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Demon Possession: Are Believers at Risk?

by David Dunlap

The theme of the Bible from beginning to end is the conflict between good and evil, between God and the devil. It begins with the serpent in Eden in Genesis 3 and concludes with the devil being cast into the lake of fire in Revelation 20. So it is not surprising that today Christians are becoming more aware of their battle against demonic forces. Many see that satanic worship is on the rise around us, increasing numbers of teenagers are experimenting with witchcraft, and "new-age" bookstores are becoming the resource center for those interested in the dark world of the occult. The Christian church is also experiencing a growing interest in combating demonic forces. Teaching on spiritual warfare is in great demand today. A proliferation of books on spiritual warfare spill over the shelves in Christian bookstores. The doctrine that Christians can be inhabited by demons is popularly taught by respected teachers across diverse theological lines, from the charismatic movement to fundamental dispensational teachers. Popular Bible teachers such as Neil Anderson, author of *Essential Guide to Spiritual Warfare* (2016), writer John Eckhardt, *Prayers that Rout Demons* (2010), and formerly a professor at Moody Bible Institute, C. Fred Dickason, who authored *Demon Possession and the Christian* (2005), have stepped forward to lead this area with popular books, magazine articles and "Spiritual Warfare" seminars in local churches. The question remains, can a Christian have a demon? This question is not merely academic; the answer will determine our views on the sovereignty of God, the authority of the Word of God, and whether personal experience will supersede Bible doctrine.

Demonic Possession As Evidence

For many who teach that Christians can be possessed by a demon, the repeated experience of the demonic phenomenon is held up as the most significant factor. Numerous cases are cited of people, who by all appearances, seem to be genuinely manifesting characteristics of demon possession. Merrill F. Unger writes, *"In Biblical Demonology I stated, 'to demon possession, only unbelievers are exposed'. Later I wrote, 'Since the first publication of Biblical Demonology in 1952, I have received many letters from missionaries from all over the world who question the theory that true believers cannot be demon-possessed...The claims of these missionaries appear to be valid.'"*¹

"There are two equal and opposite errors into which we fall about demons. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. The Devil is equally pleased by both errors."

C. S. Lewis
(1898-1963)

“There are two ways which the enemy has power; first by temptation and secondly by terror. However, it is the written word Christ ever uses and Satan is powerless. Jesus does not reason with Satan—a single text silences Him when used in the power of the Spirit.”

J. N. Darby
(1800-1882)

However, personal experience must submit to the authority of the Holy Scriptures. Where the Word of God clearly speaks, experience, irrespective of its persuasiveness, must remain silent. Many of these occurrences may be attributed to mental illness and also to the power of suggestion. In other occurrences, it may be that the individuals in question were not truly regenerate. How can one determine with 100% accuracy those who are genuine believers (2 Tim 2:19)? We must conclude that to base biblical doctrine on personal experience subjects a believer to spiritual harm. Counsel should be given to others to proceed cautiously in basing their belief on the condition of Christians who seem to be demon possessed, when the weight of biblical doctrine leans against that view.

Re-Defining Demon-Possession

How is demon possession of a Christian defended in light of the teaching of Scripture? Within recent years it has become popular for many to begin to translate “*daimonizomai*” the Greek verb meaning “to be possessed by a demon” with the phrase “to be demonized.”² Opponents of this new term contend that this subtle change has crept in due to the fact that the word “demonization” is unfamiliar to many Christians and less emotionally charged than the older and more biblical term “demon possession.” Proponents argue that this is a proper translation because it is based upon the verb's etymology. Etymology is the study of the root components of a word. However, to base the doctrine of demon possession solely upon a word's root meaning is to wrest the Scriptures of their true meaning.

Many Greek authorities warn against this danger. D. A. Carson, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Seminary writes, “*One of the most enduring of errors is the etymology fallacy that supposes that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its components. All this is linguistic nonsense. ...Any specification of the meaning of a word on the sole basis of etymology can never be more than an educated guess.*”³ Nevertheless, it is obvious that this is a more attractive translation to those who believe a demon can enter and inhabit the body of a believer. This term avoids the controversy associated with demon-possession. This terminology also blurs the biblical distinction between “demon-possession” and “demonic-influence.” There is a two-fold reason to understand and translate “*daimonizomai*,” the Greek verb, as “to be possessed by a demon.”

Firstly, the translation of “to be possessed by a demon” fits the context better in the passages where this verb is found. In each of the 13 occurrences of this participle, all in the gospels, it refers to the action of becoming possessed with a demon; or, when it refers to the person rather than the condition of being possessed, the person is called a “demoniac.” Secondly, this word is commonly translated in most lexicons and dictionaries as “to be possessed by a demon.” In one example, the Greek scholar W. E. Vine, translates this word as follows, “*DAIMONIZOMAI signifies to be possessed of a demon, to act under the control of a demon. Those who were thus afflicted expressed the mind and consciousness of the demon or demons indwelling them.*”⁴

The Scriptures warn the believer about the danger of demonic activity. As we shall see, demons can influence and attack Christians from without,

but they are not able enter, control and inhabit the believer from within.

Biblical Reasons Against Demon-Possession of Believers

A comprehensive study of the Scriptures should lead us to the belief that a true believer cannot be possessed by a demon. The Word of God lays down certain truths and principles which support this teaching. What are these biblical truths and principles? Firstly, the Scriptures teach that a believer is kept by the power of God, *"The Lord is faithful and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one"* (2 Thess. 3:3); also *"He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him"* (1 Jn. 5:18). One commentator writes, *"The word rendered haptomai 'toucheth', here signifies 'to lay hold of.' The evil one assaults, but he cannot sever the vital connection between the believer and Christ."*⁵

Although a believer is subject to the attacks of Satan, his status as a child of God and a possession of God sets limits as to what the world of demonic forces can do. Secondly, a believer is called the *"temple of the living God"* (2 Cor. 6:16). At conversion, the Holy Spirit indwells a believer and makes him a temple of the living God. In this temple, light has no agreement with darkness, and there is no concord between Christ and Belial. The apostle John further adds, *"Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world"* (1 Jn. 4:4). How then would God, who is greater than Satan, allow a demon to reside along with Him in this sanctified temple?

Theological Arguments Advanced

Although many proponents of "demonization", on the one hand, reject the idea of "demon possession" of believers, nevertheless they bring forth specious theological arguments in defense of demons inhabiting and controlling believers. One argument says that demons can reside within a believer's soul, but not within the spirit where the Holy Spirit dwells.⁶ A close scrutiny of the Scriptures reveals that, while there is a fundamental distinction between the soul and spirit, it is noteworthy that many times these terms are used interchangeably (Matt. 20:28/27:50, John 12:27/13:21). Therefore, the careful Bible student should not base his interpretation solely upon this distinction. However, the heart of the issue does not concern itself with the soul or the spirit, but rather, whether or not Satan and God can coexist in the believer's body. Another argument that has been advanced states that God allows demons to enter the bodies of believers as a form of discipline. Proponents explain, in the case of continued sin in the life of a believer, that God will use demons as agents of divine chastisement.

Matthew 18:34-35 is marshaled forth to buttress this theory. In this parable of the unjust debtor, v. 34 states that because of unforgiveness, *"he was delivered to the tormentors."* The *"tormentors"*, it is asserted, are a picture of demons.⁸ Are these *"tormentors"* truly a picture of demons or simply a reference to keepers of the prison (v.30)? Concerning the the identification of the *"tormentors"*, one commentator writes, *"The jailers, here called the 'tormentors', have instructions not merely to keep him safe in prison but to make his life as miserable as possible, by the place of imprisonment, instruments of pain, diet, sleep, etc."*⁹

***"...that wicked
one touches
him not' (1 John
5:18). Satan
will viciously
assail the
believer, but his
slimy fingers
will never
regain an
abiding grip on
the redeemed
soul."***

**D. Edmond Hiebert
(1928-1995)**



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By such an interpretation of Matthew 18:34-35, the proponents of demon possession clearly appear to be stretching and twisting the Holy Scriptures to fit their point of view. Moreover, the majority of biblical commentators agree that there is nothing in this passage that even remotely suggests demonic activity or demon possession.

The True Focus of Spiritual Warfare

Increasingly, Christians today seem to be getting caught up in preoccupation with Satan and demonic forces. Sensationalistic teachings are replacing sound biblical doctrine concerning the Christian's spiritual battle. True spiritual warfare is primarily focused on the world and the flesh, and not on a preoccupation with Satan. The spiritual battle emphasizes the preaching of the cross, the believer's victory through growth in sanctification, and the irresistible power of God in protecting every child of God against Satan. The clarion call today should be to allow the Scriptures to direct our battle plan. As spiritual soldiers we must be submissive to the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word. We have seen that the Bible teaches that a believer cannot be inhabited by a demon.

Furthermore, we should not trust in undiscerning teachings for deliverance, but rather we should rest completely upon God's resources in our warfare against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Endnotes:

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4. W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1981), 291
5. W.E. Vine, *The Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, ND), 107-108
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9. A. B. Bruce, *Expositor's Greek N. T.: Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Co, 1967), 244