

Can a Christian Have a Demon?

by David Servant

David Servant explores the complexities of demonic influence on Christians, emphasizing the importance of scripture and the role of repentance in spiritual deliverance.

Scripture: Mark 6:12

Topics: "Demonic Influence", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

David Servant preaches on the topic of casting out demons, emphasizing the need to find the truth between extremes of downplaying or exaggerating demonic influence. He highlights the biblical basis for casting out demons, citing examples from Jesus' ministry and the early church. The sermon explores the continuum of demonic influence on individuals, the role of personal choices in resisting Satan, and God's sovereignty over demonic activity. It also addresses the importance of repentance, resistance to the devil, and the potential risks of misinterpreting experiences of deliverance.

Transcript

When it comes to the subject of casting out demons, we are prone to fall into the ditch on either side of the road, either downplaying something that is entirely scriptural, or finding demons behind every bush. As with all biblical topics, the truth is found in the middle of the extremes.

Certainly casting out demons is not a subject we should ignore. It was a regular feature of Jesus' ministry (see Mark 1:32-34, 39; Luke 4:41; 6:18; 7:21). Moreover, He commissioned the twelve to cast out demons, and they were generally quite successful, bringing deliverance to many suffering people (see Mark 6:12-13; Luke 10:17; Acts 5:16; 8:7; 19:12). Beyond that, there was at least one person during Christ's ministry who cast out demons in His name whom He had not specifically authorized (see Mark 9:38-39). There are also records in the book of Acts of many people being delivered from unclean spirits through the ministry of the apostles (see Acts 5:16; 8:6-7; 16:16-18; 19:11-12). Finally, one of the signs that Jesus said would follow believers is that they would cast out demons (see Mark 16:17). So the exorcism of demons was not something that was only for the early church.

All of this being so, it would seem that there ought to be more casting out of demons, not less, by followers of Jesus today. Such exorcisms would glorify God and magnify the gospel, just as they did in the days of Jesus and His apostles. And who but a Pharisee would not desire to see people experience miraculous deliverance from Satan's power? So let us learn what we can about this important topic.

Under the Influence

Clearly, there are different degrees to which a person might be under Satan's influence. Imagine a downward-sloping line that represents a continuum of Satan's potential influence over a person. At the upper end would be a point that represents simply being tempted by the devil. At the far downward end would be a point that represents being indwelled and controlled by numerous demons. Those are the two extremes. The second uppermost increment would be the act of yielding to one of Satan's temptations or believing one of his lies. The second-to-last lowermost increment would be the state of being indwelled and controlled by only one demon as opposed to many demons. And then there would be every point in between those two.

Obviously, all Christians are tempted (and lied to) periodically by evil spirits as the devil himself is not omnipresent. So all of us are under demonic influence to that degree, and there is nothing sinful about that. Jesus was tempted in all ways as we are, and the devil also lied to Him, yet He never sinned (see Matt. 4:1-11; Heb. 4:15). Sin occurs when one yields to temptation or believes a lie, and Christians are called to resist temptation and believe the truth. So Christians should not be found anywhere on that representative continuum but the very uppermost end!

At what point along that downward continuum might a demon actually enter into a person? No one can say with absolute certainty, but there isn't an ounce of scriptural evidence that would lead us to think that a person could become indwelled by a demon by yielding one time to some temptation or by simply believing lies that are embraced by large percentages of the world's people. If that were the case, every unsaved person in the world would be indwelled by a legion of demons. The record found in the Gospels and book of Acts certainly leads us to conclude that it is a minority of people who are indwelled by demons. Obviously, the point of becoming indwelled by a demon falls somewhere far along the downward continuum. And if (and notice I said if) Christians can be indwelled by demons, we would expect that it would be a very small minority, since among the unsaved population only a small percentage of people are indwelled by demons. This should make us suspicious of "deliverance ministers" who are discerning demons indwelling the majority of Christians.

That Part That People Play

Envisioning this downward continuum also reminds us that each person has something to do with the degree of influence that Satan has over him. Although all unsaved people have obviously yielded to Satan's influence to some degree, some have yielded to a greater degree than others. And those who do yield to a greater degree don't begin as the worst sinners or the most deceived. They gradually slide down the continuum. They yield a little, then some more, and then even more. As they do, they find themselves continually more bound by their perversions, sins and the lies they have embraced, and Satan is always tempting them to take another step downward. At some far-along point in that downward process a demon may enter. Even at that point the demon-indwelled person possesses a free will, and every future descending step (or resistance) requires a decision.

Eventually more demons may enter the one who has slid even further down that line. According to the Bible, Mary Magdalene had seven demons in her at one time (see Luke 8:2). The Gadarene demonic had many demons in him, perhaps thousands (see Luke 8:30). Reaching that sad state surely took time. He was not a well-mannered citizen one day and then suddenly, for no reason, became a raving lunatic with superhuman strength who lived naked among the tombs and cut himself with stones! His own choices

gradually led him down the descending slope. Matthew actually tells us that there were two mad men of the Gadarenes who ran around naked and screamed among the tombs (see Matt. 8:28). One cannot help but speculate what would cause two men to wind up in that same depraved state together.

God's Role

Yet there is something else--beyond human free will--that is a factor in determining Satan's degree of influence over people. It is God Himself, because Satan can only do what God permits. This factor is conspicuously absent from most teaching about demonology and deliverance.

God's absolute sovereignty over Satan was made quite plain in the story of Job, when God restrained and limitedly permitted Satan to afflict Job (see Job 1:6-12; 2:1-8). It was also made quite plain when Jesus granted the legion of demons permission to enter a herd of swine (see Mark 5:10-13). It will be made plain again in the future when Satan is incarcerated for one-thousand years and then temporarily released, all at God's decree (see Rev. 20:1-8). God controls Satan even to the degree that Satan is permitted to tempt believers (see 1 Cor. 10:13). And it is obvious that God sometimes even disciplines or judges people by means of giving them over to Satan. Thus we read in Scripture about "an evil spirit from God" that tormented King Saul (see 1 Sam. 16:14-23). God's sovereignty over the devil is indisputable.

If demons desire to be inside of people, it would be safe to assume that they want to get inside people as soon as possible. So what keeps them out? We could rightfully say that it is the free-will choices of every person. But don't forget that it was God who designed people with free will and who also permits Satan to tempt and to lie to everyone. He is also the one who decreed that those who recklessly and continually yield to Satan to certain unrestrained degrees open the door to be indwelt by a demon. It is an act of His judgment that also serves as a warning to everyone else. Ultimately, God keeps demons out and He allows demons in. Jesus is "the head over all rule and authority," and all "authorities and powers [have] been subjected to Him" (Col. 2:10; 1 Peter 3:22).

When the Unsaved Repent

As I have already stated, all unsaved people are under Satan's influence and control to some degree--to whatever extent they have yielded. His spirit works in them (see Eph. 2:2). But when they repent under the conviction and drawing of the Holy Spirit, believing in the Lord Jesus, Scripture tells us that they are "delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into Jesus' kingdom" (see Col. 1:13). They are no longer under Satan's dominion (see Acts 26:18) or "captive to him," having "escaped his snare" (see 2 Tim. 2:26). They become "new creations in Christ" (see 2 Cor. 5:17) and are children of God, no longer "children of the devil" (see 1 John 3:10). Such transformations are the most dramatic in those who have previously yielded the most to Satan. And God does not leave them with demons living in them. If there are any demons inside, they are expelled at the moment of repentance and faith, because God's wrath no longer abides on them (see John 3:36).

I have a friend who is a missionary-evangelist to many developing nations, and he has told me that there are times, right when he is preaching the gospel and calling people to repentance, that demon-indwelt people shout out and scream in the audience. At the moment of their repentance, demons are expelled by the Holy Spirit. This is perhaps what happened when Philip preached the gospel to the Gentiles in Samaria. Scripture tells us that unclean spirits were coming out of many "shouting with a loud voice" (Acts 8:7), and no mention is made of Philip actively casting them out. Regardless, does it seem logical for God to, in effect, say to repentant sinners, "OK, you've repented and believed, so I'm going to forgive you of all

your sins, adopt you into my family, make you My child and a new creation, and deliver you from the kingdom of darkness. But I think I'll leave a demon or two in you"? No, that would seem to be slightly inconsistent.

But does that mean the newly-delivered convert is safe? Not necessarily. Jesus warned,

Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, "I will return to my house from which I came"; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first (Matt. 12:43-45).

A just-delivered new believer in Christ now has the Holy Spirit in him, and so any returning evil spirit will not find his former house "unoccupied." Still, the new convert must resist the devil, just as all Christians must (see Jas. 4:7). He must renew his mind with God's Word (see Rom. 12:2) and continue in faith (see Acts 14:22) lest he find himself trudging the same downward path he formerly followed. If he does, his later state may become worse than his former state. Certainly it is possible for former Christians to have demons in them.

A person who has had a demon cast out, who has not repented and believed in Jesus, has experienced an incredible act of mercy from God. He should, of course, immediately repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. Otherwise it is just a matter of time before his former demon returns to his "unoccupied house." When that time arrives, the returning demon may well be permitted by God to bring in other more wicked spirits, and the person will become worse than he previously was. This is clearly an act of God's judgment upon an ungrateful person who spurned His great mercy. Those additional demons would have loved to get inside that person sooner, but they couldn't--not until God's mercy had reason to run thinner and His anger to burn hotter.

The Marks of the Demonized

As we continue to consider the answer to our original question, it might also help us to know what identified people who needed demons cast out of them in the days of Jesus and the apostles. In every case mentioned in the New Testament, the original Greek language identifies such people as being "possessed" (Greek: echo) or being "demonized" (Greek: daimonizomai). Often what is translated as "demon-possessed" in modern English versions could perhaps be more accurately translated as "demonized." Jesus and the apostles, however, dealt with the demon-possessed and demonized the same--by casting demons out of them. Thus the New Testament does not really differentiate between the two. Yet we sometimes hear it taught that being "demonized" is a lesser degree of demonic oppression than being demon-possessed. That is simply not true. The mad man of the Gadarenes is spoken of as being "demonized" (daimonizomai) and not "possessed" (echo) by both Matthew and Mark (see Matt 8:28; Mark 5:15). I would say that his demonic oppression was fairly severe! Incidentally, Luke referred to him as being "possessed (echo) with demons" (see Luke 8:27).

Although Jesus and His apostles cast out demons from many people, there are only six examples in the Gospels and Acts that tell us specific details about people from whom they cast out demons. They include the mad man of the Gadarenes (see Matt. 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39), a man who was mute (see Matt. 9:32-33; Luke 11:14), a boy who suffered periodic life-threatening and terrifying convulsions accompanied by foaming at the mouth and grinding of teeth (see Matt. 17:14-18; Mark 9:14-27; Luke

9:37-43), a man in a synagogue through whose voice a demon spoke--a common symptom of those who needed demons cast out (see Mark 1:23-27, 34; 3:11-12; Luke 4:33-36, 41; Acts 19:15), a Syrophenician woman's daughter (see Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30), and a girl who had a spirit of divination (see Acts 16:16-18).

From this list we can see that people who needed demons cast out of them generally displayed extreme or very unusual behaviors or symptoms. These behaviors and symptoms are quite different from those that characterize many people (including professing Christians) who are allegedly having demons cast out of them today, who are more likely to be struggling with some thought patterns or bad habits. Moreover, modern ministers have invented a very long list of different kinds of demons--spirits of depression, lust, anger and so on--conditions that Scripture often declares are works of the flesh (see Gal. 5:19-21). The New Testament only mentions five kinds of evil spirits that might indwell people, and three are general terms that are obviously synonymous with each other: "demons," "evil spirits," and "unclean spirits." The only two kinds of specific indwelling evil spirits mentioned in the New Testament are a "spirit of divination," and a "deaf and mute spirit." And the single time that a "deaf and dumb spirit" is mentioned in the Bible it was also called an "unclean spirit" (see Mark 9:25).

Modern Deliverance Experiences

What about the many testimonies of modern believers who have had demons cast out of them and whose symptoms disappeared? There are several possible explanations. I must begin by saying, however, that we are only safe if we stay with Scripture. To build our theology on experience is dangerous, and it can be deadly. Lies and deception are the primary weapons in Satan's arsenal, and Scripture couldn't be more clear that "the father of lies" can only gain the upper hand in those whom he can deceive. Christians who chose to follow experience at the expense of God's Word are laying out a welcome mat for the devil. The road to hell is paved with people's "experiences with God." Scientologists, New Agers and mystics confidently testify of how their lives have been changed through their religions. They are now more at peace, have real purpose, are more successful, have been set free from old thinking patterns and so on. "It works, so it must be God" is an attitude that can lead one right into the spider's web. How tragic it is when experience-led Christians are lured into deception about demons and the devil as they actually think they are being enlightened.

Christians are usually not so gullible as to swallow obvious lies, so Satan is intelligent enough to offer them truth diluted with lies. Remember that when Satan tempted Eve, he told her four things, three of which were true, and only one of which was false (see Gen. 3:4-5, 7, 22). But the lie she believed was deadly. So we must take precaution that we are not similarly deceived.

So what about Christians who have experienced some victory after having a demon allegedly cast out of them?

First, there is a very real possibility that some, if not many, were not true believers at the time of their deliverance (and they may still not be). What modern evangelicalism defines as a Christian--one who has "accepted Jesus" and now claims to believe in Him--is a far cry from what the Bible defines as a Christian. A true believer has repented of his sins and is characterized by increasing holiness and self-denial on behalf of others, motivated by a sincere love for God. Yet I have read testimonies of so-called Christians who were habitual adulterers at the time of their "deliverance" from a "spirit of adultery." Scripture, however, plainly declares that no adulterer will inherit God's kingdom (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Second, there is a good possibility that many, at the time that someone allegedly cast a demon out them, made the determination to resist the devil, just as Scripture teaches every Christian to do (see Jas. 4:7). Although the source of their trouble was demonic, they did not need a demon cast out. Rather, they only needed to submit themselves to God and resist the devil, and when they did, the devil fled, just as Scripture promises he will (see Jas. 4:7). That is a kind of self-administered deliverance, and one that is somewhat similar to having a demon cast out, except the expelled demon was harassing them from the outside, not the inside.

A Christian who does not submit to God and resist the devil, but rather disobeys God and yields to the devil, is naturally giving Satan an opportunity. I don't mean he is opening the door for a demon to indwell him instantly. Rather, he is like a person who used to swat the flies in his house, but now he just tolerates them buzzing around his head.

Whereas every believer is periodically attacked by the devil and perhaps even harassed by the devil in the form of temptations and lies in his mind, those who repeatedly yield could become what we might call oppressed by the devil--a little further down the descending continuum mentioned earlier. This is a manifestation of God's discipline--a motivation to repent. Yielding more could lead to a state of greater oppression, when one has accepted and embraced what he once resisted. Even at this stage, any believer can repent, submit to God and resist the devil, and Satan will flee (see Jas. 4:7). He does not need a demon cast out because there is no demon within.

Saul's "Evil Spirit from God"

Old Testament figure King Saul would serve to some degree as an example of a believer who is being oppressed by the devil as a result of the Lord's discipline in his life. I'm sure you remember the story of his disobedience and eventual jealousy of David. As a result, he was "terrorized" by "an evil spirit from God" (1 Sam. 16:14-16). But that terrorizing demon, permitted by God to bring Saul to repentance, was not inside him. Scripture states that it would "come to" and be "on" and "upon" Saul, but when David would play his harp in Saul's presence, the spirit "would depart from him" (1 Sam. 16:16, 23; 18:10).

Saul did not repent under God's discipline, and so it seems that God permitted him to become even more oppressed by that evil spirit. We read that one day the "evil spirit from God came mightily upon Saul, and he raved in the midst of the house, while David was playing the harp with his hand" (1 Sam. 18:10, emphasis added). This time David's playing apparently wasn't enough to bring peace to Saul's mind, and he tried to kill David with his spear. So we see Saul's downward progression and the hardening of his heart under the Lord's discipline. Certainly if Saul had repented, God would have delivered him from his evil spirit. He would not have needed anyone to cast a demon out of him.

Some who attempt to answer our original question speak of demons as not being able to indwell the spirits of Christians, but being able to indwell their bodies or minds.

I would certainly grant that God might permit an evil spirit to oppress, from the outside, a disobedient and unrepentant Christian's mind (like He did with Saul) or body (in the form of some sickness; see 1 Cor. 11:30-31) as a means of discipline in order to bring him to repentance. But in both cases, repentance is the remedy, not casting out of a demon. Satan will flee when we submit to God and resist the devil (see Jas. 4:7). God strongly supports those whose hearts are completely His (see 2 Chron. 16:9).

It is sometimes argued that because Scripture teaches that those who are born again are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19), it would be impossible for an evil spirit and the Holy Spirit to dwell in the same place. That certainly sounds logical. It should be pointed out, however, that the same logic could be used to prove that demons can't exist anywhere since God is omnipresent and there is no place to flee from His Spirit (see Psalm 139:7-10). That being so, we quickly realize again that demons can dwell anywhere God allows them to dwell, and they cannot dwell anywhere He forbids them to dwell.

Peter's Demon?

Incredibly, some argue that the apostle Peter once had a demon in him that spoke through his voice. They are referring to the time when Jesus told the twelve that He would be killed in Jerusalem and Peter replied, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" Jesus then replied 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. 16:21-23).

It should be noted, however, that not even the most extreme teachers take literally what Jesus said to Peter. That is, no one believes Peter actually became Satan at that moment anymore than they believe that Herod literally became a fox when Jesus spoke of him as being one (see Luke 13:32). So what gives anyone the right to say that Jesus' words to Peter prove that Peter had an indwelling demon that spoke through him?

Jesus was obviously speaking figuratively to some degree. The most natural interpretation would simply be that Jesus was saying, in a very pointed way, that Peter's suggestion was just like a temptation from Satan. Notice again Jesus' second sentence spoken to Peter: "You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (Why would Jesus say that to a demon?) Jesus wanted His disciples to know that it was God's will that He die on the cross.

May I also point out that Jesus did not cast a demon out of Peter. And it is doubtful that Jesus meant by His words to Peter that he had somehow even yielded to Satan. Peter was only innocently expressing his love for Jesus.

Paul's Demon?

Some teach that Paul had a demon dwelling in his body, his "thorn in the flesh" (see 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Although it is true that Paul identified his thorn in the flesh as "a messenger (literally: angel) from Satan," he never states that that it indwelt him, either his spirit, soul or body. The expression that he used, "thorn in the flesh," does not prove that a satanic angel was in his body anymore than does my saying that an unreliable old car is "a thorn in my flesh" prove that my car indwells my body. When God told the Israelites that the unconquered Canaanites would become "thorns in your sides" (see Num 33:55), none of them imagined that He meant that the Canaanites would indwell their bodies.

Those who are trying to convince Christians that they can be indwelt by demons by using Paul's thorn in the flesh as an example will find it very difficult to convince their students that they can bring them deliverance. The reason is because God turned down Paul's repeated requests for relief from his thorn.

Ananias' Demon?

Because Peter asked Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? (Acts 5:3), some claim that Ananias, a Christian, was indwelled by a demon.

First, there is no way that anyone can say with certainty that Ananias was a true believer.

Second, if I said to my ten-year-old son, "Why has your sister filled your heart to lie to your teacher?, he would be smart enough to understand that I didn't literally mean that he was indwelled with his sister. He would know that I meant, "Why have you been listening to your sister's suggestions to attempt to deceive your teacher?" Common sense tells us that we should similarly interpret Peter's words to Ananias.

Notice that Peter's words clearly imply that Ananias was responsible to resist the devil. It was his fault for yielding to Satan's suggestion. Also notice that Peter did not cast a demon out of Ananias. Ananias didn't need deliverance. He needed to repent and resist the devil. But God didn't give him the chance after his public lie.

What About Children With Demons?

Of the five specific cases recorded in the Bible of Jesus casting out demons, two of them involved children who were delivered. It is difficult to believe that those children opened the door to being indwelled by demons through their decisions to yield more and more to Satan's temptations or that their afflictions were a manifestation of God's judgment upon them. We do not know, however, the ages of those two children, so perhaps we should not make assumptions about their accountability before God. It has been suggested that children, as well as adults, can potentially become indwelled by demons through an inability to cope with severe emotional trauma. There is certainly little doubt that severe emotional trauma can lead to destructive thinking patterns, and perhaps it is true that this can be an open door to an evil spirit.

Similarly, some have also suggested that allowing oneself to be overcome by negative emotions for a significant period of time is a way to open the door to demon oppression. Certainly we should remember that dwelling on negative thoughts is an act that is contrary to God's command to think on things that are true, honorable, pure, and so on (see Philip. 4:8). And we should never forget that "Fear not!" is a commandment, not a suggestion.

The Silence of the Epistles

Perhaps the most damning evidence against the idea of Christians needing to have demons cast out of them is found in the New Testament epistles, all of which were written to Christians. Although the epistles are filled with verses that tell believers what to do to gain victory over sin (for example, Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22; Heb. 12:1), there is not one verse that instructs them to seek deliverance from the evil spirits that might be in them. Nor are there any instructions for administering deliverance to believers who are indwelled by demons.

Although there is a scripture in the New Testament that tells sick Christians what to do to receive healing, it does not even suggest that they may need a demon cast out of them. Rather, the prayer of faith (and sometimes repentance) is their remedy (see Jas. 5:14-15).

Believers are, of course, instructed in the epistles to resist the devil (see Eph. 4:27; 6:10-17; Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8). Resisting the devil is done by resisting temptation to do anything contrary to God's will and by refusing to believe anything that contradicts God's Word. The immediate concern of the authors of the epistles was not that believers might become indwelled by demons if they didn't resist the devil, but that

they would sin or be deceived. That could begin a downward progression that, if not stopped, could ultimately lead all the way down to the bottom of the continuum that I mentioned at the beginning of this article. But to reach the end point would require many decisions to yield to Satan and ignore the ever-increasing discipline of the Lord. And if a Christian reached that dark point, he would have consciously made the decision to reject His former Lord, effectively bowing his knee to sin and Satan.

The Way to Victory

Most Christians who allegedly have demons cast out of them soon find that their initial euphoria is doused by the return of their former problem. That is simply because there were no demons in them before their "deliverance." If they want true freedom from their sin or deception, they will have to renew their minds with God's Word and learn how to resist the devil and subdue the flesh just like every other believer (see Rom. 12:2; Jas. 4:7; 1 Cor. 9:27). Ultimately, as Jesus said, it is knowing the truth that sets us free (see John 8:31-36).

If all the so-called "deliverance ministers" could exchange places with pastors who are left with the aftermath of their crusades, they would certainly adjust their "deliverance ministries." Unfortunately, most do not stay around long enough to appraise rightfully their effectiveness. They only report the immediate "results," often what is induced through some form of suggestion or manipulation. I've known of "deliverance ministers" who actually passed out paper bags to everyone present so they would have a place to vomit when their demons came out. No one ever seems to question why the vomiting phenomena is found only in movies like *The Exorcist*, and nowhere in Scripture. And after the "deliverance minister" has come through town, many pastors must spend hours counseling confused young Christians who now believe they have demons living in them because the symptoms that departed after their "deliverance" have now returned.

There is much more that can be said on this subject, but this article is already much longer than I intended. I've previously written an entire book titled, *Modern Myths About Satan and Spiritual Warfare* that covers many other aspects of this topic. You can read *Modern Myths About Satan and Spiritual Warfare* in its entirety online.

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