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# CAN BORN-AGAIN BELIEVERS BE DEMON POSSESSED?

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*This statement on the question, "Can Born-Again Believers Be Demon Possessed?" was approved as the official statement by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God in May, 1972.*

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The spread of oriental religions and the occult in America has brought with it an increase in demon possession similar to that reported formerly by missionaries on foreign fields. All too often there has been too little teaching in this area. Many have felt all that is necessary is to preach Christ, and the demons will go away.

But the New Testament does more than command to preach Christ. It warns very definitely against the enemy of our souls and shows that demons are not to be treated lightly. It also emphasizes that deliverance is available through the "finger of God," the power of the Spirit, and the name of Jesus.

## **The Danger of Extremes**

There is a danger, however, when emphasizing any neglected doctrine, to go to an extreme which is beyond the intent of the Scriptures. It is also possible to be sidetracked into making the neglected doctrine the whole ministry. This seems to be the case with some who become fascinated with the subject of demonology. They are trapped into giving most of their attention to it. The more demons they cast out, the more there seem to be to cast out, and the rest of their ministry is practically ignored.

This tendency to become more occupied with casting out demons than with exalting Christ seems inconsistent with the balance of Scripture. Also there seems to be no basis in Scripture for the accompanying preoccupation with external phenomena, such as vomiting up various substances in connection with the casting out of demons (forgetting that demons are spirit beings). In the one instance in which foaming is mandated, Scripture makes it clear that this was a consistent pattern prior to the time the demon was cast out and not a phenomenon occurring only at the time of exorcism.

One of the regrettable side effects of an unscriptural overemphasis on demonology is that scriptural teaching is sometimes brought into disrepute. This was one result of the so-called witchcraft of 16th and 17th century England and 17th century America. In England, cases were reported where children vomited up articles which supposedly proved evil spirits had entered into their bodies.

Then, in 1692, Cotton Mather, a brilliant Boston preacher who graduated from Harvard with honors, roused the people of Salem, Massachusetts, against "witches." Nineteen persons were hanged and 150 imprisoned because of the testimony of children who were supposed to be demon possessed (and who may have been moved by lying demons, though there may be other explanations). In the presence of the accused, these children would throw "fits" and would go into what seemed to be a trance. In this state they would name people who they said were responsible for their "suffering."

Though many of the accused showed a spirit and a faith worthy of Christian martyrs, judges who were men of personal integrity pronounced them guilty. As a result of the publicity given these trials,

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Americans of that day turned away from the supernatural and branded all that the Bible teaches about Satan and evil spirits as mere superstition.

It seems important, then, that we do not permit Satan to sidetrack God's people into an attention on demons or evil spirits that goes beyond the clear teaching of the Bible, thus producing a reaction that would turn people away from all that is supernatural and hinder the work of God.

Exercising caution, however, does not mean we should treat the matter of demonology lightly. The Bible clearly recognizes both the activity of demons and their great number. This is even more evident when we recognize that the word devils in our common English version really means "demons." Actually, the word devil (Greek, *diabolos*, "the slanderer") is appropriate only for Satan. This is not to say, however, that the devil does not work through demons. Satan is a created being, a finite spirit, and is not omnipresent. He does most of his work through demons scattered in various parts of the world. Jesus' work in casting out demons was at least a part of His work of healing those oppressed (exploited, dominated, under the tyrannical rule) of the devil (Acts 10:38). (It should be noted that the word oppressed as used here is stronger than in today's usage.)

A question that arises, then, is not whether demons are active today, but whether born-again believers can be demon possessed, have a demon, or need to have someone cast demons out of them. Can the Holy Spirit and a demon dwell in the same temple? Are not our bodies temples of the Holy Spirit?

### **What Writers Have Said**

Most of the older writers say that genuine Christians cannot be possessed or indwelt by a demon.

An example is John L. Nevius, a Presbyterian missionary who spent nearly 40 years in China, who saw many cases of demon possession, but never among Christians. He found that demons did not want to stay in the presence of true Christians.<sup>1</sup>

A pioneer Pentecostal missionary, Victor Plymire, gave similar insights from Tibet. He found also that demon worshipers did not find it easy to get demons to take possession of them.

More recently writers of various denominations have taken a different view. M. H. Nelson, a medical doctor, tells of numerous reports of Christians who apparently have suffered from demon possession. He suggests, however, that some of them may be in open rebellion against God. (Apparently, he believes in eternal security and still calls these rebels Christians.) He goes on to say, however, that though a demon may gain an influence over the mind and body of a Christian, it is very doubtful that the body of a Christian can be possessed by a demon.<sup>2</sup>

Others say that a demon can possess the Christian's body without possessing the Christian's inner being. This seems contrary to the biblical view of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. It also goes against the biblical view of the unity of body, soul, and spirit as far as responsibility is concerned. The fragmentation of the person into various aspects is a heathen idea. If a demon enters any area of the body or mind (or attitudes), it enters you!

### **What the Bible Says**

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Many Christians have had God-given deliverances from problems and believed they were delivered from demon possession. But we must search the Scriptures to see if their interpretation of what happened is really in line with what the Bible teaches.

Some, for example, teach that since the Bible speaks of a spirit of cowardly fear, any deliverance from fear must be by the casting out of an evil spirit or demon of fear. But an examination of the same passage (2 Timothy 1:7) shows it speaks also of a spirit of power, of love, and of a sound mind or self-control. If people interpret fear to be an evil spirit needing to be cast out, to be consistent they would need to beseech three good spirits to come in.

The fallacy of this reasoning is obvious. Love and self-control are fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives. By a spirit of love and of self-control is meant the attitudes that result from our cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Actually, the word spirit in many cases means an attitude or a disposition. David spoke of a broken spirit (Psalm 51:17); Solomon of a humble spirit (Proverbs 16:19). Paul wanted to come to Corinth, not with a rod, but with love and a meek or gentle spirit (1 Corinthians 4:21). Peter spoke of the adorning of the heart with the imperishable gift of a meek and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:4), actually meaning a quiet disposition. This is in line with the frequent use of the word spirit for one's own spirit and its expressions (Haggai 1:14; Acts 17:16; 1 Corinthians 2:11, etc.).

Thus, unless the context shows that an independent spirit-being is meant, it seems best to take most phrases such as a haughty spirit, a hasty spirit, a spirit of slumber, a spirit of jealousy, etc., to be sins of the disposition or lusts of the flesh (Galatians 6), and not demons.

A serious danger in considering all these sins of the disposition to be demons is that the individual may feel no responsibility for personal actions and feel that the necessity for repentance is removed. Actually, the Bible calls people to repent of these things and to put off these attitudes. The great conflict within us is not between the Holy Spirit and demons, but between the indwelling Holy Spirit and the flesh (that is, all the sensory apparatus that tends toward sin).

When the word spirit is used of demons, the Bible may speak of an evil or unclean spirit. Sometimes the words are used together; for example, "a spirit of an unclean devil" (Luke 4:33).

In many cases these demons caused sickness. But the New Testament does not ascribe all sickness to demons or evil spirits. In fact, many passages make a clear distinction between sicknesses and diseases not caused by demons and those caused by demons (Matthew 4:24; 8:16; 9:32,33; 10:1; Mark 1:32; 3:15; Luke 6:17,18; 9:1, etc.). In none of these examples is there any indication that any of these sicknesses caused by demons were of people in right relation to God. We must remember also that all of these examples took place before Pentecost.

The word *daimonizomai*, to be possessed of a demon, or, as some put it, to be demonized, is not as common. It is used as a verb only once and that of a Canaanite girl who was "badly demonized," or cruelly tormented by a demon. Everywhere else it is found as a participle which should be translated, "the demoniac(s)" (Matthew 8:28,33; 9:32; 12:22; Mark 5:15-18; Luke 8:35). Again, in no case is there any indication that any of these "demoniacs" or demonized persons was right with God; and in most cases they suffered severe torment—and a dramatic change of personality.

Another great problem with the idea that demons may possess Christians is a concept that erodes faith and waters down our concept of God and the salvation He provides. God is our Father. He has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13). In "this darkness we used to live when [we] followed the ways of this world and of

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the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:2). But now God by His love has saved us and made us “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19). It would seem contradictory for demons to indwell our bodies now that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

We were once servants of sin (Romans 6:17) but now we are free to live for Christ. It is still possible to sin, but if a believer sins, it is because of having become willing to do so, not because of having been invaded by a demon. The Book of Romans calls not for the casting out of demons but for a faith act by which one becomes what one is.

For a Christian to have a demon would bring a division that Jesus refused to admit. The Pharisees tried to say that Jesus cast out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Matthew 12:24). They supposed the kingdom of Satan might be divided against itself. Jesus rejected this. Luke 11:21,22 further implies that Jesus has bound Satan as far as Satan’s power to enslave a believer is concerned. Only when a demon returns and finds the house empty is he able to reenter (Luke 11:24–26).

The idea of a true believer being inhabited by a demon also erodes the biblical concept of salvation and peace. It may produce terrible fear as Christians begin to wonder what demon will invade them next. This is certainly not in line with the freedom the Bible assures us we have. Early Christians had no such fear, nor did the Church of the second century.

Hermas, who wrote a very influential Christian book called *The Shepherd* about a.d. 139, rebuked corruption and encouraged Christian virtue. In the book he also spoke of evil spirits that were able to live and reign within a person, but denied that the Holy Spirit could live in the same person with these evil spirits.

The Scripture is full of assurance for the believer: “The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). A believer is a person who is delivered from the devil. This is fundamental. Some point to Ananias and Sapphira as exceptions. But Ananias either apostatized before Satan filled his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, or else he and his wife were among those who joined themselves to the church rather than being added to it by the Spirit (see Acts 5:13,14). At the time, at least, they were no more than professing Christians.

### **Resisting Evil Forces**

It seems evident that the term possessed should not be applied to true believers. What the Bible does show is that Satan and his cohorts are external foes. We are in a warfare against Satan’s forces and they are looking for opportunities to attack us. (See Ephesians 6:12.) The biblical emphasis is on what we must face in the very atmosphere around us. The call is never for us to get someone to cast the demons out of us. They are out there attacking us, testing us, not possessing us. The call is to be vigilant and to put our armor on and take our stand (2 Corinthians 10:3–6; Ephesians 6:10–18; 1 Peter 5:8,9).

Jesus defeated Satan by quoting the Word of God (Matthew 4). We too must take our stand on God’s Word and resist Satan and his demons, in faith (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8,9). Then the shield of faith will quench every fiery dart of the enemy (Ephesians 6:16). (Here we recognize that just as God’s deliverances sometimes come through angels, so Satan’s attacks sometimes come through demons or through those who are demon possessed.)

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That the attack is external is seen in the case of Job; and also in the case of Paul's thorn in the flesh, which he called a messenger (or angel—Greek *aggelos*) of Satan sent to buffet him (beat or strike him with the fist). (See 2 Corinthians 12:7.) Paul besought the Lord three times that it (the messenger of Satan) might be removed (more literally, "Keep away from him"), but God refused and said His grace was sufficient. The result was that Paul learned to depend on God in his weakness, reproach, or distress. Whether the messenger of Satan was a demon, a sickness, or a person, the Bible does not say. Just what it was, however, is beside the point here. The attack, the buffeting, was from the outside, and Paul sought for it to be kept away, not cast out. We note also that Paul sees in himself and in us the living presence of Christ as the only hope (Colossian 1:2, 29).

We believe also that the gift of the discerning of spirits is for the purpose of discerning the spirit that may motivate people who are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, not the discerning of supposed demons in believers. If the truth remains in us, we remain in the Son and in the Father (1 John 2:24). Only if we are cut off from the vine and cast forth as a dead branch can Satan or his demons claim us. Our redemption is a redemption of the whole person. The full price has been paid.

Christ's enemies accused Him of having a demon. It is a subtle trick of the devil that makes sincere people accuse Christians today of having a demon. Clearly, there are deliverances, but calling them deliverances from demon possession is unscriptural.

#### Notes

- 1 J. L. Nevius, *Demon Possession*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, reprint from 1894, pp. 278, 290.
- 2 M. H. Nelson, *Why Christians Crack Up*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1960, pp. 76, 77.

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