by this view, largely at an unconscious level.

Integral to this perspective, in the form held by some Christians, is belief in a temporal body that is inhabited by an immortal soul. This notion of an immortal soul is very close to that of Plato. It suggests that the human soul possesses the inherent capacity for eternal existence rather than depending upon God’s action to grant eternal life. It also fails to recognize that in heaven believers will have physical bodies. No common terminology has developed to refer to the view underlying the notion of the immortality of the soul in Christian circles; we will

call it spiritual reductionism since the simpler expression, spiritualism, has a common usage that is quite distinct. Ironically, spiritual reductionism also has strong parallels in the Eastern mystical traditions. The biblical view of man, as we shall see, involves both spiritual and material elements.<sup>3</sup>

Both materialism and spiritual reductionism are attempts to resolve the dilemma posed by Platonic mind-body dualism. Different forms of dualism, and especially the tendencies toward materialism and spiritualistic reductionism as a reaction to it, lie at the root of many of the thorny theological issues separating Christians. The tendency to adopt material or spiritual reductionism as a reaction to dualism is also central to the problems which we must address in order to understand clearly the relationship between mental disorders and demonic influence. Thus, an understanding of the ways in which we are affected, often unconsciously, by these forms of thought is vital to resolving the question of how to counsel those who are influenced by Satan and his demonic agents.<sup>4</sup>

#### CAUSALITY: GOD AND CREATION

Many of us have heard the arguments. They focus on whether a particular event was the result of natural processes or divine intervention. Aunt Jane was involved in a serious car accident in which she sustained severe head injuries, leaving her in a deep coma. The doctor proposed brain surgery, but the prognosis was guarded; the operation was extremely risky. Further, the doctor predicted that even if Aunt Jane survived she would be unable to function normally. With the family's consent the doctor operated. Her family, friends, and church congregation prayed fervently.

A few days later Jane showed dramatic improvement. She regained consciousness and the ability to communicate, and was able to respond to peripheral stimulation. Gradually she regained the use of her limbs.

Perhaps you can imagine the debate; you may have participated in it. The family insisted that God had miraculously healed Jane. Skeptics argued that it was the surgeon's delicate, highly developed skills which accounted for her healing. How would you answer?

R. J. Ritzema, in a study of causal attribution, presents some intriguing data which highlights this question. Ritzema asked people to account for unpleasant events; they were to choose from explanations in terms of naturalistic factors or explanations in terms of God's intervention. He found that where naturalistic reasons could be found, people tended to use those reasons to account for events. When no natural reasons were available, supernatural ones were suggested. His findings suggest that naturalistic and supernaturalistic accounts are viewed as competing alternatives.<sup>5</sup>

It is noteworthy that Ritzema apparently did not provide the opportunity to respond with an explanation that included *both* God's action and natural processes. Yet it is precisely such a response that appears to be most consistent with Scripture.

We must begin with the recognition that God created our world, including all of its laws and processes (Gen. 1, 2; John 1:3; Col. 1:16). Moreover, God sustains the world in existence continuously by his mighty power (see Hebrews 1:2-4 and Colossians 1:15-19; God not only created all things, but all things depend moment by moment on his sustaining power). Thus, we must recognize that no event, even a "natural one," can occur without God's personal involvement.

God's involvement may be direct and personal, as in creating the heavens and the earth, or in speaking to Moses out of the burning bush. It may also be indirect, as in sending the rain and snow from heaven to water the earth, with the result of providing seed to the sower and bread to the eater (see Isa. 55:10; Matt. 5:45). We must recognize that God is involved regardless of the specific method he employs. God's sovereignty over the earth is so complete that not a sparrow falls to the ground without his knowledge and involvement (Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 12:6-7). Even the hairs of our heads do not escape his notice. Everything that lives, breathes, moves, and exists in all of creation does so only because God wills and enables it to do so. God is involved in every event in creation!

To return to Aunt Jane, it poses a false dichotomy, then, to ask whether God healed her or she recovered because of the surgery. God healed her. This is equally true whether God used

the skill of the surgeon, the “miracles” of anesthesia and pain medication, and the remarkable recuperative powers of the human body—which God made to accomplish this end—or whether he used an extraordinary and miraculous process. The appropriate question is not whether God healed Jane, but how he did it.

This tendency to view God and natural causes as competing explanations for events in our world is an outgrowth of dualistic thinking. A related outgrowth of dualism is the custom of referring to our world as “nature.” While often not a conscious process, referring to our universe as nature subtly suggests that it just “naturally” occurred rather than coming from divine origins. James Houston has suggested that the word *nature* is alien to a biblical worldview.<sup>6</sup> The Bible refers to our world as “creation.”<sup>7</sup>

Distinguishing between creation and nature may seem like hair-splitting. However, it becomes clear on closer reflection that this seemingly superficial distinction has profound and far-reaching implications for us.

Use of the term *nature* suggests that the world came into being through an impersonal process. Thus, the tendency to think and talk of nature subtly biases our thinking toward the dualistic view of events which we have just discussed. By contrast, the word *creation* suggests that God is at work even in everyday events. Thinking of our world as creation calls to mind the existence of a Creator and the act of creation. This is consistent with the teaching of Scripture that God created our world and that he sustains it in its operation moment to moment.

### MATERIALISM AND SATAN'S TACTICS

We have already noted that one of the problems we must face in understanding the role of the demonic in mental illness is our tendency to view the world in a dualistic way, and the accompanying tendency to simplify this duality by adopting either materialism or spiritualistic reductionism. Both of these approaches are reductionistic, and, to the degree that they are adopted, reflect a distortion of reality.

Perhaps partly in response to the rampant materialism in our contemporary Western culture, Christians have commonly chosen to emphasize the spiritual dimension. In some respects this view is reactionary. Unfortunately, there are many negative ramifications to this almost exclusively spiritualistic focus. One is the tendency to regard all that is spiritual as God's responsibility. This results in looking to God to make us holy apart from our action rather than recognizing that as co-laborers we are to work out our own salvation (sanctification) even as God works in us toward that end.

A second negative ramification of spiritualistic reductionism is the contemporary tendency to find demons in every form of human evil from anger to zoophilia. The key problem with this view is that it implicitly denies that the material order has any significance. Thus mental disorders tend to be viewed exclusively in spiritual terms. It also minimizes or denies that humans bear the marks of the Fall, and consequently have an inherent propensity toward sin. This approach subtly undermines any personal responsibility for the individual's present condition, and implies that there is little the person can do to change his or her condition except petition God to act miraculously, outside the ongoing processes which sustain this world.

In the interest of maintaining a balanced perspective, it is important to remember that those who doubt the existence of demons, or perhaps believe that they are simply irrelevant, commit the opposite error of materialistic reductionism. This view denies the reality that we are engaged in a war involving the spiritual forces of darkness and light.<sup>8</sup>

#### ADAPTATION AND AWARENESS OF SATANIC INFLUENCE

Another problem is the fact that we tend to become insensitive to Satan's most prevalent forms of activity within our culture. It is much easier to recognize satanic activity in cultures which are radically different from ours because we have not become adapted to the point that we are unable to detect them. We are easily lulled into complacency by the familiar. Satan is able to act more freely, without as much fear of detection, when his activities are consistent with our worldviews.

Modern information-processing theorists consider adaptation a basic function of cognitive processing. According to this view, our nervous system is designed in such a way that it responds to changes in stimulus events. When a new stimulus event occurs we respond to it. Similarly, if a stimulus event terminates, we respond to this change as well. However, in the presence of a constant stimulus we soon cease to respond; it's almost as if the stimulus weren't there. Put differently, if a stimulus continues long enough we come to ignore it. Even a fire alarm, if it sounds continuously, soon ceases to produce a response.

The tendency to respond to changes in stimulus events is illustrated by the reaction of persons who have grown accustomed to the 2:15 A.M. train passing nightly on the tracks 150 yards from their home. Over time they learn to sleep through this nightly occurrence, never even knowing that it happens. Then, when the schedule changes, they awaken with a start at 2:15 A.M., certain that something is wrong.

Satan's familiar tactics are rather like the passage of that train. We become so accustomed to them we do not even notice. But when we observe an unfamiliar pattern, perhaps from a different culture, it prompts our notice. Going to another country where occult practices are common, we are confronted with a pattern which is unfamiliar and immediately smacks of evil. I'm told by people who come from other cultures that they likewise find some aspects of evil in our society quite blatant, though they have typically become unaware of the patterns of evil in their own cultures.

I believe that overt demonic influence is an exception, not a customary mode of Satan's activity in our contemporary society. Satan's normal approach is much more subtle. He most often acts in ways that are consistent with the widespread naturalism and materialistic reductionism of contemporary Western thinking. By approaching those who hold materialistic worldviews in ways consistent with those views, Satan avoids drawing attention toward his activities and involvement. In a culture such as ours which views everything in naturalistic terms and denies the reality of the spiritual, this approach is apparently much more effective for accomplishing his ungodly objectives than the more open and direct approach of overt demonic influence.

## TWO KINGDOMS

From a spiritual perspective we may think of each person as belonging to one of two kingdoms, the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of “the god of this world,” Satan (2 Cor. 4:4).

In his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus suggested the need to be born again. Nicodemus was perplexed. Jesus explained that as a natural man, Nicodemus was born into sin. As a direct consequence, Jesus went on, Nicodemus was “condemned already” because he was not involved in a believing, saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus’ comments make it clear that there are only two possibilities: either we have been condemned already or we have entered into a saving relationship with God (John 3:1–18). In this and other contexts Jesus declares that anyone who is not with him is against him (see Matt. 12:30; Mark 9:39–40; Luke 9:49–50; 11:14–23).

The thesis of two kingdoms is developed further in Paul’s discussion of attitudes regarding meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:1–13). Paul suggests that idols themselves are of no account; thus eating meat sacrificed to idols is, of itself, not a problem. However, some believers, those referred to as “weaker brethren,” because of their past experience with the worship of idols, do not know this fully; Paul describes this condition by noting that their conscience is weak. When Paul returns to this discussion, however, he takes it one step further. He notes that “the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons . . .” (1 Cor. 10:20). This further underscores the truth that there are only two spiritual kingdoms in this world, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

It is no accident that Satan is referred to as the god of this age. It is suggested here that all false worship is ultimately worship of Satan, though often this is unwittingly so on the part of the worshiper.

In chapter 6 of Romans Paul addresses this issue somewhat differently. He describes the person in a fallen condition as a slave to sin. Through identification with Christ in the process of salvation and union with him we become dead to sin and free from this slavery. What is striking is that Paul then exhorts us to reckon (or consider) ourselves as dead to sin and alive to

righteousness. Then we are to present ourselves to God as “weapons” of righteousness. Paul sums up this argument with the stark contrast:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Rom. 6:16–18)

As Paul puts it, the choice is not slavery or freedom. Rather, we must choose to whom we will become enslaved: God or Satan. Moreover, we begin life enslaved to Satan. In confronting the Pharisees, Jesus approached the question of two kingdoms in a slightly different way; he said of them: “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.” The text makes it clear that Jesus was saying that the Pharisees had the same nature or essential character as Satan. By contrast, when one receives Christ he or she becomes a new creature because God’s seed is in him or her (see 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 John 3:1–2, 9).

According to these passages, all who are outside of the household of faith are by their very nature oriented to doing Satan’s will. Furthermore, they are unable to do God’s will (Heb. 11:6). Such individuals are influenced by Satan at their very core. In most instances no overt demonic influence is manifested in their lives. Yet Satan’s influence flows from their innermost being, from their very hearts.

The notion of two kingdoms suggests that all unbelievers are members of Satan’s kingdom. As members of his kingdom, they also are under his influence whether or not they recognize it. Thus we must conclude that all unbelievers are under satanic influence.

The notion of two kingdoms gains further support in Colossians when Paul describes the process of salvation in terms of a change of kingdoms:

For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.

(Col. 1:13–14)

It is important to recognize, however, that the Christian is not removed from the exposure to satanic influence. The struggle with sin and Satan continues throughout this earthly life.

Numerous biblical passages, such as those telling of Eve, Judas, Jesus himself, Peter, and others further underscore the fact that Satan's kingdom is powerful and pervasive, affecting even the believer.

*Eve and Satan* When Satan approached Eve in the Garden of Eden, he clearly influenced her decision to disobey God by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was accomplished through dialogue, rather than through physical control such as we customarily associate with demonic influence. Nonetheless, the evidence that Eve was influenced by Satan is compelling (see Gen. 3).

*Judas* Judas was the “treasurer” for the disciples and Jesus; he kept the moneybag. In this office he was apparently less than scrupulously honest (see John 12:3–6). Doubtless, in this transgression Judas was influenced by Satan to some degree.

At the time of the Last Supper we are told that the devil had put it into Judas' heart to betray Jesus (John 13:2). Just prior to the betrayal “Satan entered into Judas” (Luke 22:1–3ff.; John 13:27). “Entered” means, literally or figuratively, to enter, or to come in. Regardless of how one interprets the expression “entered into,” it is clear that Judas was under the influence of Satan at the time of the betrayal.

*Jesus* Even Jesus was not exempt from the advances of Satan. At the beginning of his preparation for earthly ministry, Jesus went away into the desert and fasted for forty days and nights. At the end of this period Satan came to him, apparently in a physical presence, and tempted him to sin in three distinct ways. He challenged Jesus to change stones into bread, to jump off the temple roof and demand that God protect him, and to attempt to gain access to all the kingdoms of the world and their attendant glory prematurely.

These temptations appear to address the three major areas of potential for human sin, named in 1 John 2:16–18: the lust of the flesh (food needed for bodily sustenance after prolonged fasting), the lust of the eyes (earthly kingdoms), and the pride of life (an egotistical attempt to compel God’s protection). No one would describe this experience as one of demon possession. Jesus did not succumb, but it is clear that Satan was active in seeking to influence him.

*Peter* In the life of Peter two episodes are recorded in which he was influenced by Satan. When Jesus first began to teach his disciples about the fact that he must suffer and die, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him, saying this should never happen to him. At that time Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (Matt. 16:23; cp. Mark 8:30–33). Ryrie notes, “Peter was used by Satan to try to dissuade Jesus from going to the cross.”<sup>9</sup> It seems that Satan’s goal on these occasions was to influence Christ through Peter.

On the evening of the crucifixion, after dinner and just before going out to the Mount of Olives, the disciples fell into a discussion of who among them was the greatest (see Luke 22:24ff.). Jesus responded to this discussion, turning to Peter and telling him: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). Jesus then went on to warn Peter that he would deny Jesus three times before the cock crowed. In this interaction it appears that Jesus gave permission to Satan to have extensive influence over Peter, limited by Jesus’ prayer that God would protect Peter’s faith.

Two other events in Peter’s life may evidence the activity of Satan or demons in influencing his conduct. First, when Jesus was transfigured in his presence, Peter proposed that they build tabernacles for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Had this been done, it could have distracted Jesus from his earthly mission. Second, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter began to fight against them with a sword. Again, Peter’s action was inconsistent with God’s plan, and may have been the result of evil influence.

Although we do not have adequate space to develop the accounts (in some instances less detail is provided), many other persons in Scripture clearly were under satanic influence. Among these were Ahab and Jezebel, Pharoah and his magicians, Cain, the astrologers and Chaldeans of Babylon, and King Darius.

### THE FALL, AND SIN IN THE WORLD

We have examined the role of Satan at some length. While it is not the purpose of our discussion to dwell here on the Fall and consequent entrance of sin into our world, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that Adam and Eve set in motion a sequence of events with far-reaching implications. For our purposes, two of these need to be emphasized: first, the fact that spiritual death or separation from God, together with the predisposition to personal sin, became the lot of all mankind; second, all of creation was dramatically altered.

#### Personal Sinfulness

Because of the Fall, sin and death became the lot of all mankind. It is hard to comprehend all of the implications of this simple fact. As Jay Adams notes, in the Genesis 3 account we immediately discover fear, shame, deception, and blame-shifting.<sup>10</sup>

The wages of sin is death, we are told (Rom. 3:23). Death is multifaceted: immediate separation from God, eventual physical death, and potentially the “second death,” or eternal separation from God.<sup>11</sup>

Because of the transgression of Adam and Eve, the predisposition to personal sinfulness is built into each of us. As we shall see later, this fact contributes to the tendency to experience mental disorders and demonic influence.

#### The Sin of Others

The Fall also resulted in the sinfulness of others; each person experiences the unpleasantness of being sinned against. Our parents are imperfect, as are our brothers and sisters, friends, spouses, and children. The fact that we are the victims of sin

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further contributes to the problems of mental disorders and demonic influence.

### **Sin in the World**

Beyond the effects of personal sin and the sins of others, the entrance of sin into our world had profound effects on all of Creation. We are told that “the whole creation groans and suffers” waiting to be set free with the children of God (Rom. 8:18–23). It is hard to grasp all of the implications of this cataclysmic change. It appears that predation, one animal killing another for food, is a result of the Fall. Also, disease, natural disaster, and similar things are all effects of the Fall; mental disorders are another of the many facets of this groaning and suffering. Although it is appealing to attribute all mental disorders to personal sin, we must recognize that the profound disturbance of the Fall makes matters far more complicated. Chapters 5 and 6 further develop this thinking.

#### **SATAN’S ROLE IN THE SEPARATION OF THE SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL**

The tendency toward dualistic thinking, and the accompanying tendencies toward materialism and spiritual reductionism are not merely human misconceptions. We must also understand that they are among the many consequences of spiritual warfare. Though not really quite so simple, in one sense all such misconceptions are the result of a *diabolical* plot. Full, true worship of God is precluded by either form of reductionism.

Carried to its logical conclusion, materialism denies the very existence of God. It may seem less readily apparent, but spiritual reductionism is no less atheistic; while acknowledging God in a mystical, spiritualistic way, it denies the full physical, daily reality of his majestic, creative, and redemptive acts. It denies that God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14), and that God’s plan includes the redemption and transformation of our physical bodies.

Because naturalistic materialism is so widespread in our culture, it seems not at all surprising that Satan tends to present himself in ways consistent with this worldview so as not

to draw attention to himself. To put himself in the spotlight would draw attention to the spiritual realm, thus inevitably also drawing attention to the reality of God. For those who discount God, this might direct their attention toward him. For those who already believe in God, such overt manifestation would alert them to seek God's resources for defense against spiritual attack.

Does it not make sense that Satan's preferred mode of action is to use more natural means, perhaps such activities as alcohol and drug abuse, sexual obsessions, gambling, preoccupation with wealth, "things," or status, rather than overt demonization? These are no less enslaving, no less damaging, and no less forms of satanic influence because they are not openly "spiritual."

### THE NATURE OF PERSONS

Although space cannot be devoted to developing the subject in detail, a few comments about the nature of persons are essential at this point.

Humans are created beings, made in the image of God, and fallen. We are told that God created Adam out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into him the breath of life. Persons were created both male and female. Though it is subject to some disagreement among scholars, the image of God suggests that persons are unique in creation as spiritual, mental, moral and social beings. After his creation, God gave humans dominion over the earth. Taken together, the facts of (1) the image of God and (2) dominion give humans a dignity of being and breadth of responsibility accorded to no other creature.

Initially, Adam and Eve existed in untested holiness. However, they transgressed God's command. As a result, sin and death passed on all mankind. This death has three aspects: spiritual, physical, and eternal. The salvation provided in Jesus Christ involves restoration of spiritual life and escape from eternal death into eternal life. However, the judgment of physical death continues to be carried out on all persons. This process, too, is reversed in the re-creation of individuals at the resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

The existence of mental disorders, indeed of all natural evil, can be traced to the fact of sin. As we shall see, mental disorders involve elements of sin in the world, the sin of others, and personal sin.

Persons are units or wholes. For analytic purposes it is helpful to view persons as composed of parts: material and spiritual, or body and soul, in the common dichotomous view; body, mind, and soul in the trichotomous view. One of the effects of dualistic thinking is the tendency to view the eternal state as one of eternal spiritual existence, in the absence of the material aspects of our beings.<sup>13</sup> However, it is clear in Scripture that we will be whole beings, comprised of spiritual and physical dimensions in heaven (see 1 Corinthians 15:12–21, 39–58; 2 Cor. 5:1–5; cp. John 14:1–3). Thus, we must affirm again that humans are whole beings comprised of material and spiritual; we are psychospiritual and material unities.

#### SUMMARY

To fully grasp the issues involved in satanic and demonic influence it is important to understand the subtle and pervasive effects of dualism on contemporary thought. Dualism is the tendency to view reality as composed of two parts, material and spiritual, rather than as a unified whole with two inseparable aspects.

Because of dualistic thinking we tend to view spiritual and natural explanations of events such as healings as competing explanations rather than as compatible explanations at different levels of analysis. Similarly, we tend to see Satan and demons as active only in overt “spiritualistic” phenomena which take the form of influence and “possession,” discounting satanic involvement in “natural” events such as a traffic accident.

Spiritually, there are only two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and Satan’s kingdom. Each person belongs to one of these, as is illustrated by several biblical accounts. Satan constantly wars against God and those who choose to enter into his kingdom.

Satan is a wily warrior who uses those stratagems that most effectively accomplish his ends. Thus he adapts his approaches to fit within a given culture’s prevailing worldview; in this way we become adapted to his approaches and they escape detection—and thus his designs are more effective. Toward this end, Satan fosters and encourages dualistic thinking. Accordingly, in contemporary Western culture Satan’s approaches fit within a naturalistic, materialistic framework to escape our notice.