

# Can Christians Have Demons?

Pastor Keith Hassell

This topic has become a very controversial and even hot topic with modern Christians. I remember being in debates over the subject with other theology students in my early preparations for ministry. I took the position of my religious background that no real Christian could be demon possessed, because the Holy Spirit lived inside. How could God and a demon both *possess* the same vessel? It was not until I had experiences with the deliverance of Christians that I was forced to seek answers for what I was seeing.

Dr. Ed Murphy, in his book The Handbook For Spiritual Warfare published by Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., states on page 429 the position of the church fathers: “As we have seen, the church fathers saw that believers demonized before coming to Christ *were not automatically set free* from their indwelling demons when the Holy Spirit came into their life at conversion. They also knew full deliverance would be more process than crisis. At catechumens, new believers were built up in the truth in Christ. Then, as a final assurance of full deliverance from demons, they were dealt with by the Order of Exorcist, which the church appointed to perform this ministry. It was completed before the believers were baptized...”

Obviously, my position about Christians and demons was not a historical position. Add to that the increasing experience of other Christian counselors, pastors, and ministers who have had the same discoveries of demonic personalities operating in believers’ lives, it becomes necessary to find a way to explain, accept and deal with this issue in order to help these Christians find freedom without destroying their faith by telling them they are not Christians because they are demonized.

The issue of controversy seems to be over the terminology, *demon possessed*. Those who would disregard the idea that a Christian could have a demon would argue something like this: *Every Christian is indwelt or possessed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit cannot dwell with demons. Therefore Christians cannot have or be possessed by a demon.* There is a problem here though. There is no scripture that directly addresses this issue. It is a logical presupposition rather than truth based on direct biblical interpretation. Dr. Murphy states that if we say the same thing about Christians and sin, the logic would not hold true with biblical truth: *“Every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit cannot dwell with sin. Therefore Christians cannot sin.”*(p. 431)

The idea of “demon possession” came about by the unfortunate ongoing mistreatment of the Greek word *daimonizomai*, the word translated as *demon possessed* in many versions of the Bible. In Merrill F. Unger’s book, What

Demons Can Do to Saints published in 1977 by Moody Press, he says that this is not the best translation of this word. He says “*daimonizomai* (means) ‘being demonized’, i.e. under the control of one or more demons...*All* demonic invasion is demonization of whatever degree of mildness or severity.” If this translation of *daimonizomai* is accurate, then we can stop describing people as being “demon possessed” and use the term “demonized” which only speaks of the influence of demons rather than of ownership. Dr. Timothy Warner points this out on pages 79-80 of his book, Spiritual Warfare published in 1991 by Crossway, when he says, “We obtained our English word demon by transliterating the Greek word *daimon*. We should have done the same thing with the Greek word *daimonizomai*—a verb form from the same Greek root. It would come into English as “demonize,” and we could then speak of the *degree* to which a person could be demonized rather than being limited to the either-or options imposed by the “possessed”-“not possessed” view...A Christian may be attacked by demons and may be affected mentally and sometimes physically at significant levels..., but spiritual possession clearly implies ownership and would seem to include the control of one’s eternal destiny. In either case it would be impossible to be owned and controlled by Satan and have a saving relationship with Christ at the same time. So if the question is, Can a Christian be demon-possessed? The answer is clearly no.”

The Bible gives us several examples of God’s people and demons. First there is the case of King Saul (I Samuel 9-13). Saul was a true worshiper of Yahweh. He was anointed, and filled with the Holy Spirit on several occasions, even prophesying. Yet three different times an evil spirit entered Saul causing his whole personality to change. David was called in to play the harp to soothe this evil personality’s effect on Saul. Next, there is the case of a woman, a daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:10-17), who was bowed over because of an evil spirit. The New Testament describes other devout Jews, God’s own people, who were afflicted with demons (Mark 1:21-28; 39).

Jesus sent out his disciples to Israelite towns with power over unclean spirits, to cast them out (Matthew 10:1, 5-6). Then there was the case of Christians Ananias and Sapphira whom Satan had filled their heart to lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10). Paul warns of giving place to the devil (Ephesians 4:27). Clearly God’s own people can be significantly “demonized” without being owned by the devil.

Another thing to consider is the “tri-unity” of man who has a *spirit*, and a *soul*, and a *body*. Paul speaks a blessing over the saints at Thessalonica saying, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thessalonians 5:23). Paul also tells us that the word of God is a living and powerful two-edged sword “piercing even to the division of *soul* and *spirit*, and of *joints and marrow*, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of

the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Evidently God is able to distinguish between the complex areas of what is spirit, what is soul, and what is body. I Corinthians 6:17 tells us that “He who is joined to the Lord is one *spirit* with Him.” This would make sense as we consider that God is Spirit (John 4:24). It is the spirit of man that is described as being “born again” in John 3:5-6. The soul is generally understood to be the personality aspect of man. It consists of the mind, will, and emotions. These areas are to be brought under the control of the Holy Spirit: “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16).

It seems unreasonable to consider that anyone could be “one spirit with the Lord” and also “one spirit with demons”. Yet it seems possible that even as the flesh still influences the lives of Christians through the mind, will, and emotions so demons could still be at work here as well. Many “Christians” whom I have seen delivered from demonization genuinely loved the Lord but found themselves almost powerless to overcome in areas of their lives. Reoccurring sins, mood swings, addictions, depression, fear, etc. seemed to come upon them like a dark cloud. At such times it seemed that “something” or “someone” evil was at work inside of them. And usually after a time of deliverance they found themselves feeling “free” and more able to bring these areas of their lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Were they “demon possessed”? No. They were still *owned* by the Lord. Were they “demonized”, i.e. tormented by demons? I believe so. Of course, this is also the case when physical infirmities are caused by demonic assault. Understanding the Biblical distinction between spirit, soul, and body helps to explain the controversial issue of whether a Christian can be under the influence of demons.

If Christians can genuinely be “demonized”, then it is vital not to deny them access to scriptural deliverance, nor to destroy their faith by suggesting that they are not Christians. We need to stop stigmatizing those needing deliverance as being strange or bizarre. To do so would alienate people from the very help they need. Casting out demons was a normal part of New Testament ministry. This ministry brought rejoicing rather than disdain (Luke 10:17). It is important for the Church to become informed about the nature of spiritual conflict and to work the works of Christ who said that “these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons...” (Mark 16:17).

Deliverance is not intended to be a cure all and certainly does not eliminate personal responsibility before God for sin. Even after deliverance, people are required to walk in fellowship with God or else the situation can become worse (Matthew 12:43-45). Yet it was *part* of the ministry of Jesus and the early church to set people free to serve and follow God. As I see it, deliverance is *primarily* for Christians. Think about it: who are the ones who have the greatest qualification for deliverance anyway...the ones who want to follow God, or the unbeliever who does not? Do we then argue over when they can be delivered, before or after we

lead them to Christ? In understanding the conflict, may we be a vehicle of God's liberating power to those who are genuinely looking for freedom from the powers of hell!