

‘What’s all the fuss? Does it really matter what we believe? If you deliver people in one way and some one else in another, surely as long as the effect is the same, who cares? If it works, don’t try to mend it!’ But truth does matter. What we believe ultimately determines what we build. I am convinced that much unbalanced teaching in the area of demons and deliverance has resulted in damaging people’s lives, distorting the work of God, detracting from positive witness and dishonouring the gospel. That matters. This is why it is important to examine and make clear what the Bible teaches and not be taken beyond its parameters by peoples’ ‘experiences,’ claims and observations of phenomena.

The Bible makes it clear that demons exist and that people can come under the influence of them with various effects. There is no doubt that casting out demons was a part of Jesus’ and the apostles’ ministry though ‘a closer look at the expulsion of demons during our Lord’s ministry and that of his apostles shows that such deliverance always took place in an evangelistic context. It was never divorced from the preaching of the gospel.’¹ Most of the present day confusion relates to the effects of demons on Christians – born-again believers in Jesus Christ. In this study, I am concerned with examining the nature of demonic influence in the context of Christian life and discipleship, and seeking to present a balanced and biblical view of ‘deliverance ministry’ in relation to Christians. In order to do this, we must first understand the relationship between the teaching of the Bible and our own observation/experiences; we will then consider some important scriptural truths and principles which can inform a biblical understanding of demons and deliverance.

The Bible and Experience

As Christians, the Bible is our ultimate authoritative guide. All truth claims and experiences have to be judged against Scripture. Christians often fall into the trap of accepting their own or other peoples’ subjective observations/experiences as the guide. We hear ‘*Well I know that the Holy Spirit told me!..... from all my experiences I have found out.... It must be true, I experienced it myselfI know someone who was totally changed...*’ These experiences may be genuine but they are not authoritative as a guide, and their interpretation of the experience must be guided by Scripture. Not the other way round. As Leahy writes, ‘well-meaning Christians frequently draw conclusions based on observations and then belatedly seek to buttress those conclusions with verses of Scripture which do not always support the preconceived beliefs.’²

New experiences may send us back to Scripture to re-examine a previously held position. This happened for many of us when we first experienced speaking in tongues. But it should never be with a pre-disposition to validate the experience. It seems to me that one of the leading proponents of modern deliverance ministry, Dr. Ed Murphy, is in great danger of doing this. For example he writes: ‘If their experiences are valid they will find that they are supported by Scripture much more than they had first imagined.’³ Predictably therefore he admits that he changed his own position as a result of ‘accumulated experience’⁴ This tendency to let our observations of phenomena determine our theology, is referred to by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as ‘capitulation to phenomena.’ This is ‘the error of allowing ones doctrine to be determined by theology. The facts cannot be gainsaid, so it is decided that they must be accommodated by theology and therefore theology is adjusted accordingly.’⁵

It is true that Scripture itself points us to being personally guided by the Holy Spirit, and that not every specific spiritual experience is covered by Scripture. You’ll never find a text to validate falling backwards when prayed for, for example. But hopefully nobody is going to build a whole theology out of this phenomena, or make it an integral part of their pastoral approach, as many do with casting out demons - complete with detailed categories of demons, fixed ideas on how the demons gain access and complex methods of deliverance.

In order to avoid letting our experiences lead us away from the firm ground of Scripture I would suggest some simple guidelines:

¹ Leahy, 1975, p.105

² *ibid.*, p.164

³ Murphy, 1992, p.xiii

⁴ *ibid.*, p.429

⁵ Leahy, 1975, p.166

- Realise that the Bible does not direct us in every single detail of life. Rather, it provides us with the foundation of fundamental truths, and the parameters of clear spiritual principles.
- Therefore, don't approach the Bible to collect proof-texts for your own experiences or beliefs.
- Rather, read, study and meditate on the Bible in a regular and balanced way so that you become acquainted with the '*whole counsel of God*'⁶
- Apply good accepted principles of interpretation when studying a text.
- Where the Scripture is silent or unclear avoid comprehensive and dogmatic theories and assertions.

Mind Your Language!

Misunderstanding and confusion often arises from careless and imprecise use of language. This has certainly been the case with demons and deliverance ministry. Let's look at just two examples.

Demonisation

The NT word often wrongly understood to mean 'to be demon possessed' is '*daimonizomai*' which literally means 'to have a demon.' Some writers try to use the fact that it does not mean possession to suggest varying degrees of influence and so support the notion that a Christian can be demonised, though as 'something short of possession.'⁷ But the Bible clearly uses the word to suggest that the demon or spirit is resident within the person. 'Demonisation is always presented as a spirit's inhabiting a human.'⁸

In the story of Legion in the gospels, we read 'many demons had *gone into* him.'⁹ In Jesus 'parable' of the demon returning to the home with other spirits after being thrown out 'the Lord regards the demon as *residing in* the man as its home.'¹⁰

'*Daimonizomenos*' (having a demon) is never used of a born again believer. This is not just playing with words. As we shall see, when it comes to dealing with the enemy it is crucial to know whether he is on the outside or whether he has infiltrated within.

spirit

Not every use of the word spirit (*pneuma*) in the New Testament refers to a demon. Though demons are often referred to as evil spirits or unclean spirits, or just spirits, there are times when the word is to be understood differently.¹¹ It can refer to an aspect of the person and work of the Holy Spirit ('*the spirit of wisdom and revelation*' or '*the spirit of adoption.*'¹²) It can refer to Satan himself ('*the spirit that works in the sons of disobedience*' or '*the spirit of the world.*'¹³ One commentator notes that 'although Essene texts sometime linked evil behaviours with pervasive evil spirits, in Greek "spirit of" often meant simply "attitude of."¹⁴ Examples of this would include '*a spirit of gentleness*' or '*the spirit of faith*'¹⁵ Though not obvious in most modern translations, in the original Greek, there are examples of it being used as shorthand for spiritual gifts.¹⁶

This should warn us to be wary of coming to dogmatic conclusions about different spirits with different names and categories on the basis of verses like 2 Tim.1:7 where '*fear*' and '*timidity*' are surely characteristics or tendencies of Timothy's character. The book, Pigs in the Parlour grouped lots of

⁶ Acts

⁷ Jeff Miller, unpublished paper, p.7. See also Dickason, 1987, p.38 and Dow, 1991, p.27

⁸ Dickason, p.40

⁹ Luke 8:30, my italics

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.40, my italics. Matt.12:43-5

¹¹ The following is taken from Hugh Thompson, 1993, pp.5-6

¹² Eph.1:7; Rom.8:15

¹³ Eph.2:2; 1 Cor.2:12

¹⁴ Keener, 1993, pp.624-5

¹⁵ 1 Cor.4:21; 2 Cor.4:13

¹⁶ 1 Cor.14:12

different spirits under about 50 main headings; that included a spirit of funk, theatrics, and sophistication!¹⁷ This kind of thing is unfortunately not uncommon.

Some Experiences to Question

As well as the question of naming and categorising demons in this way, there are other claims and experiences related to demonology that have to be questioned:

Can a Christian have a demon?

*What are the signs of having a demon?*¹⁸

*Are evil spirits commonplace and should 'deliverance' of Christians have a 'routine place' in ministry?*¹⁹

Can we be demonised as a result of something our ancestors did?

Should we expect deliverance to occur over a long period of time?

Given what I said earlier, in order to answer these questions, we don't just try to find a list of 'proof-texts.' Textual study certainly has its place but first let us be clear on two fundamental truths and one important scriptural principle.

The Nature of Regeneration

Regeneration literally means 're-birth.' It refers to the work of the Spirit of God entering us and thereby making us alive to God.²⁰ It happens as we repent and put our faith in the risen Christ. In this fullest sense it is a new covenant, post-resurrection phenomena. Having the Spirit resident within us is the primary mark of the true Christian.²¹ We become '*partakers of the divine nature*'²² and '*temples of the Holy Spirit*'²³ We are new creations in Christ.²⁴ This is of paramount importance. Our freedom is based upon realising, believing and appropriating the amazing truth of this. Whatever our circumstances, feelings or experience, if we are born again we have the Spirit of God within us, and so have '*all that you need for life and for godliness*'.²⁵

Our Security in Christ

As a result of the new birth, we become new creations '*in Christ*.' The very significant phrase '*in Christ*' refers to both:

- Our legal position – the basis for our experience of new life
- Our vital union – the means of our experience of new life

The living experience of union with Christ will be affected by our understanding and acceptance of our legal position. In relation to the possible effect of demons upon a regenerate person, it is important to know certain truths about the person who is '*in Christ*.' The Bible tells us and can't make it much clearer:

*'the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.'*²⁶

*'he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves'*²⁷

*'you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,'*²⁸

¹⁷ Thompson, 1993, p.5

¹⁸ Dow suggests among other things 'markedly unrestful colour schemes for dress or house décor' (p.37) while Miller writes 'If a person drinks alcoholic beverages, he is susceptible to picking up a spirit of alcohol' (p.14)

¹⁹ As is argued for by Dow, 1991, p.27

²⁰ Eph.2:5

²¹ Rom.8:9

²² 2 Pet.1:4

²³ 1 Cor.6:19

²⁴ 2 Cor.5:17

²⁵ 2 Pet.1:3

²⁶ 1 John 5:18

²⁷ Col.1:13. Note that it is at the point of regeneration that we are delivered by our entrance into the Kingdom of God

²⁸ Eph.1:13

*'you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.'*²⁹
*'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'*³⁰

Christians may fail to experience the good of this, but that does not take away from its truth. Indeed their ultimate freedom will come not from casting out spirits but by realising the truth of their security in Christ as new creations. 'Dealing with Satan is often not a power encounter, but a truth encounter'³¹

It is true that many problems that Christians have are not dealt with simply by stating Scriptural truth and it isn't just a case of 'Cheer up brother! Praise the Lord!' There is a place for counselling, prayer, practical measures etc. But these can only be effective in so far as they help them come to a realisation and appropriation of truth. Anything else is a distraction.

The Nature of Sanctification

Sanctification has two theological aspects:

- We were set apart unto God at the point of our new birth³²
- We are in the process of becoming more like Jesus³³

In a very real sense, we can say that this second aspect of sanctification is a realising and outworking of the truth of our regeneration. Hence Paul's appeals to sanctification are based on 'putting on the new man'

*You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*³⁴

*Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*³⁵

We can see from these verses the importance of the mind. Elsewhere Paul refers to this process as the renewing of the mind³⁶. In many ways we could say that sanctification is the bringing of our mind and whole person into line with our regenerate spirit. A biblical way of illustrating it is to say that, having been born of the seed of the Spirit,³⁷ we carrying God's 'DNA' in us, and the likeness of Christ within, is being worked out in our whole person until Christ is formed in us.³⁸

One important implication of understanding this process of sanctification is that we can recognise that as new creations we have areas of weakness in our life that we are still working on. These are the habits and thought patterns left behind by the old nature. It is true that as the result of the new birth, we are now '*partakers of the divine nature*'³⁹ and have a bias to godliness. We do not continue in the practice of sin⁴⁰ nor are we dominated by sin⁴¹, but we can still sin and will be aware of areas of weakness. These areas will be determined by our temperament, our upbringing, our past life, choices we have made, circumstances etc. We may fall in a particular area. We must recognise this, keep 'short accounts' if we do sin, keep ourselves in the grace of God, stay filled with the Holy Spirit and continue with the discipline of the renewing of the mind by faith and obedience. These weaknesses are not about direct demonic attack. It is part of the nature of sanctification. This is an important point as many

²⁹ Col.2:10

³⁰ Rom.8:38-9

³¹ A.Owen, Power for Living, p.4

³² 1 Cor.1:2

³³ 2 Cor.3:18

³⁴ Eph.4:22-4

³⁵ Col.3:9-10

³⁶ Rom.12:2

³⁷ 1 Pet.1:23; 1 John 3:9

³⁸ Gal.4:19

³⁹ 2 Pet.1:4

⁴⁰ 1 John 3:9

⁴¹ Rom.6:14

people have an over-exaggerated and perfectionist concept of 'freedom from sin' so that they have got themselves even more bound up!

The Continuing Battle

The process of the renewing of the mind takes place in a hostile environment. It is a ***battle*** for the mind. One of the most important pieces of armour is the '*helmet of salvation*' for this protects the mind from the lies, accusations and temptations of the enemy. Although it is true that character weaknesses and occasional sins are not demonic, we must be careful that we do not allow them to dominate or for a particular sin pattern to develop for then we will '*give Satan a foothold.*'⁴² Wayne Grudem writes that 'where there is a pattern of persistent sin in the life of a Christian in one area or another the primary responsibility for that sin rests with the individual Christian and his or her choices to continue that wrongful pattern. Nevertheless, there could be some demonic influence contributing to and intensifying that sinful tendency'⁴³ There can be demonic influence as well as bondage to a habit pattern.

However when we have a healthy faith in our security in Christ and we are living under the grace of God, then we are able to live in peace and joy, full of confidence whilst at the same time being watchful and alert. We can be careful without being fearful, on our guard without getting in a state, vigilant without becoming victimised by demons. We can be upright without being uptight!

A Key Principle - The Truth Shall Set You Free

John 8:30-32 reads:

Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

We should note from this that:

- It was spoken to people who were putting their faith in him
- Jesus speaks about disciplined obedience as the sign of true disciples
- His words show that obedience brings greater revelation of the truth
- It is this revelation of the truth that sets a man free

What you 'know' of the truth - and this is a revelation-knowledge that quickens faith - will determine how much you are able to experience freedom! God, through the prophet Hosea, laments that '*my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.*'⁴⁴ Without knowledge about God and what he has done for us and who we are in Christ, our spiritual life will be diminished if not destroyed. Knowledge is power and knowledge of God's truth has power to set us free.

This explains why we find Paul telling us in his letters that what he prays for Christians is for wisdom and knowledge⁴⁵ In chapter 6 of Romans, he gives us some keys for living in freedom from sin and these begin with what we know. We need to 1) *know* – a revelation knowledge that comes from Spirit-illuminated reading of Scripture 2) *Reckon* - actively engage our faith on a daily basis in these things that we know 3) *Offer/Yield* - practically adopt a way of life on the basis of what you know and reckon.⁴⁶ The primary need for living in freedom is knowledge.

So Let's Be Clear

The demons are on the outside!

A demon cannot be resident within a regenerate person. As Leahy writes 'the Christian cannot be demon possessed. Such a notion contradicts everything which the New Testament has to say

⁴² Eph.4:26-7

⁴³ Grudem, 1994, p.422-23

⁴⁴ Hosea 4:6

⁴⁵ Eph.1:17-18; Phil 1:9; Col.1:9

⁴⁶ Rom.6:9,11,13

concerning the nature of the new birth and the standing of the child of God'⁴⁷ S/he is a partaker of the divine nature, a temple of the Holy Spirit. 'The term *naos*, translated 'temple' in this passage, was used of the innermost sanctuary of the temple where the Divine presence was manifested.' Martin Luther is quoted as having said, 'it is impossible for Jesus Christ and the devil ever to remain under the same roof. The one must yield to the other'⁴⁸

Demons can and will try to assault the mind/emotions of Christians, if given a foothold. This assault may be strong and intense, but even if there are landing strips in the mind and emotions, there is no fifth column! There are no secret demon agents that you have to go searching for before you are able to win the battle. A Christian is completely secure in Christ if s/he stays in the grace of God, holds on to the truth, has faith, and guards their mind.

Your history need not hold nor hinder you

'*You are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.*'⁴⁹ There is no sound biblical basis for the idea of saying that the actions of the natural ancestors of spiritually born again people can have any effect on them. The whole concept of regeneration cries out against such a notion. We received a new history as well as a new destiny when we were born again. The oft-quoted verses from the Old Testament about '*punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.*'⁵⁰ are completely misused. This is directed at those who '*hate God*' and 'the whole emphasis of the verses is the dramatic contrast between the short-lived divine anger and punishment which extends no further than the fourth generation, and the divine love and favour which reaches to a thousand generations and is still not exhausted.'⁵¹ And that is still under the old covenant! But deliverance is a truth issue. If we believe it, then it will affect us; it is not our ancestors' sin that is affecting us; it is the lie that has come from the devil, who is the father of lies⁵²; we need to believe the truth, not cast out a spirit.

Note that this is not saying that traumas that happened to us in our own life before we were born again can have no effect on us mentally and emotionally, or will not be used by Satan to undermine your position in Christ. But here also, deliverance comes from the glorious realisation of the truth that '*the old has gone*'. This is the '*power of the gospel unto salvation*'⁵³ that liberates and transforms people's lives.

Not everything is a demon!!

The main process of sanctification is fought in the arena of the mind, battling weaknesses within and temptations without. But we do not always need to be fighting the demons off!! It is significant that when you find Paul addressing weaknesses in the churches he appeals for right living and discipline where necessary. He does not call for casting out or binding spirits or demons. Russ Parker observes 'while he did mention the reality of evil spirits, Paul has much more to say about holiness of life as the proper standard for Christian living. In the Ephesian letter he challenges the individual and the church to maintain a continuous discipline of holy living; he does not call for daily deliverances!' ⁵⁴ In the church at Corinth Paul addresses some very serious cases of sin and immorality, including an incestuous relationship for which he calls for church discipline⁵⁵, but he never once recommends deliverance from demons. The advice is often far more practical. To the lazy at Thessalonica he doesn't suggest deliverance from a spirit of laziness but says that those who won't work won't eat!⁵⁶ 'We need

⁴⁷ Leahy, 1975, p.95

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.96

⁴⁹ 2 Cor.5:17

⁵⁰ Ex.20:5

⁵¹ (T.Ling, unpublished paper, p.1)

See also Luke 1:50; John 9:1-3; Rom.11:16-17; 1 Pet.1:18

⁵² John 8:44

⁵³ Rom.1:16

⁵⁴ Parker, 1989, p.95. Dow, in contrast, would seem to have us picking up demons regularly (see Dow, p.26

⁵⁵ 1 Cor. 5:1-5

⁵⁶ 2 Thess.3:10-12

to accept our responsibility to obey the Lord and not shift blame for our own misdeeds on to some demonic force'⁵⁷

Setting the Captives Free

What then of those Christians who clearly seem to need some kind of deliverance?

Are they regenerate?

This may seem harsh but it sometimes needs to be asked! Many people need assurance of their salvation but others need to be confronted with their true state. Those who are not may have to stand before Jesus one day to hear the words 'I never knew you!'⁵⁸ Paul was not afraid to raise the issue. He exhorted the Corinthians to 'examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith'⁵⁹

The sign that someone who needs deliverance is actually regenerate is that they are very conscious of the struggle, they are remorseful about their sin, and they desperately want to change.

Are they possessed?

If they are regenerate, no! But they may be under severe assault! When some who are Christians seem to experience something similar to unbelievers who have had demons cast out of them, this may be explained by the loosening of the demons grip on their minds when confronted by the prayer of faith. We have to consider that it may also be explained by the suggestibility of some people when they are in a very emotional state.

If they are regenerate it may not even be direct demonic attack, but a mental or emotional 'stronghold' - a root that has taken hold in their mind and/or pattern of feelings. Tearing up these roots in prayer can also result in emotional manifestations.

An Analogy

When trying to help Christians who need deliverance, I have found it useful to use a simple analogy. It is just a helpful illustration. I do not claim it is a theological stance, though I do not feel it contradicts any theological truth. It seems to be better to use something like this rather than use watertight concepts and terminology that may be theologically questionable to some and which are meaningless jargon to others.

If we compare our inner being (mind, heart, spirit) to a garden, we can say that seeds of truth (revelation) together with the rain of the Spirit, cause the garden to grow, but it also requires our co-operation in cultivating it and guarding its environment. There will be a constant 'weeding' of the garden to do which we do ourselves (the continual discipline of the renewing of the mind). However, sometimes we have been exposed to certain bad seed which has taken root strongly, and sometimes, through a long period of neglect, a number of bad roots are evident. The fruit of these roots are depression or oppression by fear, habitual sin, guilt etc. We feel overwhelmed and unable to clear the garden. Deliverance ministry is when we ask for a friend or two to come and help us pull up these particular roots, and clear the garden again. Once it is clear, we still have the responsibility of cultivating and protecting it. Our aim is not to wallow around in the weeds but to produce a beautiful and fragrant garden bearing much fruit to the glory of God.

Some Practical Steps:

Having hopefully become clear on what exactly we are dealing with in deliverance, and how it fits into the ongoing process of Christian life and discipleship we can consider how to deal with a Christian who, after teaching, discipleship and counselling, is clearly still bound up in some way. This may be an emotional or mental stronghold and/or a demonic assault.

⁵⁷ Grudem, p.421

⁵⁸ Matt.7:21-3

⁵⁹ 2 Cor.13:5

When you feel 'out of your depth' seek the advice of a leader/pastor – there should always be accountability when dealing with people's lives.

Clearing the Ground

1. Establish an assurance of the person's position in Christ.
2. Call for repentance of known sin
3. Clarify that the person genuinely wants release
4. Emphasise the grace of God in which they now stand – God is for them!! Minister faith and hope, not intensity and fear.
5. Show them how the process of the renewing of the mind and disciplined obedience to revealed truth is the way to freedom and is not superseded by a one-off deliverance 'session' (Refer to John 8:30-32; Romans 12:2)
6. Be practical – consider rest, diet, chemical imbalance, counselling etc.

Pulling Up The Roots

7. If it is clear that there is a strong demonic assault on the mind, take another person with you and pray agreeing together in faith to bind those spirits and prophesy the deliverance of the person (see Matt.18:18-20)
8. If it is a mental or emotional stronghold, again pray the prayer of faith with another person to break the stronghold and to affirm their freedom as new creations in Christ.

Planting Good Seed

9. Take time to thank God for the deliverance, sow fundamental truth about their position in Christ and where applicable bring prophetic word with which they can continue to fight the enemy.
10. Disciple them in the continued guarding of the mind, particularly dealing with any footholds, and in a way of life that will help them to stay in their freedom.

Conclusion

My hope is that this will have made clear a biblical and practical position on demons and deliverance in the Christian life which will be workable for those concerned to help Christians come into their rightful inheritance of freedom in Christ. It should provide practical, balanced guidance for such ministry, as well as I hope giving food for thought for those who have held a different view. The main aim is to help bring Christians out of anything that would hold them captive and bring them into their glorious freedom, in Christ.

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