

## DEMON POSSESSION

### I. Introduction

There are many reasons why the subject of demon possession is a relevant subject of interest among Christians. Some of these are:

- A. The popularity of eastern mysticism and religions, i.e. the New Age Craze.
- B. The current romantic view of Native American Indian culture and their animistic religion. (No this is not politically correct!)
- C. The apparent increase in satanic ritual abuse victims has prompted Christian counselors to question the line of demarcation between mental and spiritual etiologies.
- D. A proliferation of deliverance ministries has increased the debate among evangelicals about definitions, methods, etc.
- E. The evangelical presses are cranking out a high volume of literature on the subject of demonology both in fictional and non-fictional form. The works of Frank Peretti are bestsellers. We are now hearing of *dark angels*, *territorial demons*, *generational curses*, *transference of spirits*, and *warring in the heavenlies*.

### II. The Problems

- A. The problem of definition. Exactly what is demon possession? What are its symptoms?
- B. The mind-body problem. How can that which is spiritual influence or control that which is physical? Spirits are non-spatial; how can they inhabit that which is physical without violating the laws of physics? The Holy Spirit is likewise said to indwell our bodies which is described as a temple (I Cor. 6:19). (This is a tough philosophical issue and will not be covered in this outline. For a more thorough analysis of this problem ask for CIM's paper on *The Mind-Body Problem*.)
- C. Does demon possession occur today?

- D. Can Christians be possessed by demons?
- E. How can we discern the difference between so-called symptoms of possession and mental illness?
- F. How can possession be distinguished from oppression or other forms of demonic influence?
- G. Can and should Christians attempt to cast out demons?

### III. Overview of Biblical Demonology

- A. Their origin. The most satisfying view is that they are fallen angels. Satan is their Prince (Matt. 12:24). See also Rev. 12:4.
- B. Their personality. The Bible uses personal pronouns and assigns to them the attributes of personality, i.e. they have intellect, etc. Along with the Greek word for demons we find the following descriptive adjectives: *unclean, evil, more evil, deaf, dumb, or mute, spirits of infirmity, and divination.*
- C. Their primary work. As Satan's subjects they carry out his work in the world. In general, their work seems to be one of temptation and deceit. I Cor. 14:29; I Tim. 4:1. More Specifically, they seek to torture the victims they possess.
- D. Their destiny. Matt. 25:41. Eternal punishment in Hell.

### IV. Relevant Biblical References to Demon Possession

(For a complete list of Scripture references for demonology see Appendix B in Philpot's book listed in the bibliography)

- A. Old Testament: Lev. 20:27; I Sam. 16:14; 18:10; 28:7ff.
- B. New Testament: Matt. 4:24; 7:22; 8:16,28ff.; 9:32ff.; 10:8; 11:18; 12:22ff.; 12:43 ff.; 15:22; 17:14ff. Mark 1:24,26,32,34,39; 3:15,22; 5:2ff; 6:13; 9:38; 7:26,29,30; 16:9,17. Luke 4:33,35,41; 7:33; 8:2,27ff; 9:1,42,49; 10:17; 11:14,15,18,19,20; 13:32. John 7:20; 8:48,49,52; 10:20,21. Acts 8:7; 16:16; 19:12,13. I Cor. 10:20,21. I Tim. 4:1

## V. Defining Demon Possession

A. The Problem: The Bible does not give an all inclusive definition. All we can know is what we induce from a careful study of all biblical references. The picture presented in the NT is that the people readily recognized demon possession, and was apparently recognizable even by pagans (as in the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Matt. 15).

B. The Biblical words: Three words are used:

(Note: The actual phrase "demon Possession" is not used in the Bible. It first appears in Josephus near the end of the First Century.)

1. *daimonion exon* (16 times) *one having a demon*. The word has the idea of one *bearing a demon within oneself* with resultant physical and mental suffering.
2. *daimonizomai* (13 times) *to be demonized*. It has the idea of control, influence, or dominion over the victim, and it is a control that apparently cannot be resisted by the person being demonized.
3. *Ochloumenous*: *one tormented by evil (unclean) spirits*. It is used only in Acts 5:16. A root of the word is used in Luke 6:18 *Those troubled by evil spirits*. It is also used in Greek literature. The emphasis in this word seems to be on the torture wrought by the evil spirit.

C. Definition:

1. In some way that we cannot totally explain, a demon (or demons) possesses, inhabits, or controls a person's body and faculties against the person's will for its purpose of doing its will in the material world, and to destroy and torment its host physically, mentally, and spiritually.
2. Unger, an authority on demonology, says: *The chief characteristic of demon possession is the automatic projection of a new personality in the victim, the inhabiting demon using the body of the possessed individual as a vehicle for his own thought, words and acts*. (See ***Demons in the World Today***, pp.102ff.).
3. Demon possession should not be confused with demon influence. However, the original word *daimonizomai* may refer to a variety or

degrees of demonical activity. Demon possession itself may appear in degrees of severity. Being possessed by more than one demon implies a deeper level of possession. Some demons may also be more powerful than others.

## VI. Symptoms of Demon Possession

(The following symptoms are more properly the symptoms of being demonized in keeping with the definition of the original.)

### A. Biblical Symptoms

1. Physical: blindness (Matt. 12:22-29), dumbness (Matt.9:32), a crippled woman (Lk. 13:11-16). While we can't be dogmatic, it may be that some of these symptoms were psychosomatic, meaning that there was no organic or material cause. We also would not rule out the possibility that demons could cause illnesses which would otherwise be diagnosed as being caused by chemical imbalances or from such sources as bacteria or viruses.
2. Supernatural. Mark 1:24. The demon knew Christ's true identity. The same demon threw his subject to the ground. See also the account in Matt. 8 where the victim had extra-ordinary strength and was made to break chains, etc. In Acts 16, we have an account of a girl with apparent psychic ability.
3. Antisocial behavior. Self-inflicted wounds, nakedness, screaming.
4. Mental or emotional: depression, mental illness. The boy in Matt. 17:15ff. is described in the original text as being *moonstruck* or literally insane. The symptoms were so like epilepsy some english translations translate it epilepsy. When Jesus commanded the demon to leave, the boy went into convulsions apparently caused by the demon.
5. Note: An observation from the New Testament data: demon Possession is almost always linked to physical and mental symptoms rather than causing the victim to perform sinful deeds.

### B. The Catholic Church recognizes 4 characteristics of demon possession:

1. Knowledge of a language previously unknown by the victim.

2. Knowledge of hidden or secret things.
  3. Demonstration of superhuman strength.
  4. An aversion to the things of God.
- C. It should be noted that not all of the symptoms need to be present for it to be demon possession. In Luke 13: a demon kept a woman in a crippled condition for 18 years. She apparently had none of the other symptoms. In the strict sense of the term, she also may not have actually been possessed by the demon, but under its bondage.
- D. Missionaries, ministers, and those involved in deliverance ministries, report the same symptoms appearing in demon possessed people today.

## VII. Mental Illness and Demon Possession: The Problem of Distinctives

- A. This is of course, one of the major difficulties. The Bible clearly recognizes that not all illness is attributable to demons. Matt. 4:23 ff. says Jesus healed all diseases *and* delivered those possessed of demons.
- B. The above-mentioned symptoms (in Part VI.) have also been listed as being characteristics of certain types of mental illness which are more or less treatable by modern medicine. The question is: how can we discern when a condition is caused by demonic control, or, normal environmental or physical causes? Before we discuss this, it might be helpful to review some aspects of the Christian worldview with regard to the nature of man and the cause of disease:
1. The nature of man
    - a. There are two extremes to avoid.
      - (1) The Materialist or naturalist view says man is *just* a complicated electro-chemical machine. This is, of course the prevailing view in academia and much of modern psychiatry. This view denies the supernatural or spiritual aspect of man.
      - (2) The Spiritual view. This view tends to see a spiritual cause behind *all* problems including physical disease, i.e. sickness is due to sin. Evil in this view is attributable to satan and his demons

(The devils made me do it!). This view sees the supernatural in everything.

- (3) A Biblical view: Man is a psycho-spiritual-physical unity. It avoids the reductionism of the two preceding views. The important word here is *unity*. Physicians know that a person's will to live affects their prognosis for recovery. They also know that extreme anxiety may affect a person's immune system leaving them less resistant to disease.

## 2. The causes of illness according to a Biblical view of man

(Note: it is not entirely Christian to characterize illness as either physical or mental, although it is common for us to do so. Man is a unified being. Even if the symptoms of an illness are predominantly physical, the soul also suffers. If the soul is sick, there will also be physical consequences. In healing then, often a combination of spiritual and physical resources need to be employed, i.e. forgiveness, repentance, prayer, exercise, good diet, and medication.)

- a. A general cause: Sin resulting in the Fall has affected all creation.
- b. Specific physical causes: it could be genetic, or caused by micro-organisms such as virus and bacteria, or improper diet.
- c. Personal sin: it may have direct physical consequences as when harmful drugs are purposefully ingested, or the guilt of sin may cause psychosomatic responses. Note: some maladies may be the result of the sinful behavior of others!
- d. Satan and demons. See symptoms above in part IV.
- e. Illness may have its primary source in God as a means of discipline. See Nebuchadnezzar.

## C. Distinguishing Demon Possession from Mental illness. Or, what is demonic and what is pathological?

1. The General Diagnostic Problem: Since man is such a complex being, it may be impossible to ever understand the complete etiology of an illness. From a study of biblical revelation we can conclude that Satan and his

demons can cause a variety of symptoms (physical, mental, and spiritual). However, these same symptoms may be caused entirely apart from demons, or, it may be a combination of causes, natural and supernatural. There are primary and secondary causes, as well as a moral and volitional aspects to health and sickness, e.g. aids.

## 2. Specific diagnosis of Demon possession and mental illness.

(We realize the definition of mental illness is both difficult and controversial. It is not our purpose to get technical. We are mainly here referring to what are commonly called psychoses. Mental illness may be hard to define [like demon possession] but we usually know it when we see it! Some observations:

- a. In many cases it may be impossible to know *a priori* if symptoms are caused by demons. For example, an individual may have the symptoms of a certain form of mental illness which is treatable with medication. However, if the treatment does not result in improvement, and it is learned that the patient has had involvement in certain occultic activity, the symptoms *may have been* demonically caused.
- b. Missionaries report cases of demon possession on the mission field which often exhibit no symptoms that resemble those of mental illness. In other words, behavior is normal and rational. The possession, however, is obvious due to supernatural phenomena, opposition to the gospel, and the distinct presence of another personality.
- c. If a person comes to a counselor admitting that they are demon possessed it is likely they are not simply because the demons do not generally want their presence known.
- d. Demonic involvement should be looked at simultaneously along with the medical, mental, spiritual causes. Never underestimate the degree of human depravity! See Gal. 5:19-21; James 1:13.
- e. When a person has the normal symptoms of mental illness, but does not respond to the normal treatment of those symptoms, demonic involvement should be explored. Neil Anderson uses an inventory to check for possible occult involvement. See his book *The Bondage*

**Breaker.** Others ask questions concerning the deity of Christ and His shed blood to note the reactions. Demons believe in God and this knowledge makes them tremble (see James 2:19). According to missionaries and those experienced in dealing with demon possession, those possessed will evidence immediate negative reactions.

- f. *A posteriori.* If a person has the normal symptoms of a mental illness, yet does not respond to normal treatment, but does respond to the fervent prayer of righteous Christians, it is probably safe to conclude that demons were the source. We are here referring to a situation where the person genuinely repents and trusts in Christ, and where the symptoms do not return.

## VIII. Ministering to the Demon Possessed

- A. Christians do not have to fear demons. *Greater is He that is in you...* However, neither should they be taken lightly. One should have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the enemy.
- B. From our understanding of Scripture, there are no special gifts operative today such as *gifts of deliverance*, or *gifts of exorcism*, or even gifts of discernment (in the supernatural sense). Every believer is a priest and can pray for someone in bondage.
- C. When a case of demon-possession is *highly* suspected, we recommend the following:
1. The person needs to be confronted with the fact that their state is a result of their willful decision to yield to the evil spirits rather than to their Creator-God.
  2. The person must be enjoined to repent of the sin of worshipping false gods and turn to Christ for forgiveness and salvation. Note: in some cases, due to the severity of the demonic attack it may be impossible to share the gospel. See the next step.
  3. The Prayer of Faith: *The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.* James 5:16. (For the right kind of faith see I Cor. 13:2). Pray that the afflicted will be convicted of sin (his or hers), righteousness (Christ's), and judgement (its certainty) (see John 16:5-11). Pray that the

Lord Jesus, to whom all authority is given, will release this person from the bondage of the demon(s). It is recommended that you not be alone but in the company of other believers who will pray with you. It is also recommended by some that you pray out loud. Demons cannot read our thoughts.

4. The Scripture is an offensive weapon (Eph. 6:17) Read aloud passages which tell of Satan's defeat.
- D. We do not recommend carrying on a dialogue with evil spirits. Instead, insist (in the name of Christ) that they shut up.
  - E. When the person is freed the emptiness must be filled by Christ or the demons will eventually return, making the person's state worse than it originally was. Matt. 12:43ff.

#### IX. How People become Possessed

Perhaps the most profound thing we will say in this outline is that *people become demon possessed when they break the First Commandment: Thou shalt have no other gods before me*. This is why the sin of idolatry was so serious in the OT (see Deut. 32:17 and in the NT, I Cor. 10:20,21). The images themselves were nothing; it was the demons behind them. Demon possession is less common in cultures which are pervasively Christian. Where demons (spirits) are worshiped, as in Southeast Asia, demon possession is common. As our own society becomes more pagan we can expect to see its frequency increase.

#### X. Final Observations and Concerns

- A. It is very dangerous to develop a doctrine of demonology from experience. See Jn.8:44 . When demons speak they lie.
- B. What about Christians? Can they be demon possessed? We have no doubt that *professing* Christians can be possessed. Eighty-five percent of the population in the U.S. claims to be Christian. It is difficult to believe that a person's body can be occupied simultaneously both by the Holy Spirit and a foul spirit. When I Cor. says *our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit* it uses the Greek word *naos*, the same word used for the Holy of Holies in the OT. *We find no warrant from Scripture for the belief that a true, regenerate Christian can be demon possessed*. That a true Christian can be influenced, harrassed, be oppressed, or be in bondage to demons there can be little doubt, otherwise the admonition to

put on the whole armor of God would make little sense.

- C. I John 4:1ff. This passage does not have anything to do with testing demons by addressing them. Rather, John is warning believers about being gullible to false prophets whose doctrine is heretical.

## XI. Bibliography

- A. The most useful bibliography for Pastors and counselors:

*Counseling and the Demonic* by Rodger K. Bufford may be the overall most helpful for the professional counselor. While we do not endorse everything in the following, they are exhaustive and helpful: *The Bondage Breaker* by Neil Anderson, *Demons in the World Today*, by Merrill F. Unger, *Demons: A Biblically Based Perspective* by Alex Konya, and *Demon Possession*, a symposium edited by John Warwick Montgomery. We would single out *Miracles, Demons and Spiritual Warfare*, by Edward N. Gross for its sound doctrinal treatment.

We also found the following journal articles helpful:

Walter C. Johnson. *Demon Possession and Mental Illness*, *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*. (Sept. 1982), 149-154.

William Berends. *The Biblical Criteria for Demon-Possession*, *Westminster Journal*. XXXVII number 3 (Spring 1975), 342-365.

- B. General Bibliography

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- Montgomery, John Warwick. ed. ***Demon Possession.***
- Nevius, John L. ***Demon Possession.***
- Penn-Lewis, Jessie. ***War on the Saints.***
- Philpott, Kent. ***A Manual of Demonology and the Occult.*** (See his excellent bibliography.)
- Unger, Merrill F. ***Biblical Demonology.***
- Unger, Merrill F. ***Demons in the World Today.***
- Unger, Merrill F. ***What Demons can do to Saints.***

*And though this world, with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us;  
We will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us:  
The Prince of Darkness grim, We tremble not for him; His rage we can  
endure, For Lo! his doom is sure, One little word shall fell him. M. Luther*