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THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS: An Examination of the Teachings of Bob Larson

by Steven Parks

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SYNOPSIS

For many years, the Christian Research Institute has warned believers about a massive shift occurring within the contemporary church. Sadly, many believers are being ushered out of the age of objective biblical exposition bequeathed to us during the Protestant Reformation and into the age of unbridled subjective experience. Examples abound, but few exemplify the paradigm shift better than Bob Larson.

Larson's newfound emphasis on spiritual warfare highlights his proclivity toward subjectivism, and his recent venture into performing live public exorcisms before capacity crowds further accentuates his sensationalistic approach to ministry. While some of what Larson teaches on demonology and spiritual warfare is theologically sound, what he gives with the right hand of sound biblical exegesis is quickly snatched away with the left hand of alleged experiences with the supernatural.

Larson thus wavers between presenting balanced teaching grounded in biblical truth and espousing dangerous ideas established by his alleged encounters with the supernatural. Unfortunately, even the biblical aspects of Larson's theology end up overturned as a result of his supposed skirmishes with the demonic. As Larson's focus on spiritual warfare intensifies, subjective experience reigns supreme.

Throughout the millennia, the Christian church has faced myriad trials in the form of doctrinal controversies. While enduring these tests of faith, one constant temptation for believers has been to base their beliefs not on the objective written Word of God but rather on subjective experience. Movements such as Montanism and mysticism have enticed many away from objectivity grounded in Holy Scripture and into the realm of autonomous esoteric experience.

Not much has changed over the centuries. For years, the Christian Research Institute has been warning believers about a massive paradigm shift occurring within the contemporary church, as the faithful are being tempted to abandon biblical exposition in favor of extrabiblical experiences. While any number of examples could be given to illustrate evangelicalism's growing obsession with subjectivity, few exemplify this paradigm shift better than Christian television and radio personality Bob Larson.

Larson uniquely embodies the church's perpetual struggle to subjugate personal experience to the inspired text of Holy Scripture. His evident desire to remain faithful to the Bible is tragically overridden time and again, and in the end most of what he teaches is based more on alleged encounters with the supernatural than on a careful exegesis of Scripture.

LARSON'S BACKGROUND

Born in 1944, Bob Larson grew up in rural Nebraska. A popular youth excelling in sports and academics, Larson earned the titles of best athlete and best all-around student in high school. During those years, Larson developed a fondness for rock and roll, becoming the lead singer of a band called The Rebels, which enjoyed some measure of success.¹

Shortly after enrolling at the University of Nebraska in 1963,² Larson experienced a dramatic conversion to Christianity and felt he could no longer follow through with his "secular" plans. Abandoning his dream of becoming a medical doctor, Larson left college altogether in 1964,³ pursuing ministry with an exceptionally fiery passion.

Drawing from his experience as a rock musician, Larson traveled around the country warning the nation's youth against the dangers associated with this style of music, even gaining national attention in *Newsweek*.⁴ Larson soon parleyed this notoriety into a successful writing career, eventually publishing several books detailing the perils of rock and roll.

In 1972, Larson founded Bob Larson Crusades, a strategic move allowing him to expand his focus to deal with issues related to cults and the occult, authoring works on these topics as well.⁵ From these humble beginnings, the broadcasting empire known today as Bob Larson Ministries extended its influence, ultimately taking the evangelical community by storm.

LARSON'S INFLUENCE

Readers may already be living in a community sponsoring one of Larson's ubiquitous conferences or they may even have attended such an event. Larson has lectured in over 70 countries,⁶ and travels an average of three to four days per week, often attending to ministry duties from his hotel room.⁷

A prolific author, Larson has nearly 30 books to his credit, both nonfiction and fiction, the latter including the bestsellers *Dead Air*, *Abaddon*, and *The Senator's Agenda*. Over the years, Larson has worked tirelessly to spread his message, and these efforts have gained him a prominent platform within the evangelical Christian community.

As the host of *Talk-Back with Bob Larson*, a live national radio broadcast heard daily via satellite, Larson offers his unique take on issues ranging from Christian living to apologetics. Employing his trademark style of broadcasting, he has enjoyed much success as a radio personality, and *Talk-Back* has aired in 200 cities throughout the United States, Canada, South America, Western Europe, and North Africa.⁸

These noteworthy accomplishments have even caused the secular world to sit up and take notice. Television talk show hosts such as Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, Montel Williams, and Sally Jessy Raphael have all featured Larson as a guest on their programs. In addition to the daytime talk show circuit, Larson has appeared on *Larry King Live* and *Politically Incorrect* hosted by Bill Maher.⁹

Larson also hosts two television broadcasts of his own. *Bob Larson in Action*, a half-hour television series aired weekly on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, is seen "on over 1500 television stations, 16 satellites, the Internet, and thousands of cable systems around the world."¹⁰ *Bob Larson Presents: DWJD-TV* (Do What Jesus Did-Television) is Larson's newest weekly half-hour television show and is aired nationwide via Sky Angel, a direct broadcast satellite system.¹¹

LARSON'S EMPHASIS

After Larson made a name for himself by speaking out against rock music, he shifted his attention to the arena of spiritual warfare. Believing there was a lack of reliable teaching on this topic, Larson took it upon himself to "fill that void with biblically sound facts that meet the scrutiny of serious theological review."¹²

Aware of chicanery passing itself off as dependable teaching, Larson believes that Christians “need to be very objective in the realm of spiritual warfare,”¹³ denouncing sensationalism for what it is: “Now some in the church have a rather unhealthy, sensationalized, preoccupation with the demonic, and I understand that. And there has been much repute [*sic*] brought on the arena of this issue by those who have dealt with it very unwisely. They have done so in a psychologically unsound way, and a theologically inappropriate way.”¹⁴

Since an information gap exists, who better to fill it than Bob Larson, a man who purports to have seen more supernaturalism than any living human?¹⁵ Indeed, Larson’s experiences with the supernatural are so astonishing that he is hesitant to relate most of what he has experienced for fear of overwhelming believers.¹⁶ The problem Larson refers to is evident to those carefully examining his teachings on the nature and activity of demons.

LARSON’S DEMONOLOGY

Larson believes studying demonology is part and parcel of Christianity, and he openly laments contemporary evangelicalism’s ignorance in this area.¹⁷ Some of what Larson has to say about demonology is biblically based and has likely been of help to those searching for sound teaching on the subject. For this he is to be commended.

For example, Larson teaches that demons are fallen angels,¹⁸ possessed of all the attributes of personal beings, including will, emotion, and intellect.¹⁹ As fallen angels, Larson correctly notes, “demons are noncorporeal spirits,”²⁰ that is, they are immaterial creatures with no extension in space,²¹ possessing no mass.²² To his credit, Larson explodes the myth that Satan is the infinite, omnipotent, and omnipresent counterpart of God. In no uncertain terms, Larson affirms that Satan is finite,²³ unable to forcibly coerce individuals to sin against their will,²⁴ and limited to operating in one place at one time.²⁵

While these teachings are certainly biblical, Larson nullifies them when he recounts his personal experiences with alleged demons. This penchant for inconsistency is evident throughout Larson’s teaching, and it is common for him to espouse both sound and sensationalistic statements on the same topic.

For instance, while Larson rightly asserts that demons are noncorporeal beings, he also teaches they manifest themselves physically.²⁶ According to Larson, most of these occurrences border on nuisance, such as when demons have crank-called those to whom Bob was ministering deliverance;²⁷ yet Larson believes some crafty demons have gone so far as to duplicate his own physical appearance, masquerading as Larson himself in order to obstruct genuine exorcisms.²⁸

As insidious as these occurrences sound, Larson suggests that many demons have an even more sinister goal in mind, as in the case regarding an incubus, “a demon assuming human physical dimensions and sexually cohabiting with a woman. Succubus is the counterpart, when the demon assumes female proportions and actually cohabits with a man.”²⁹ These erotic encounters may even result in a “demonic impregnation,” which must be countered with a prayer that “Satan’s supernatural offspring be aborted.”³⁰ These ideas have more in common with pagan superstition than with biblical demonology. To ascribe physicality to evil spirits goes beyond the boundaries of Scripture.

In fact, such assertions undermine important truths, not the least of which is the empirical evidence Jesus offered for His own resurrection. After Christ had risen from the dead, He presented Himself to the disciples thereby demonstrating His victory over death. Fearing that He was a spirit, the disciples continued to waver concerning His identity. To dispel their doubts, Jesus offered them a sufficient test for discerning spirits from nonspirits: “See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39, NASB). If demons can physically manifest themselves and even impersonate individuals, then Jesus offered an inadequate proof for His own resurrection. Upon what basis could the disciples conclude that an evil spirit was not masquerading

as Jesus? The Savior offered His physical body as evidence to the contrary, alleviating any uncertainties harbored by the disciples. Such proof, however, would have been insufficient if demons could assume physical dimensions at will.

Furthermore, Larson relies on his subjective experiences with alleged evil spirits to support his views regarding their abilities. Although Larson affirms that demons are finite beings, he ascribes to them godlike supernatural capabilities. Sometimes the forces of darkness create minor disturbances, such as teleporting important items out of view in order to hide them,³¹ or even setting off hundreds of fire alarms simultaneously.³² On other occasions, demons have materialized dangerous weapons out of thin air,³³ tampered with car brakes,³⁴ and even caused earthquakes registering 5.0 on the Richter scale!³⁵

This is not the picture of demons presented to us in Scripture. It is not even consistent with what Larson teaches elsewhere when he declares, "Demons are noncorporeal spirits. They have no physical mechanism to express their will. They need a body to accomplish their designs."³⁶ Such inflated assertions regarding the overwhelming power and pervading influence of demons have caused many to become overly preoccupied with satanic activity, focusing more on our adversary than upon our Advocate.

LARSON'S SIDESHOWS

In addition to his skewed demonology, many evangelical observers have expressed concerns over a recent development in Larson's ministry: he now conducts live public exorcisms.³⁷ During one such event, Larson declared:

My Bible tells me in Colossians 2:15 that Jesus made a public spectacle of the devil. I'm doing this for a reason. You know if God hadn't been dealing with my heart in recent months, I never would have done anything like this. But God has been teaching me that I need to give the Christian community a window into the world of the reality of the supernatural, so we wake up, and get off our duffs, and get busy for God.³⁸

This claim comes despite the fact that Larson previously denounced such public displays:

Quite frankly I often cringe when I see public evangelistic displays of what purports to be supernaturalism that only draws attention to a particular individual on stage in front of the camera...I'm just telling you that [exorcisms] take place in private. They take place in cloistered settings where I and a band of intercessors are battling for the sake of a soul, and they're not the sort of thing where the cameras are rolling, and the lights are on, and folks can look at it and say, "Wow! Look at what he's doing. He must have the power of God in his life. Oh, what a wonderful servant of the Lord," because that sort of thing is too easily given over to pride. Cameras aren't running, nobody is there to get any glory out of it.³⁹

Now, based upon an erroneous interpretation of Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, Larson feels he must share in Christ's work of publicly humiliating Satan by casting demons out of the afflicted before large crowds. Why does Larson practice what he recently condemned? The answer seems clear: a poor exegesis of Scripture guided by an unbridled subjectivity.

Larson's proclivity toward sensationalism becomes truly evident in his alleged encounters with the supernatural. In this regard, his "literalizing"⁴⁰ of Scripture has drawn serious criticism⁴¹ and is actually the basis for some of his more outlandish claims. For example, based upon Paul's teaching that the Word of God is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), Larson wields his Bible as though it were an actual weapon, dealing lethal paper cuts to demons,⁴² even making eunuchs out of incubi.⁴³ Other creative uses of Scripture include restraining demons with invisible rope (because "a cord of three strands is not quickly broken"; Eccl. 4:12)⁴⁴ and raising a person's body temperature by holding a Bible over the individual (because the Word of God is like a lamp: Ps. 119:105).⁴⁵

Though he appeals to Colossians to substantiate his practice of conducting public exorcisms, Larson seems to miss the entire thrust of Paul's argument: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15). The apostle painted a word picture that would have been familiar to first-century readers. As Dr. N. T. Wright, Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey, has observed, "The phrase *triumphing over them* alludes metaphorically to the practice of Roman generals following a conquest. In the days before the modern news media, the most spectacular method of announcing a far-off victory to people at home was to march in triumph through the city, displaying the booty taken from conquered peoples, and leading a host of bedraggled prisoners through the streets as a *public spectacle*" (emphases in original).⁴⁶

Notice the manner in which Jesus humiliated the forces of darkness: through the instrumentality of the cross. Contrary to what many might have expected, Jesus was actually conquering Satan and his minions at Calvary, subjugating them to open shame. Dr. Curtis Vaughan, professor of New Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, amplifies this point: "Christ, in this picture, is the conquering general; the powers and authorities are the vanquished enemy displayed as the spoils of battle before the entire universe. To the casual observer the cross appears to be only an instrument of death, the symbol of Christ's defeat; Paul represents it as Christ's chariot of victory."⁴⁷

It is no secret that Jesus performed exorcisms in the presence of many witnesses (see, e.g., Mark 5:12-13). Nevertheless, it was not those displays that subjected the evil spirits to open shame. Rather, the cross of Christ humiliated the forces of darkness, a historical reality that occurred once for all time two thousand years ago.

LARSON'S THEORIES

While Christianity has traditionally held that demon possession is a rare phenomenon, Larson contends that cases of possession abound. He maintains that demons attach themselves to such inanimate objects as tourist souvenirs,⁴⁸ houses,⁴⁹ and even entire nations⁵⁰ (American demons are the toughest variety⁵¹).⁵² This, however, is just the tip of the satanic iceberg. Demons also possess people, and in Larson's theology, nobody is safe from incursion. Targets for possession include people from all walks of life, even infants in the womb⁵³ and Christians.⁵⁴ The latter have acted as the impetus for Larson's public exorcisms, since unbelievers aren't exactly beating down Larson's door seeking deliverance. Even if they were, they would find little help from Larson, who believes — in polar opposition to the historic Protestant position — that exorcisms should not be conducted on unbelievers: "I argue, what business do you have trying to cast a demon out of somebody who isn't a Christian? Think about that for a minute. Do you know how dangerous it is to cast a demon out of somebody who isn't a Christian?...So in effect, never do an exorcism until the person is a Christian."⁵⁵

Larson rarely attempts to offer a biblical defense for his view of the demonization of Christians. Like the majority of his teachings on spiritual warfare, his conclusions are based more on experience than Scripture. Although Larson once vehemently opposed the notion that Christians could be possessed, his experience overruled his earlier teaching:

A change in my own theology and heart came about very gradually. The more I got involved in conducting exorcisms, the more I realized that a greater and greater percentage of the people I was ministering to were Christians...but as I began to deal with more and more people who were honestly born again, who knew the Lord as their Savior, and were demon possessed I had to face the reality that my theology, my public statements on the issue, all that I had taught about this was in error.⁵⁶

In Larson's demonology, possession is the result of demons gaining "legal rights"⁵⁷ to a Christian through the believer's open rebellion against God, such as involvement in cults or the occult.⁵⁸ Demonization can

also be the result of seemingly innocuous activity, such as having too much alcohol to drink with dinner⁵⁹ or becoming overly enamored with one's automobile.⁶⁰

Larson affirms, nonetheless, that possession usually results from grievous sin. Since Christians often do their utmost to avoid sin, it is often necessary for Larson to locate the cause of demonization outside of the Christian. He finds suitable explanations in the form of curses.⁶¹

In Larson's worldview, "curses are exacting, legal arrangements of the spirit world."⁶² Such arrangements give demons permission to inhabit their victims until the curse receives a detailed voiding.⁶³ These enchantments generally come in one of two forms: ancestral or relational curses.

"Ancestral curses are often the most serious and may effect [*sic*] descendants for generations."⁶⁴ These are hexes placed upon a victim's forebear and are passed down to succeeding generations. Relational curses occur because of close associations one might have with those involved in the occult; thus, a Christian wife may become possessed because of her husband's occult activity;⁶⁵ a person may be demonized because of a close friend's occultism;⁶⁶ and an individual may even be susceptible to satanic invasion because of a business associate's misdeeds.⁶⁷ Larson argues that "even though an exorcist might not suspect the victim has any ancestral, generational, or relational curses that need to be broken, there is no harm in addressing these issues as a matter of caution."⁶⁸

Scripture teaches that such ideas are absolutely repugnant. The Israelites had an infamous proverb blaming others for their woes: "The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek. 18:2, NASB). In response to this saying, God declared, "As I live...you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore" (v. 3, NASB). Yahweh set the record straight, pointing out that "the son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself" (v. 20, NASB). In short, individuals are accountable for their own wickedness and not for the sins of others.

When pressed for explicit biblical evidence for his belief that Christians can be demonized, Larson points out that Jesus performed exorcisms within the confines of synagogues:

Now in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon. Now Luke chapter four has always been one of my favorite passages of Scripture, but when I read that, and I saw what it said about a man in the synagogue, I realized that the very first case of demonic possession the Lord Jesus ever dealt with was in church! Here was someone in the synagogue. Now he was there to worship God. He was there presumably with right spiritual motives, and he had a demon who spoke out of his body. I mean we're talking about real demonic manifestation here.⁶⁹

This is the best Larson has to offer. Sometimes the subject of the story changes (he occasionally uses the "daughter of Abraham" mentioned in Luke 13⁷⁰), but the basic thrust of his argument remains constant: If you attend a synagogue, you're a believer.

Such arguments need no lengthy refutation. The Pharisees attended synagogue; yet Jesus referred to them as "whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27, NASB). Jesus affirmed that in the confines of the visible church there would be believers and unbelievers until the end of time (Matt. 13:24-50). Assuming that location defines a state of belief is therefore a gross error.

Unfortunately, arguments advanced by others in favor of the demonization of Christians are too numerous to address here.⁷¹ Suffice it to say, such assertions contradict Scripture, which affirms that Christians are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), who is more than able to protect His people from unclean spirits (1 John 4:4).

THE PENDULUM

We have the same experience a man has whose head is dizzy. When he is to climb a high tower or to pass over a bridge under which deep water is flowing, one must simply blind him, must hang a coat over his head and lead and carry him blindfolded; otherwise he falls from the tower and breaks his neck or falls into the water and drowns....We, too, must simply close our eyes, follow the leader, the divine Word, and say: I will let myself be wrapped in swaddling clothes, will let a coat be put about my head, and will let myself be led to that which I believe and do not see; and thus I will live and die.⁷²

So cautioned Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation. Luther was well acquainted with those who refused to content themselves with the written Word of God. Among his chief adversaries in the Reformation were the Enthusiasts, who denigrated the divine Word by supplementing it with esoteric experience. Larson essentially commits the same error.

Like a pendulum swinging precariously from side to side, Larson wavers between presenting balanced teaching grounded in biblical truth and espousing dangerous ideas formed by his alleged encounters with the supernatural. In the end, the biblical aspects of Larson's theology are overturned as a result of his skirmishes with the demonic, and as the pendulum continues its erratic course, subjective experience reigns supreme.

As with the lightheaded individual in the illustration above, those who rely on sources other than God-breathed Scripture to guide them safely through the crumbling towers and wobbly bridges of this life will eventually find themselves in a world of spiritual agony. Such is the tragedy of those who look to Bob Larson for advice on spiritual warfare.

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