

Possession or Suggestion?

By Don Matzat

Jesus came into this world to defeat the works of the devil. How can it be that some Christian teachers and authors are claiming to cast demons out of Christians? What is really happening in these "deliverance" sessions? Jesus came into this world for the express purpose of destroying the works of the devil. John writes, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work (1 John 3: 8)."

The writer to the Hebrews declares, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - - that is, the devil - - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (2: 14)." Jesus defeated the devil and his host of demons. He bound Satan and plundered his house (Matthew 12: 29).

Even in the light of the victory of our Lord Jesus over the devil, there are some in the church today who believe that Christians can still be demonized or possessed by demons. They emphasize and conduct ministries of deliverance to Christians who are plagued by personal problems such as alcohol, lust, anger, worry, fear, etc. Such problems are often diagnosed as demonic in origin. The deliverance ministry includes "binding," rebuking, and casting out these demons from Christians.

This view is not coming from the weird fringes of evangelical or charismatic Christianity but is being promoted by some well-known and respected theologians including C. Fred Dickason, dean of Moody Bible Institute's theology department, C. Peter Wagner and Charles Kraft of Fuller Theological Seminary, Neil Anderson, professor of practical theology at Talbot Seminary, and John Wimber of the Vineyard Fellowships. These "authorities" have contributed numerous books on the subject of deliverance.

How do we deal with this question? Since Jesus defeated the devil and his host of demons, can Christians still be demonized or possessed by demons? Is the ministry of deliverance necessary for the sanctification of a Christian? What does the Bible say about the subject? How do we regard the experiences of those who claim to be casting out demons from Christians?

Two Important Points

Before dealing with this issue, there are two important points that must be kept in mind:

First, in the New Testament our Lord Jesus cast out demons from the people of his day. These were actual encounters with the demonic. The Apostle Paul also encountered demonized people such as the young woman in Acts 16: 16-21. To dismiss these events as merely being a first century description of the healing of mental or emotional problems is foolishness.

The devil and his host of demons are, according to Scripture, very real. Demons are fallen angels. 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.

Secondly, the Bible clearly forbids Christians to be involved in occult activities (Deuteronomy 18: 9-13). Those who pursue the supernatural through ouija boards, tarot cards, séances, spirit-guides, and the like are opening themselves up to the realm of the demonic. For example, the ability of the woman in Acts 16 to foretell the future was demonic in origin. When the demon was cast out, her ability was gone. Christians who dabble in the occult are putting their faith in jeopardy and are inviting the interaction with the demonic. (1)

But the question is, can a Christian in whom the Holy Spirit dwells be possessed at the same time by demons?

Scripture or "Clinical Experience?"

There is absolutely no biblical evidence to suggest that sanctification, the process whereby a Christian overcomes sin, is produced via the casting out of demons. Jimmy Swaggert, for example, had the demons of lust cast out of him by Oral Roberts, yet Swaggert fell into the same sin again. The witness of Scripture is clear - the source of besetting sins is the sinful nature, *not demons*.

Never does the Apostle Paul in any of his Epistles which define the dynamic of the Christian life and experience encourage the casting out of demons as a necessary prelude for sanctification. Rather, he commands Christians to walk in the Spirit and to put to death the deeds of the sinful nature. (Galatians 5: 16ff.) In Romans 6, the power of baptism, not the self-proclaimed power of one engaged in a deliverance ministry, is the answer to the sins that plague Christians. In fact, in the sections of the New Testament that list the variety of ministries in the

church (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4) there is no mention of a "deliverance ministry." Those who claim to be practicing such a ministry have no biblical support for their function.

Those promoting the deliverance ministries today readily acknowledge the absence of Scripture to confirm the validity of their ministry. Their final authority is not and cannot be the Bible, but rather, according to their own admission, their "clinical experience." For example, Charles Kraft writes:

Without a clear scriptural position, then, we need to consult those with experience in dealing with the problem under consideration. Those who work with cancer patients know that Christians can and do develop cancer. Likewise, those with clinical experience with Christians having demonic symptoms have overcome their doubts and concluded that Christians can and regularly do carry demons.

Fred Dickason writes,

I have encountered, from 1974 to 1987, at least 400 cases of those who were genuine Christians who were also demonized. . . . I would not claim infallible judgment, but I know the marks of a Christian and the marks of a demonized person. I might have been wrong in a case or so, but I cannot conceive that I would be wrong in more than 400 cases. The burden of proof lies with those who deny that Christians can be demonized. . . . We must deduce that those who deny that Christians can be demonized generally are those who have not had counseling experience with the demonized. Their stance is largely theoretical.

Christians cannot be possessed by demons. If deliverance from demons was an issue for Christians, the Bible would clearly say so. In his Word, God has revealed to us all things that are necessary for life and salvation. The very fact that the Bible does not give precedent or teaching on the subject of casting demons out of Christians indicates that it was neither an issue nor a practice. To cite "clinical experience" as the authority is to reject Scripture as the only source, norm and judge of Christian teaching.

In addition, my stance on this issue is not *largely theoretical*. I have had my share of "clinical experiences" with the alleged realm of the demonic. From 1971 until 1986 I was a participant in the Charismatic Movement. In the early seventies, the practice of casting out demons became very popular among Charismatics largely due to the writings and ministries of Derek Prince and the late Don Basham.

Basham authored the very popular handbook on deliverance *Deliver Us From Evil*. Prince had authored a number of pamphlets and was known for his "group

deliverance sessions." I embraced for a time a deliverance ministry.

What You See is Not What You Get!

In 1973, I attended one of Derek Prince's group deliverance sessions in Lansing, Michigan and was amazed by what I experienced. Prince began the session by teaching on the subject of demons and deliverance. Following the Bible study, he proceeded to rebuke and command various demons. He would say, for example, "in Jesus name I rebuke and cast out the demon of anger," or lust, or nicotine, or alcohol, or whatever.

Among the 200 or so gathered in the Michigan State University student center that afternoon, havoc broke out. Some began to scream, moan, fall on the floor, spit up, etc. Others were running up and down the aisles with tissues and towels cleaning up the messes. It was incredible, and I was impressed. I went back to my congregation armed with a new ministry technique that seemed to help people overcome their problems and besetting sins.

To initiate this type of ministry in my congregation, I bought a supply of books on the subject of demon possession, especially Don Basham's book, and made them available to those interested. For the next year or so, following our Sunday night prayer meeting, we offered deliverance sessions. Space does not permit for me to share with you all the "clinical experiences" we had with allegedly demonized Christians.

Some were seemingly successful, but others did not "keep their deliverance" and kept going back to their sins and hang-ups. I can still see the sweet, gentle woman who believed that her diabetes was demonic screaming uncontrollably as I and the elders held her down attempting to exorcise the demon. It was a real power-trip. Yet, she remained diabetic even after we believed that the demon had vacated.

As time passed, I began to seriously question our emphasis upon the demonic. We actually became obsessed with demons. We would not begin any worship service on Sunday morning or evening prayer meeting without first gathering the elders together to "bind" and cast out the demons. There was something fundamentally wrong with our focus.

In Colossians 2:15 the apostle wrote: "And having disarmed the power and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." This truth was contrary to my experience. If Jesus had defeated the demons by his cross, why was I seemingly locked in a mortal combat with them? It was disturbing to sing *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* and confront Luther's statement, "One little word can fell him."

I arrived at the conclusion that either Scripture was wrong or my experience was wrong. But how could my experience be wrong? Solid, stable Christian people were exhibiting profound reactions when confronted with the ministry of deliverance. What was going on? Could they possibly be faking the reaction? If so, why?

The whole issue came to a head one Sunday night as we were ministering deliverance to a young man. He had complained that he had a problem with his temper and would go off into fits of rage. He suspected that it might be a demon. Together with three of my elders, we gathered around a table in the church library for ministry.

As we began to pray, pleading the blood of Christ over our gathering, the young man became agitated. His countenance changed. He snarled at me, "I hate you! I am going to kill you!" He ripped his cross and chain off his neck and threw it at me across the table. As he got up and began to come at me, one of my elders, a former football player, intercepted him and wrestled him to the floor. The two other men joined in the fray. Holding him down, they began commanding that this demon of anger would come out.

I remained seated in my chair, shaken by the encounter but also filled with doubts. "Is this really an encounter with a demon?" I thought. I decided to take a risk and call his bluff. Gathering courage I stood up over him. My elders had him pinned to the floor. I pointed a finger at him and firmly said, "You are faking! Now cut this out! Get up and sit down!"

To my relief, he stopped struggling. The elders released him. He quietly got up, brushed himself off, and picked up his cross and chain.

"How did you know I was faking?" he asked.

"I was just following a hunch," I said. "I believe that your temper problem is caused by your sinful nature, not demons."

After a few minutes of further conversation, the young man left. My elders and I discussed the situation and arrived at the conclusion that we had to put this deliverance ministry to rest. We were giving the devil too big a place. We got back to focusing upon the cross of Jesus Christ and the victory that had been gained for us. We never had another encounter with the alleged demonic.

The Power of an Idea

I do not believe that the young man in question nor any of the others who had gone through our deliverance ministry were purposely seeking to deceive by playing a role or faking a response. The

idea of being demon-possessed can be a frightful, traumatic thought. The young man, for example, had accepted the diagnosis that he was demonized. He knew from reading material or even from television how "the demonized" reacted when confronted with the deliverance ministry.

He also knew, according to common deliverance ministry parlance, that demons became very agitated by any mention of the blood of Christ. He accepted the authority of those who were conducting the ministry toward him. He was not possessed by a demon, but rather by *the idea of having a demon*. He was victimized by suggestion. He simply acted as he believed he was supposed to act. He was "primed" for deliverance.

Extensive research has been done by competent psychologists on this subject. While I realize that many Christians are adverse to the findings of psychology, in this area it would be good for them to listen.

Dr. Paul McHugh, MD, Director of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions in Baltimore writes about the power of an idea or suggestion. (4)

He relates the events that occurred at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris in the 1880s. For a time the chief physician, Jean-Martin Charcot, thought he had discovered a new disease he called "hystero-epilepsy," a disorder of mind and brain combining features of hysteria and epilepsy. The patients displayed a variety of symptoms, including convulsions, contortions, fainting, and temporary unconsciousness. Charcot, the acknowledged master of Parisian neurologists, demonstrated the condition by presenting patients to his staff during teaching rounds in the hospital auditorium.

A skeptical student, Joseph Babinski, decided that Charcot had invented rather than discovered hystero-epilepsy. These symptoms resembled epilepsy, Babinski believed, because of the decision to house epileptic and hysterical patients together (both having "episodic" conditions). The hysterical patients, already vulnerable to suggestion and persuasion, began to imitate the epileptic attacks they repeatedly witnessed.

Babinski eventually won the argument. In fact, he persuaded Charcot that doctors can induce a variety of physical and mental disorders, especially in young, inexperienced, emotionally troubled women. There was no "hystero-epilepsy." These patients were afflicted not by a disease but by *an idea*.

With this understanding, Charcot and Babinski devised treatment consisting of isolation and counter suggestion. The patients were transferred to the

general wards of the hospital and kept apart from one another. The most effective technique was simply ignoring the hysterical behavior and concentrating on the present circumstances of the patients. The symptoms then gradually withered from lack of nourishing attention.

If people exhibit the learned behavior of epileptic seizures because they accepted the idea of a physician that they were hysterical epileptics, how much more will they exhibit the learned behavior associated with demoniacs because they have accepted the idea implanted by a spiritual authority that they are demon-possessed?

Researcher Dr. N. P. Spanos and his associates did extensive research into the phenomenon of demon possession and concluded in a 1983 chapter in the book *Compliant Behavior* that the demoniac role, like all other culturally prescribed roles, had to be learned. (5)

Prove It!

I am certain that those involved in deliverance ministries will not readily embrace the notion that they are implanting the idea of demon possession, but none-the-less, there is an alternative explanation for the "clinical experience" of casting out demons. Because of this fact, the burden of proof, contrary to what Fred Dickason claims, does not lie with those who question the ministry, but rather with those "counselors" and "clinicians" who claim they are casting out demons. Are they really casting out demons or being duped by a psychological dynamic? Experience can be very deceptive. If they are actually casting out demons, let them prove it.

Proving their claim is not difficult. All they have to do is set up a test situation in which deliverance is ministered to a person who has not accepted *the idea of demon possession*, knows nothing about the behavior involved, is not "primed" for deliverance, and does not accept the minister as an authority figure.

For example, put the same Derek Prince into a gathering where he is unknown, where the people have no idea of demon possession, and have received no prior instruction. If Prince, for example, began to rebuke and command a variety of demons while seated in the stands at a Michigan State football game would he get the same response? I doubt it.

When Jesus and the Apostle Paul cast out demons, they were not having a clinical, counseling experience involving the diagnosis and treatment of those possessed. The Bible defines their experiences with demons as spontaneous, impromptu events. The Apostle Paul did not sit down with the young woman

in Acts 16, advise her that he believed that her particular problem was caused by demon-possession, and proceed to bind and cast out the demon.

It was a spontaneous event. The demons spontaneously reacted to Jesus and, for that matter, to the Apostle Paul. In Acts 19: 15, the demons responded to the sons of Sceva who were attempting to conduct a deliverance ministry, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?"

Let us assume, for example, as most deliverance ministry advocates do, that alcoholism is demonic in origin. If that is the case and our Lord Jesus entered a local pub where the town "drunks" hung out, he would receive an immediate, spontaneous reaction from the demonized alcoholics. The demons would know it was Jesus entering the pub. Would Dickason, Anderson, Wimber, Wagner, Kraft et. al. receive the same reaction if they invaded a local bar for the purpose of casting out the demons of alcohol?

If they even mounted the bar and loudly issued their rebukes and commands, would the demonized alcoholics fall off their bar stools, scream and grovel on the floor, and vomit out the demon of alcohol? I seriously doubt it. I challenge them to try it and report their results.

But, if they would isolate a single alcoholic and put him into a counseling context in which he accepts the idea that his alcoholism is demonic in origin, is aware that the counselor is an authority figure who casts out demons, is "primed" for deliverance, and knows what kind of reaction is expected of him, the same commands and rebukes would probably cause a screaming, groveling, vomiting reaction. In fact, if the alcoholic remained within a supportive context, similar to the AA dynamic, he might even stop drinking. The question is, did they cast out a demon or program a reaction within a clinical context?

Deceptive Experiences

Much of the dynamic of Charismatic and Evangelical Christianity today is driven by experience. Rather than seeking truth in the objective Word of God, feelings, experience, and alleged spiritual phenomena are being used to judge Christian reality. Even though the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is Lord and that he has totally defeated the works of the devil, Christian ministers freely reject that truth because of their "clinical experiences" with alleged "demon reactions." In other circles,

Christians are falling backwards into the arms of "catchers," claiming that they have been bowled over and "slain" by the power of the Holy Spirit. Some are experiencing "holy laughter" as they are jabbed in the belly by one who claims to be a "Holy Ghost bartender." Barking like dogs, roaring like lions, and

claiming to be "drunk in the Spirit" characterize the behavior of Christians touched by the "Toronto Blessing" and the Pensacola revival.

While I do not reject or limit the power of the Holy Spirit and believe the Holy Spirit can do whatever he chooses to do with whomever he chooses to do it, I have also come to realize how easy it is to manipulate people and lead them into strange behavior. People seeking spiritual experiences are very willing subjects and relish the attention given to them.

If, for example, those claiming to be "slain the Spirit" were simply dragged off behind the stage and ignored, the phenomenon would rapidly cease. In the same way, if those playing the role of the demoniac were accused of faking, they would rapidly come to their senses. The problem is, the ones ministering the experience would find their power-trip coming to an end. There is much ego-gratification to be found in putting a hand on a person's forehead and seeing them fall over or commanding a demon and getting a violent reaction.

While there are some ministers and evangelists who are frauds and take advantage of the susceptibility of spiritually hungry people, others, such as the theologians and leaders involved in deliverance ministries, are sincere and believe they are helping people. In my estimation, their sincerity is mingled with naiveté. Since the claim of casting out demons from Christians raises some very important theological issues, before rejecting Scripture in favor of clinical experiences these deliverance ministers must explore every alternative explanation for their "demon experiences."

Dealing with the Devil

Focusing an inordinate amount of attention upon the devil and demons can be spiritually debilitating. One can readily become obsessed with the devil and might finally conclude, based upon experience, that *everyone is demonized*. Fred Dickason, for example,

claims that within a thirteen year period of time he encountered over 400 cases of demonized Christians.

This is almost a demon per week. He has probably had more alleged encounters with the demonic than our Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul put together. What impact is such emphasis having upon his spiritual life and upon those who are influenced by his ministry? While Dickason thinks that he is on the front line doing battle against Satan and his host of demons, he has actually fallen into the devil's snare. The devil is a liar, a deceiver, and loves all the attention.

There are two traps we fall into when considering the devil and demons. Both of these traps are set by the devil himself. On the one hand, we ignore the devil and do not recognize that he is out to destroy our faith by turning us away from our Lord Jesus. He is the master of deception and often parades as "an angel of light." If we are ignorant of his devices we become easily deceived and susceptible to strange experiences and false teaching.

Secondly, we give the devil too much attention and begin to see demons behind every teapot. This is also a deception of the devil. The Christian who becomes obsessed with Satan and demons has taken his focus off the Word of God, the cross of Jesus Christ, and the victory that has been gained over the powers of hell. If we fall into the snare of focusing upon the devil, he will gladly provide us with our share of supernatural experiences and successful power-trips.

As one wise man remarked in response to my former practice of binding demons before every worship and prayer gatherings, "When you focus upon demons, every demon in town comes around to get the attention." If we are willing to base truth upon experience rather than upon the objective Word of God, the devil is more than willing to provide confirming testimony.

The fact of the matter is, Jesus Christ is Lord.