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## Demon Possession - Chapter 7 of "Counseling and the Demonic"

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### DEMON POSSESSION

In chapter 3 we examined scriptural teachings about demons and demonic influence. Here we will focus specifically on the characteristic features of “demon possession” as manifested in Scripture, and in the writings of those involved in deliverance ministry. Next, we will consider the ways in which a person may come under demonic influence, here called avenues into the demonic. Then we will consider limitations of the biblical accounts of demon possession. Finally, we will examine demonic influence in other cultures.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMON POSSESSION

Because the English translations of the New Testament use the expression “demon possession,” and because those involved

in deliverance ministries also typically refer to demon possession, we will use that expression in this section as we examine the characteristic features of those who experience this extreme form of demonic influence.

Dickason, quoting Unger, defines demon possession as “a condition in which one or more evil spirits or demons inhabit the body of a human being and can take complete control of their victim at will.”<sup>1</sup> Thus one aspect of demonic influence is the loss of personal control over what one says and does, and presumably over what one thinks and feels as well.

Although Dickason uses the expression “demonic possession,” he repeatedly states that the issue is not one of ownership.

Again, the term *possessed* is misleading. . . . The real concept is invasion and control to some degree, lesser or greater; but never ownership.<sup>2</sup>

The demon . . . seeks to control whatever area of life or whatever behavior is not controlled by the Holy Spirit. The issue is still control, as the term *demonization* means [emphasis in original].<sup>3</sup>

At this point Dickason blurs an important distinction, that between unbeliever and believer. As noted earlier, the unbeliever belongs to Satan; thus the demon-possessed unbeliever is both owned and controlled by Satan. By contrast, the believer belongs to the kingdom of God, thus is not owned by Satan. Further, there is no biblical data to indicate that the believer can be demon possessed.

Other aspects of demonic influence, in its extreme forms, include loss of consciousness, speaking with another voice, and projection of a distinct personality. Koch suggests that descriptions of demonic possession in Scripture indicate that it is manifested by unusual physical strength, outbursts of rage, disintegration of the personality, and supernatural sensibilities such as clairvoyance and precognition.<sup>4</sup> In addition, we have found scriptural accounts to include going about without clothing; inability to see, hear, or speak; and bizarre behavior (see chapter 3).

Case studies reported by those involved in deliverance ministries suggest that characteristics of possessed persons include one or more of the following: moral depravity; melancholy; apparent idiocy; ecstatic episodes; extreme aggression; periods of unconsciousness; foaming at the mouth; resistance to a wide variety of religious activities such as prayer and Scripture reading; speaking in unlearned languages; phantom pain; depression; impure thoughts; obsession with or participation in actions of a sexual, sensual, and hostile nature; hearing “voices” that utter condemnatory statements or order acts such as murder or suicide; and suicidal obsessions.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the features observed in those believed to be demon possessed parallel characteristics found in scriptural examples. This is no great surprise, since those concerned with demon possession are usually professing Christians and, at least to some degree, scholars of Scripture. This makes it difficult to clearly conclude whether their observations and reports may be biased to some degree by what scriptural accounts have led them to expect. This concern is particularly significant since these accounts come almost exclusively from case studies rather than more rigorous scientific investigations with standardized procedures for observation, statistical analysis, and checks on the reliability of the resulting data.

Clearly, it is fairly easy for skeptics to dismiss accounts of possession as little more than naive credulity. This is particularly likely since many of those who profess to have dealt with demon possession seem to find demons everywhere; at the same time, those in deliverance ministries seem to have little notion of the human side of evil. However, we should not dismiss the notion of possession too quickly merely for these reasons. The biblical evidence is overwhelming that Jesus viewed persons as “possessed” and cast out demons from them. How then can we constructively address the criticisms of the skeptics while affirming that such phenomena do occur?

Table 2 presents a summary, taken from the writings of several authors, of the features observed in those “possessed.”

Some thorny problems are raised by the list of characteristics in Table 2. First, it is difficult to distinguish many of the reported cases of demon possession from exaggerated forms of

**Characteristics of Demon Possession<sup>5</sup>**

Knowledge of supernatural  
 Supernatural strength  
 Going about naked  
 Unable to hear, speak  
 Seizures  
 Blindness  
 Use of "different" voice  
 Presence of distinct personalities  
 Bizarre behavior  
 Fierce, violent behavior  
 Unusual behavior/attitudes (e.g., vicious toward self)  
 Feeling of overpowering evil  
 Self-report of demonic influence

**Table 2**

everyday patterns, most of which are sinful. Second, many presumably possessed persons do not manifest the features presented in this chart. Third, as we shall see in chapter 9, those with mental disorders as defined by DSM-III-R may also manifest many of the same characteristics found in those demon possessed.

**Mack** Mack exhibited an obsession with pornography and peep shows, together with chronic masturbation. In addition, he showed general disruption in his social relationships. He came for counseling when his wife discovered he had been buying pornographic magazines. She insisted that he get help. They had been to a spiritual counselor who suggested that Mack was possessed by a demon of lust; the counselor had attempted to cast out the demon, but to no avail. Ultimately, the counselor concluded, with some justification, that Mack did not sincerely desire to be delivered.

In counseling it was soon discovered that Mack's sexual habits traced to his childhood, when he was one of a group of boys who spent their time stealing pornographic magazines and engaging in a variety of sexual activities with each other and with anyone else available. This pattern of sexual obsession and promiscuous sexual activity had continued into adulthood, even after Mack's marriage. His wife had discovered only one aspect of this far more pervasive pattern.

At what point does one conclude that a person such as Mack is

demonically influenced rather than merely exhibiting a chronic pattern of sinful behavior? Could Mack be both sinful and demonically influenced—even possessed?

In a similar fashion; it is believed that most people become discouraged at times, and many become depressed, at least on occasion. Suicidal and homicidal thoughts and actions are also commonplace. For example, it is reported that C. H. Spurgeon suffered from serious bouts of depression.<sup>6</sup> His condition appears to fit the criteria for a major depressive disorder as defined in DSM-III-R.<sup>7</sup>

The biblical accounts of Elijah and Jonah suggest that they, like Spurgeon, may have been depressed (see 1 Kings 19; Jon. 4). It seems likely that to some greater or lesser degree these men were demonically influenced, or at least that demonic forces attempted such influence. Perhaps some would say that they were possessed by the demon of depression, though it seems doubtful that they manifested the symptoms described in Table 2.

The mere presence of depressive, suicidal, or homicidal features is not enough, it seems, to warrant one to conclude that demonic influence is present to an extraordinary degree. What then is sufficient evidence?

If one examines the entire list of characteristics of demonic possession presented in Table 2, it appears that this list could be separated into two groupings: 1) patterns common in mental illness, and 2) common sinful patterns which are also found sometimes in mental illness (see Table 3). It appears that when we examine behavioral manifestations there is little unique to distinguish demon possession.

The manifestations of demonic influence can most readily be observed in those circumstances where demonic influence is most obvious. Thus it is helpful, at least initially, to focus on these more overt forms of demonic influence. Keep in mind, however, that demonic influence varies tremendously in terms of degree; different individuals may show many or few of the features described here. Similarly, these characteristics may be present to greater or lesser degrees, and for larger or smaller periods of time.

It is important that we not make the error of assuming, merely

**Characteristics of Demon Possession and Other Maladies<sup>9</sup>**

- Features Associated with Mental Disorders
  - Unable to hear, speak
  - Seizures
  - Blindness
  - Use of "different" voice
  - Presence of distinct personality
  - Bizarre behavior
  - Unusual behavior/attitudes (e.g., vicious toward self)
  - Feeling of overpowering evil
  - Self-report of demonic influence
  - Knowledge of supernatural
  - Supernatural strength
- Features Associated with Both Mental Disorders and Sin
  - Going about naked
  - Fierce, violent behavior
- Unique Features
  - ???

**Table 3**

because a person does not show obvious symptoms such as those listed in Table 2, that he or she is free from demonic influence. Our knowledge of Satan's craftiness should lead us to suspect that just the opposite may be true: demonic influence may be greatest in individuals who seem least likely to be so afflicted. Satan can appear as an angel of light, and he has always had his false teachers and false prophets.<sup>9</sup>

One further issue requires consideration. While we have, so far, thought of demonic influence as falling along a continuum in terms of degree, the biblical accounts of demon possession and the casting out of demons raise the possibility of an important qualitative distinction. These accounts suggest that demons may actually inhabit a person. Does such inhabitation result in a qualitative difference in the nature or degree of influence? Might there be substantial differences between the degree and form of influence when a demon inhabits the person rather than influencing him or her from outside the person's body? Both biblical data and case reports support such a distinction. A critical factor is whether the individual is a Christian; since the unbeliever belongs to Satan it should not be surprising that Satan's emissaries can inhabit or possess the unbeliever. This is not so with the Christian.

The inhabitation of a person by one or more demons results in

different forms and degrees of control; this can have significant implications for the treatment process. We will return to this in a later chapter. For now, we will consider how a person comes under demonic influence.

### AVENUES INTO DEMONIC INFLUENCE

There are a number of avenues into demonic influence or possession. Central among these are habitual patterns of personal sinfulness and a variety of forms of cultic and occult worship. Though some might dispute it, others include the use of alcohol and street drugs as well as the abuse of legitimate medications among avenues into demonic influence.

Possession of charms and amulets, and of objects associated with occult practices, may also make one open to demonic influence. Horoscopes, tarot cards, Ouija boards, and possibly the game *Dungeons and Dragons* may be additional avenues into demonic influence. Participation in the contemporary hard rock music culture, especially with such groups as AC/DC and KISS (Knights in Service to Satan) can also be an avenue into demonic influence.

A central theme in practices which lead persons into demonic influence is an unwillingness to accept God's sovereign control over the conditions of life, including health, possessions, relationships to others, status and social influence, and knowledge of the future. As was discussed earlier, turning to those things rather than to God is false worship, and all false worship involves allegiance to Satan, whether or not we are aware of it.

Doubtless some will question whether one or more of those activities is harmful. Indeed, in some instances individuals likely have participated in some or all of these activities without apparent harm. It is one of the hallmarks of Satan's character that he is able to corrupt and pervert even such things as music, art, or medication, which, used rightly, are holy and right and good.

Sexuality is one example of this perversion of God's good creation by Satan. God created us as sexual beings. The sexual relationship within marriage was pronounced as holy and pure; it is a mutual obligation of marital partners to each other (1 Cor. 7:1–5). Most commentators believe that a central theme of the book of Song of Solomon is celebration of sexual intimacy in marriage.

Yet, we find accounts in Scripture and in society around us countless forms of perverted sexual behavior: fornication, adultery, homosexual practices, bestiality (zoophilia), rape, and sexual abuse. Even the withholding of what is due the marriage partner is a perversion of sexuality, sometimes carried out in the mistaken belief that Scripture teaches that sex is for procreation alone.

In addition to the possibility of persons choosing to commit sexual sin, there is also the possibility of demonic influence or possession playing a role in sexual activities. This seems particularly likely when the activities are of such a compulsive nature that the person seems unable to control them, or when they take some of the more extreme forms, such as sexual sadism, sexual abuse of children, and child pornography.

Personal sin is a key element in most cases of demonization. However, some believe that demons may come to control a person apart from any personal volition or action, coming instead through the occult sins of the parents.

Dickason refers to this as “ancestral influence.” He argues that bondage, mediumistic abilities, and demonization are not passed genetically. “However, if the parents back to the third or fourth generation were involved in the occult or had demonic abilities, then the children may be affected or even invaded as a legal judgment from God.”<sup>10</sup>

Dickason reports that as many as 95 percent of cases of demonic influence, in his experience, are the result of involvement with demons by ancestors. He believes that the boy who was demonized from childhood is such a case.<sup>11</sup>

That demonic influence occurs in several generations in the same family seems quite likely. However, Dickason’s view of ancestral influence seems doubtful. He bases his conclusion on an interpretation of Exodus 20:3–6, which refers to God’s “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands [of generations], to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” Dickason misinterprets this passage. Its focus is on God’s mercy to those who obey him, mercy to “thousands of generations” of descendants of those who keep God’s ways. God’s dealing with the descendants of King David illustrates God’s faithfulness in carrying out this

promise. Further, other scriptural passages make it clear that sinful patterns are passed through families by the normal processes of learning and social influence rather than by inheritance (or “ancestral influence”).

Finally, there is nothing in the Gospel text to support Dickason’s claim that the boy who was demonized from childhood became that way through ancestral influence; if anything, the text points away from this conclusion since his father brought him to Jesus for deliverance; further, in response to Jesus he said: “I do believe; help my unbelief.”

It is important to be aware that Satan and demons are not passive agents. They are actively involved in seeking to gain influence over people, and they employ a variety of strategies toward this end. Among Satan’s ploys are temptation, accusation, deception, harassment, bodily harm of all persons, and possession of unbelievers.<sup>12</sup>

We will return to the question of avenues into the demonic again in chapter 9 when we examine behavioral indicators of possible demonic influence. In summary, all false worship provides a possible means of coming under control of demonic influence since it involves, as we saw in chapter 4, knowing or unwitting worship of Satan. Similarly, all other forms of sinful activity, especially when repeated or habitual, provide an avenue for coming under demonic influence since they involve giving that object or activity the respect, status, and importance that rightfully belongs to God alone (Exod. 20:1–6). In effect, these too are forms of false worship and lead one directly to Satan and the demonic.

Dickason notes that “moral responsibility for continuing in the state of possession and for acts committed while in that state stands as a clouded issue.”<sup>13</sup> The problem is that the individual is not in control when the demon(s) exercise control, and in some instances the individual may be so effectively disabled mentally by the demon(s) that he or she is unable to seek help, perhaps even unable to recognize his or her plight.

It is noteworthy that in some ways this conclusion regarding the responsibility of the demon possessed parallels the reasoning behind contemporary laws providing that persons may be found “not guilty by reason of insanity” or “guilty and insane.”

In either case, the treatment of choice has been psychiatric/psychological treatment rather than imprisonment. The view that the possessed person has diminished mental and volitional capacities also parallels beliefs that once persons have begun to drink, those who are genetically predisposed to alcoholism may be unable to stop, and may have greatly lessened abilities to think rationally or to act morally as well.

It is important to remember that demon possession occurs only in the unsaved. However, while the demon-possessed person has had his or her mind blinded, we must remember that this person has reached this state through a variety of conscious decisions involving choosing to come under demonic influence. The Christian, with the indwelling Holy Spirit, belongs to God's kingdom, thus is protected from possession, and has the resources through the body of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to resist Satan's efforts (compare Ephesians 2:1-6; Colossians 1:13-14 with Ephesians 6:12-18).

#### LIMITATIONS OF POSSESSION ACCOUNTS IN SCRIPTURE

Biblical accounts of demon possession are limited. We cannot assume that Jesus delivered all those afflicted with demon possession in his day. It seems likely that Jesus delivered only those who were brought to seek his aid, or who came into contact with him for other reasons. There must have been many in Israel during the life of Jesus who were demonically influenced or possessed, but who did not receive deliverance.

For several reasons our concept of demonic influence should not be limited to what may be gleaned from the biblical accounts of demon possession, though it must be guided by them.

First, these stories may intentionally address only selected issues. An analogy to biblical teachings regarding the church may be helpful here. Basic principles about the nature and purpose of the church are revealed, and examples of how it functioned are presented. However, much is left unsaid; this encourages the search for Spirit-led wisdom in adapting the church to different times and cultures.

Similarly, in the case of the demonic, basic principles regarding the demonic are given in Scripture, providing an important

interpretive framework for understanding the specifics of contemporary cases of demonic influence or possession. The alternative is to develop our demonology from the reports of demons themselves; this is most dangerous since they are by their very nature liars and deceivers.

Second, it appears that the primary purpose of the Gospel accounts of deliverance from demonic influence was to demonstrate the coming of the kingdom of God and the person of Jesus Christ. The focus, then, is on the person and character of Christ rather than on the nature and manifestations of demons. Put more strongly, the foremost purpose of Scripture is to teach us about God, though teaching about demons may also be included.

Third, as noted in chapter 3, there are numerous accounts of satanic and demonic influence reported in the Gospels in places other than in stories of demon possession. This underscores the importance of distinguishing these conditions.

Fourth, as noted above, it seems extremely doubtful that Jesus expelled demons from all who were afflicted in Palestine in his day, any more than it is plausible to believe that he healed all who were sick of various diseases. It seems likely that these miracles were performed as signs of the presence of the kingdom of God on earth. This raises doubt about whether miraculous healings and castings out are part of God's usual mode of action. Further, Christ gives no indication that it was his purpose to seek out and deliver all who were possessed by Satan or demons.

Fifth, we must ponder what differences existed between those who were delivered from demons by Jesus and those who were not delivered. Many factors may distinguish such individuals. Jesus apparently delivered only those who were brought to him for help at their own initiative or the initiative of others, and those who came in contact with him because of curiosity or possibly other reasons. This may be an important factor to keep in mind as we seek to deal with similar phenomena today.

Sixth, Satan's methods are varied. There are several reasons why demonic influence or demonization may not be typical for Satan's current mode of activity in the United States, though this appears to be rapidly changing. It appears that there have

been special outpourings of satanic activity in the form of overt demonization at certain times in human history. These outpourings appear to coincide with significant manifestations of the power of God at work in human history and with the shifts in God's modes of activity in human history. Some believe that the outpouring of demonic manifestations during the life of Christ was unprecedented.<sup>14</sup> This should not be too surprising since the death and resurrection of Christ represented a pivotal victory for God. That Satan should mount an unprecedented campaign at such a time is only to be expected.

Another major factor that may account for the relatively low frequency of possession in recent history in the United States is the fact that Christianity has historically been the dominant religious system in the U.S. Moreover, the recent growth of religious pluralism in the U.S. may, in turn, account for the apparent increase in reports of possession. Thiessen notes that the possessions with which Jesus dealt involved persons from outlying districts, persons who were half gentile; such phenomena apparently were not seen in the environs of Jerusalem, where reverence of God was more common.<sup>15</sup>

A final factor that might account for differences between the biblical accounts and current manifestations of satanic influence is that Satan may well vary his tactics with time and culture. As a deceiver who can appear even as an angel of light, it should be no surprise that Satan would choose tactics which are least likely to attract attention to his activities.

Much in Scripture suggests that even in the time of Christ Satan manifested himself in other more subtle ways, as well as in overt influence or possession.

### **DEMON POSSESSION IN OTHER CULTURES**

Getting an accurate picture of the occurrences of demonic influence in other cultures is difficult. Most accounts of demonic influence from such settings are in the form of case histories and anecdotal stories, many of which may be distorted by memory failure and inaccurate perceptions. However, some tentative conclusions may be drawn. In many instances, those who profess to be involved in the demonic in Third World settings do not seem to show the same characteristics discovered in

biblical accounts of possession. Often these individuals also lack the features that would likely result in their being diagnosed with a mental disorder.

For instance, witch doctors, shamans, fakirs, and magicians have great power and influence in their cultures. They are feared, revered, and respected. Rather than manifesting loss of reality contact, they appear to be knowledgeable, clever, resourceful, crafty, and cunning. Those whom Jesus delivered from demonic influence were quite different from these persons. The ones Christ delivered were generally outcasts, unable to function effectively in society. In contrast, the behavior of Simon, the magician of Samaria (Acts 8:18–25), and the fortune teller of Philippi (Acts 16:11–22), appear to be more similar to the contemporary patterns of demonic influence as seen in Third World cultures.

What conclusions may be drawn from these observations?

First, we should be aware that much of what the Bible has to say about demonic influence has often been overlooked by those who focus narrowly on demon possession. Such a narrow focus reveals only a limited picture of Satan and his influence. Remember that Jesus characterized the Pharisees as belonging to Satan. Also, Paul was afflicted by a messenger from Satan.

Second, we must recognize that to distinguish between mental disorders and demonic influence we must seek to understand all the symptoms and forms of demonic influence.

#### SUMMARY

In seeking to understand the characteristics of demon possession, most writers have focused on accounts of casting out demons during the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament Gospels. However, the signs of demonic influence in these accounts are similar to those associated with mental disorders.

In approaching the question of whether the Gospel accounts of possession give an adequate basis for discovering the forms of demonic influence, several limitations of these accounts have been identified: 1) they provide an interpretive framework rather than providing exhaustive information about the influences of demons; 2) their emphasis is on showing the presence

and power of Christ; 3) there is much evidence throughout Scripture that demons also operate in other ways; 4) it is doubtful that Jesus cast out demons from all those so afflicted in Palestine in his day; 5) Jesus only cast demons out of those who were brought for his help or with whom he came into contact for reasons such as curiosity; 6) Satan's methods vary with time and culture.

Accounts of demonism in Third World cultures, and of demonic influence in other biblical passages, suggest a great variety of characteristics of people under demonic influence. Often the demon possessed are individuals of power and influence who are respected, revered, and even feared. Thus, we should be cautious about concluding that all instances of demonic influence will exhibit the symptoms most often associated with demon possession in the Gospels. Unfortunately, that fact complicates the issue of the relationship between demonic influence and mental disorders.

If these conclusions about the effects of demonic influence are accurate, then the tendency to view demonic influence and mental disorders as alternate explanations for the same phenomena needs to be reconsidered. It is to this issue that we turn in chapter 8.