Can a Christian Be “Demonized”?  
by Brent Grimsley and Elliot Miller

A believer (we’ll call him Carl) attends a conference on spiritual warfare sponsored by his church. During a “hands-on” workshop he confesses that an immobilizing fear of rejection has always prevented him from sharing his faith with nonbelievers. The group leader suggests that an evil spirit is responsible for Carl’s problem. After prayer for discernment, and with Carl’s permission, the leader and a few others lay their hands on him to perform an exorcism. Although Carl can hardly remember the experience afterwards, he is told that a spirit named “fear” was compelled to identify himself. After putting up fierce resistance he was finally expelled through the authority of Jesus’ name.

For some time afterward Carl experiences victory over his fear, and even leads a few souls to Christ. But then the old feelings of intimidation resurface, causing him to wonder if another deliverance session might be necessary.

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS

North American Christians have become increasingly aware of their battle with demonic forces. Teaching on spiritual warfare is in great demand today. And the doctrine that Christians can be inhabited by demons is popularly taught by respected teachers across divergent theological lines, from charismatic to anticharismatic dispensational. Entire ministries have been founded for the purpose of delivering Christians from demonic control. As a result, stories like those of “Carl” have become almost commonplace, causing concern to some.

Can a Christian have a demon? The question is not merely academic. The answer affects the type of pastoral care one can expect to provide or receive (e.g., can a point be reached in a counseling relationship where an exorcism becomes necessary?) and the way a believer perceives his or her battle with the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

In this article we will first examine the currently popular view that, while a Christian cannot be “demon possessed,” believers may be “demonized.” This means that (1) demons can reside within believers and exercise control over them, and (2) the appropriate method of dealing with this problem is to cast the demon out.

The second view to be considered (and, in this article, defended) states that a believer cannot be inhabited and therefore controlled by a demonic spirit since he or she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This view does allow that believers may be externally “oppressed” by demonic forces, but maintains that resistance, not deliverance, is the proper method of dealing with this problem. Let’s look at the reasons given for these two opposing views.

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Etymological Considerations
View no. 1 understands the Greek verb *daimonizomai* to be translated “demonized” rather than “demon possessed” because (1) possession implies ownership and Satan does not own anything; (2) the verb is passive and pictures a demon controlling a passive person; and (3) the verb’s root means a “demon-caused passivity.”

It is obvious that “demonized” is a more attractive translation than “demon possessed” to those who believe a demon can invade and inhabit a believer’s body. This avoids the emotive connotations associated with demon possession.

One might take this translation to mean demonic influence from without. But this would be misguided, since (1) this is the main term used in the New Testament to describe people inhabited by demons (along with variations of “have a demon”), and it is never used for anything less; and (2) those who teach that a believer can be demonized also teach that wicked spirits can actually reside within a Christian. These demons would then need to be cast out. Thus, the issue is not the translation of the verb, but the location of wicked spirits relative to the believer. In other words we may ask: Can demons control Christians from within or only oppress them from without?

View no. 2 understands the verb to mean “demon possessed” because (1) the Greek lexicons and theological dictionaries all translate *daimonizomai* as “to be possessed by a demon”; and (2) one of the English dictionary definitions for *possess* is “to gain or exert influence or control over; dominate” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 3d ed.).

Thus, demon possession can be understood as “possession to control.” W. E. Vine translates the verb this way: “To be possessed of a demon, to act under the control of a demon.”

View no. 2 better fits the etymological facts (i.e., the historical usage of the word) because: (1) the issue is not ownership (as in the popularized myth that one can “sell his soul to the Devil”) but the location of a demon relative to the believer, for only if the demon is within the believer is it truly in a position to control (and thus possess) him or her; (2) in Jesus’ parable of the strong man (Matt. 12.29; Luke 11:21-22), He compares His freeing the captives of demon invasion with someone first binding a strong man (i.e., Satan) and then plundering his possessions (Greek *huparchô*, in Luke 11:21). Since the possessions in the parable represent the people Jesus delivers from demons, there is a biblical sense in which Satan can possess people; (3) in Greek the passive voice merely means that the subject is the recipient of the action, a fact perfectly consistent with the term *demon possessed* when properly defined as being inhabited, and thus controlled by, a demon.

Scriptures Cited to Support Invasion of Christians

Due to space limitations we must restrict ourselves to examining the most plausible proof texts. The following two passages are cited time and again by those who teach that a Christian can be “demonized.”

The Case of King Saul. Two passages say that an evil spirit from God came upon Saul. Both times he tried to pin David to the wall with his javelin (1 Sam. 18:10-11; 19:9-10). The first question to be considered is whether Saul was a genuine believer. Although at the time of his anointing as king it appeared as though he were a man of God (1 Sam. 10, ff.), his subsequent behavior was not consistent with an authentic conversion (James 2:14). The fact that he was anointed and used by God does not prove he was a true believer: God used even pagan kings such as Cyrus as His anointed men to accomplish His purposes (Isa. 45:1).

Even if we grant that Saul at one time was a genuine believer and later became possessed by a demon, it doesn’t follow that the same is possible for genuine believers today. Although Scripture does not explicitly describe the nature of regeneration prior to Christ’s atonement, it would appear that believers in the Old Testament did not have the Holy Spirit as a permanent indwelling presence, as do New Testament believers (e.g., Ps. 51:11).

Thomas Ice and Robert Dean, Jr., add an additional reason for rejecting the example of King Saul in this regard: “The Hebrew text says that the evil spirit would come upon Saul or depart from upon him; it is never said to have entered into Saul, as would be expected if demon-possessing was the intended idea.”
The Case of the Woman Bent Double. In Luke 13:10-17 we read of a “daughter of Abraham” who “had a spirit of infirmity” (KJV) which left her bent over, unable to straighten up. Satan is identified as the one who bound her for 18 years (v. 16). There is no question that this sickness was demonically instigated but is there enough evidence to suggest that the woman was a true believer indwelt by a demon?

In Demon Possession and the Christian, C. Fred Dickason, the dean of Moody Bible Institute’s theology department, affirms that the weight of the evidence points in the direction that she was a genuine believer. First, she worshiped at the synagogue. Second, she glorified God because of her healing (v. 13). Third, the phrase “daughter of Abraham” implies salvation when taken with the passage about Zacchaeus (Luke 19:9). The phrase “daughter of Abraham,” however, doesn’t necessarily mean the woman was a true believer in God and Christ, for it was most likely used ethnically to mean she was a Jew. Jesus’ statement about Zacchaeus being a “son of Abraham” means that Zacchaeus should from that point on be regarded as truly a Jew and a member of God’s covenant people, even though he was a hated tax-gatherer for a foreign power, namely Rome.

That she was a regular synagogue attender, and that she praised God for her healing, are beside the point. One could attend synagogue without being a true worshiper of God — consider the scribes and Pharisees. There is no mention of her coming to faith in Jesus. But if she did, it could easily have been a result of her deliverance rather than existing prior to it.

Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the woman bent double was demon possessed. Modern translations render the literal Greek phrase “spirit of infirmity” as “sickness caused by a spirit” (NAS), “crippled by a spirit” (NIV), and so forth. This would seem to be the intended sense of the phrase, as Jesus did not perform an exorcism on her (as He consistently did in clear cases of demon possession) but simply pronounced her cured.

As even Dickason admits, “we cannot conclusively say that the Bible clearly presents evidence that believers may be demonized.” The strongest passages in support of the view are unconvincing. Since the church historically has not held that Christians can be demon possessed, and since the idea of a demon cohabiting a body with the Holy Spirit is naturally repugnant, the burden of proof should be on those who say that a genuine believer can be inhabited by a demon. Yet the most such scholars as Dickason can say is that the Bible does not clearly give evidence that believers cannot be demonized. This is to argue from silence at precisely the point where we would expect clear biblical teaching.

Scriptures against Invasion of Christians

Is the Bible truly neutral on the subject of Christian demon possession? While Scripture does not address the issue directly, we submit that it does lay down certain truths and principles that militate against such a view. In fact, a comprehensive study of this subject in the New Testament should lead to one conclusion: citizenship in Christ’s kingdom and demon possession are mutually exclusive concepts, because demon possession implies citizenship in Satan’s kingdom.

The Plundering of Satan’s Possessions. As we saw above, those inhabited by demons, are considered Satan’s “possessions” which Jesus came to “plunder through the establishment of His kingdom. By faith, all Christians are delivered from the kingdom of darkness and transferred into “the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13; Ads 26:18). It is therefore no coincidence that every occurrence of the word daimonizomai and related terms in the New Testament, and every exorcism recorded, appear to involve non-Christians, usually in the context of evangelism. The reality that “the kingdom of God is near is demonstrated when Satan, the ruler of this world, can no longer hold on to his captives (Luke 10:17-20).

The assumption throughout Scripture is that one might have God dwelling within, or Satan, but not both. For example, the apostle John assures his Christian readers: “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them;
because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). It is reasonable to infer from this that he who is “in the world” cannot also be “in you.”

**Temples of the Living God.** The indwelling Holy Spirit makes the believer a temple of the living God. Paul exhorts the Corinthian Christians not to be bound together with unbelievers on the grounds that they are the temple of God — and harmony between light and darkness, Christ and Belial (Satan), and the temple of God and idols (which Paul associates with demons in 1 Cor. 10:19-20) is impossible (2 Cor. 6:14-18). How then would God, who is greater than Satan, allow a demon to reside with Him in His temple?

In the parable of the man repossessed (Matt. 12:43-45), the unclean spirit returns to the “house” from which he’d been driven out and, finding it unoccupied, resumes residency with seven spirits more evil than himself. We may legitimately conclude that, had he found his old dwelling occupied (by the Holy Spirit), he would not have been able to regain possession of the man.

**Sealed and Kept by God.** The indwelling Spirit also means that believers are sealed by God as His possessions and kept for the day of redemption (Eph. 1:13-14). Although the believer is in spiritual warfare and therefore is still subject to the influences and assault of Satan (Eph. 6:10-18), his or her status as a child and possession of God sets definite limits as to what the powers of darkness can do. 1 John 5:18 states that “He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him.” No evil angel can separate the true believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38-39).

**A Conspicuous Absence.** In light of the clear scriptural fact that Satan is limited in what he can do to believers, it is significant not only that we find no possessed Christians in the New Testament, but also that there is no practical instruction on exorcism within the church. The epistles are certainly not lacking in teaching on spiritual warfare. But though we are frequently warned of the dangers of satanic attack, the method of dealing with the Devil is always the same: “Resist him, firm in your faith...” (1 Pet. 5:9; cf. Eph. 6:10-14; James 4:7). As Ice points out, “Never are believers said to respond to Satan or demons by casting them out, which is always the remedy in the New Testament for a demon possessed person. Instead, for the believer the command is always to stand or resist, which is the counter to an external temptation by Satan and the demonic.”

This is a valid argument from silence. For if deliverance is as important to victorious Christian living as its advocates would have us believe, we can rightly expect the New Testament to deal with it. ice and Dean make th is point forcefully. “We believe that such silence speaks volumes....the Bible clearly claims to give us every thing pertaining to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3) and is adequate to equip us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17)....those who teach Christian possession are by implication denying the sufficiency of Scripture and are going beyond its authority by promoting their own. They have forgotten the warning of Paul: ‘...that in us you might learn not to exceed what is writ ten....’ (1 Corinthians 4:6).”

**EXPERIENTIAL EVIDENCE**

It is important to understand the reasoning of those who Ice and Dean charge with going beyond scriptural authority. In perhaps the most rigorous and persuasive example of this reasoning, Dickason cites numerous cases of people who by all appearances would seem to be genuine Christians genuinely manifesting symptoms of demon possession. For Dickason, like all other advocates of the doctrine, it is the repeated occurrence of this kind of phenomena that persuades him that Christians can have demons.

While Dickason makes it clear that Christians should not place experience above Scripture in determining doctrine, he attempts to demonstrate that Scripture is effectively silent on this matter. Thus he is able to conclude: “We recognize the lack of conclusive evidence in the Bible on this issue and would not elevate our [experience-based]
We find two problems with Dickason’s reasoning. First, although he insists that he does not elevate this conclusion to the stature of biblical truth, for all intents and purposes that is precisely what he and the other proponents of Christian demonization do. For they solemnly teach and defend, as a matter of some importance, a doctrine (i.e., an alleged theological truth) that is based on experience. That of itself is problematic. We believe as a rule it is wiser for teachers to remain silent where Scripture is silent on theological/spiritual issues.

Second, Dickason assumes that because Scripture is silent on the issue it is also neutral. Thus he never adequately deals with the argument from silence explained above; that is, it is not insignificant that a problem as serious as would be demon invasion of Christians is never clearly depicted nor even remotely discussed in the New Testament. Furthermore, as we’ve seen, the Bible is not entirely silent on this question; though it does not explicitly address it, it does implicitly point us toward a conclusion. Dickason and the others have erred by allowing experience to have a stronger impact on their thinking than the implicit biblical evidence against the view.

**Alternative Explanations**

If we do not accept the claims of Christian possession, what are we to make of the many dramatic experiences reported by Dickason, the late theologian Merrill Unger, John Wimber (leader of the vineyard churches), and numerous others? We don’t doubt the reality of many such experiences, but the interpretation these teachers give them is not called for.

**Psychological Sources.** Many of these occurrences could be attributed to psychological sources — not only mental illness (which is no doubt a factor in some cases) but also the power of suggestion. In our long-term research of religious movements and phenomena, time and again we have run into a curious fact: intelligent people can become persuaded of improbable beliefs when striking manifestations issue from their own psyches or the psyches of others, or are experienced as external events. These beliefs range from elaborate conspiracies involving satanic ritual abuse of children, to UFO encounters, to past-life recall, to apparitions of Mary or signs in the heavens produced by Mary. In many of these and other cases a common denominator is a contagious anticipation — often set into motion by the leaders of the event — that such manifestations very well may occur.

It can be observed that phenomena will be cited in support of almost any belief, no matter how unbiblical. There is much that we have yet to learn about the dynamics of our own minds, and some of these little-understood factors demonstrate a powerful capacity to lead people into psychological self-deception.

**Satanic Deception.** If this explanation seems inadequate to account for some of the manifestations, there is a second possible source that could at times work in conjunction with the first. Just as it is possible that demonic as well as psychological factors could be involved in alleged UFO encounters, past-life recall, apparitions of Mary, and so forth, so in the case of Christians being delivered of demons.

Of course, this is exactly what the proponents of Christian deliverance argue to be the case. But just as deception would be Satan’s true objective in the sensational phenomena cited above, so might it be with exorcisms of Christians. Clearly, the Devil would like us to believe he has more power over us than he actually does.

It seems that demons would be capable of producing certain audible, mental, and bodily phenomena from a position external to the Christian in order to create the illusion that the Christian is, in fact, possessed. If they can convince believers that they have the power to control them, then such believers, though actually in control of their own wills, will grant the powers of darkness a degree of control by default. A Christian who resorts to deliverance sessions to
gain spiritual victory rather than standing firm in the promises and provisions of Christ has already been greatly neutralized by the enemy.

**Possessed, but Not Regenerate.** A third possible explanation is that the individuals truly were demon possessed, but were not truly believers. How does one determine who is and who is not a genuine Christian? Only God knows for sure the identities of His elect and the true state of an individual’s soul (see, e.g., 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 Sam. 16:7; and the parable of the wheat and tares in Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43). In some cases the manifestation of wicked spirits could be one step along the way to genuine conversion.

We must conclude that it is impossible to ascertain for certain who is truly demon possessed and who is truly a Christian, since these questions have to do with the interior, unobservable conditions of individuals. It is therefore folly to base one’s view on the apparent condition of Christians being demon possessed when the weight of New Testament theology (regarding the kingdoms of Christ and Satan) leans against that view.

### THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

In addition to the above biblical and experiential evidence, diverse theological arguments are marshaled in support of Christian demonization. We will consider some of the most common examples here.

**Demonic Tormentor, as God’s Chastisement.** One argument states that God allows demons to invade the bodies of believers as a form of chastisement if they continue to sin and give ground to Satan. One such sin often cited is lack of forgiveness (2 Cor. 2:10-11; Eph. 4:26-27; Matt. 18:21-35). But in Matthew 18:35 there is nothing to suggest that the tormentors (v. 24) are to be taken literally. They are an incidental part of the story (or are we to believe that demons torment us until we “repay all” that we owe God?). Neither is there anything in the passage concerning demonic activity.

Second Corinthians 2:10-11 and Ephesians 4:26-27 speak of giving the Devil an “opportunity” or an “advantage” through anger and unforgiveness. But contextually this clearly means giving Satan the opportunity to hinder the church’s unity and witness, not to take possession of believers.

**Punishment for Seeking Special Gifts or Power.** A second argument says that God may allow a demon to invade a believer if he or she seeks special gifts or power. But this warning can be carried to o far: God’s Word clearly tells us to seek spiritual gifts and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 14:1; Luke 11:13).

Of course, we must avoid seeking occultic power. The Bible warns the believer against involvement with demons (1 Cor. 10:14-22), but it never suggests the danger of such involvement is demonic possession.

It is true that there are satanic counterfeits to divine, spiritual power (2 Thess. 2:9). The need, then, is to test the spirits (1 John 4:1-3), the moral character of those purporting to have spiritual gifts (Matt. 7:22-23), and all teaching within the church by the Bible (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:16-4:5); not to deny the possibility of legitimate manifestations of God’s presence and power.

**God Can Dwell with Evil.** Jack Deere, until recently the chief theologian for the Vineyard movement, argues that “Jesus dwells with sin anytime he inhabits the heart of a new believer. If He can dwell in a sinful person why couldn’t he dwell in a demonized person?”

This analogy between demonic evil and the evil of fallen humanity is flawed. God stands in a different relationship to demons than to believers. He is the judge of Satan and demons and the savior of believers. Demons are enemies of God; believers, despite their sin natures, are His servants and friends. God will dwell with His people; He will not dwell with His enemies. This argument fails to recognize the essential difference between evil persons (demons) and
redeemed persons (believers) who have evil within them (the “flesh”), but also have a new nature (the “spirit”) which causes them to ultimately triumph over evil (1 John 3:9).

**Demons Reside in the Soul, Not in the Spirit.** Yet another argument says that demons can reside within a believer’s soul, but not within his or her spirit where the Holy Spirit dwells. But there is no ontological or fundamental distinction between the soul and spirit in Scripture. Indeed, the terms are used interchangeably, so this argument does not stand up to biblical scrutiny. Furthermore, the real issue is whether God and Satan can cohabit the believer’s body (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:19), which would still be the case even if one inhabited the believer’s spirit and the other the believer’s soul. Therefore, this argument is really beside the point.

**DELIVER US FROM DELIVERANCE MINISTRIES**

Some of the teaching on spiritual warfare proliferating today is biblically sound, but most is of decidedly mixed value. Sensationalistic teachings are replacing traditional evangelical doctrine regarding the Christian’s battle with the Devil. Such doctrine always emphasized the protection Christ brings into the life of a believer, the defeat of the Devil by the preaching of the gospel, and the believer’s victory through growth in sanctification. Evangelicals consistently taught that a Christian defeats Satan by submitting to God and resisting satanic temptation. Spiritual warfare was thought of as moral warfare — the armor of God consisting of those moral qualities that the Holy Spirit produces in a believer’s life. The Christian was understood to be “victorious” over Satan by remaining faithful to God despite all satanic oppression and temptation.

There is a grave danger in the syndrome which sees a demon behind every problem in a believer’s life. This mindset obscures our moral responsibility to walk in righteousness, and to “mortify the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13). The Bible never identifies sins such as lust, anger, and pride as spirits but rather as “deeds of the flesh.” It instructs us to “put them all aside” (Col. 2:8), never to cast them out. If we “walk by the Spirit” we “will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

Certainly, the demonic realm works in concert with our flesh and serves to exacerbate its desires in an attempt to provoke us to sin. But this is demonic temptation or oppression, not demonic possession. It is an assault from outside that the believer is well equipped to resist and overcome (Eph. 6:10-18).

What about testimonials of Christian lives being made victorious through deliverance ministry? Even as Christians who believe in the erroneous “healing in the Atonement” doctrine might still be healed because they trusted Jesus for their healing, so Christians who learn to trust Jesus for victory over the Devil can experience victory, even if they erroneously believe they were delivered of demons. But we have often found such misinterpreted victory to be fleeting (as in the story of “Carl”), thus leading to a troubling dependence on deliverance ministry.

The teaching that Christians can be demonized turns our attention from God to Satan. It can inspire fear in the believer where he or she should experience confidence in Christ. As noted, it often makes believers dependent on those with deliverance ministries to protect them from demons. It fosters a spiritual superstition that distracts the believer from both proclaiming the gospel and from personal growth in sanctification.

Perhaps the greatest danger lies in its methodology in determining truth. For, as we saw above, those who teach that a Christian can be inhabited by a demon place their experience above the teaching of Scripture and deny the sufficiency of Scripture in the process. Once the church allows subjective experience to replace the objective test of Scripture on one issue, a precedent will be set for future issues. A theological Pandora’s box will have been opened, leading to an epidemic of superstition and doctrinal deterioration.
We have seen, however, that Scripture never teaches that a Christian can be inhabited by a demon. Nor does it teach that there is any spiritual problem for which a Christian should undergo an exorcism. Therefore, we can confidently rest in the victory Christ has won over the demonic forces and we can trust God’s resources in our battle against the world, the flesh, and the Devil. May God deliver us from this specious and divisive teaching, and may we use our spiritual resources in Christ and retain the sound teaching of our evangelical heritage.

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**NOTES**

7. Dickason, 127.
8. Gordon R. Lewis notes that “in the early church (of Acts and subsequently) deliverance ministries occurred in connection with the conversion and baptism of heathen, but were not continuous practices among church members.” (“Demons and Christians,” unpublished paper, 11.)
10. Ice and Dean, 123.
14. For detailed theological arguments against the triochotomist view of man see almost any work on systematic theology, including Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1990), 167-70.
16. Frank and Ida Mae Hammond’s *Pigs in the Parlor* (Kirkwood, MO: Impact Books, 1973) is representative of this approach of casting out sins from believers. Names of common demon groupings listed include: bitterness, resentment, hatred, and anger (113), but these are clearly deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21).