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Can Christians be Possessed by Evil Spirits?

Introduction

In the African ministry context, accusations of demon possession are commonplace. It would appear that every strange, bizarre, or abnormal form of behavior is attributed to demon possession. Unfortunately, in many cases there is a very thin line between occurrences of mental disorder and demonization. This is because the symptoms in several instances are quite similar, and the precursors may be quite complex. For these reasons, another article in this issue sought to address the issue of discerning whether certain conditions were caused by mental disorders or demonization.

In addition, the predisposition to regard every unexplained behavior as having a demonic origin was also addressed in this issue and described “the expanded middle.” However, one debate that has continued for decades and which is the concern of this chapter is, Can Christians be possessed by evil spirits?

Demon Possession in the African Context

The African worldview is quite tolerant to accusations of demon possession. This is because of the belief that spirits—good and evil—permeate the cosmos; many belonging to the malicious category. Also, because ritual specialists such as diviners, healers, and sorcerers are dependent upon communication with the spirit world and are sometimes overwhelmed by the spirits with whom they have contact, demon possession is not an unfamiliar occurrence. Indeed, in African Traditional Religion (ATR) it is believed that certain persons possess the ability to induce spirit possession

upon others, especially during cases of disputes. In addition, it is believed that mental disorders or possession by an evil spirit can occur when a person is under the sentence of the divinities or ancestors. Although such episodes may not be considered strange within the continent, the real issue is whether these occurrences of demon possession can also include Christians, whose lives are committed to Christ.

ATR Beliefs Concerning Possession and the Bible

In many respects the African worldview find parallels with that of the Bible. Among the areas one finds similarities is the acceptance of a realm in which spirits operate. This is significant because in some respects modern Western education attributes every unexplainable human condition to either psychological or neurotic causes; however, the Scriptures acknowledge the existence, working, and interference of demons in human affairs.

The Old Testament demonstrates the operation and powers of evil spirits especially in opposition to the people of God, and especially through the gods in the nations surrounding Israel. However, it is not until the New Testament period, during Christ's earthly ministry, that open confrontations and manifestations of the demonic are encountered. From the beginning of Christ's public ministry when a demoniac identified the Messiah in the synagogue, until the end of his ministry when he hung on the cross, demons dogged Christ's pathway. Yet with each and every encounter with the demonic Jesus displayed the supremacy of his kingdom and the sovereignty of his power.

Demon Possession in the NT

The most common expression denoting demon possession in the NT is the word *daimonizomai*—often translated as demon possession. However, most scholars consider that a better translation would be demonized (Boyd 2007; Love 2000; Wilson 2000), or acting under the influence of a demon. In other words, demons may attempt to attack, influence, harass and oppress Christians but may not gain full control of them.

It is important to make a clear distinction between demonization and demon possession. Demon possession is a state in which demons have total control over the will and life of a person, so that they determine what the person does, says, and how they behave. The Gospels reveal several accounts of demon-possessed persons. A classic example is the demoniac who lived in the region of Gadarenes (Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39). Distinctive features of demon possession are evident from this Bible narrative: The victim made his home in the tombs (Mark 5:3); chains could

not contain him—he always broke loose (vv. 3, 4), he cut his body with stones (v. 5); he was often heard crying out night and day in the mountains (v. 5); he was naked (Luke 8:27); and his thoughts had been taken over by the demons so that when he spoke it was the words of the demons that emerged (Mark 5:7-9).

Another gospel account that describes the effects of demon possession is found in Mark 9:14-29. From this passage the evident effects of demon possession include deafness and dumbness (vv. 17, 25), epileptic-like features—foaming at the mouth, gnashing of teeth (vv. 18, 20), and suicidal behavior—thrown into the water, or fire (v. 22).

It is interesting to note that besides psychological characteristics such as self-mutilation, and suicidal behavior, other features, which accompany the presence and possession of demons are physiological conditions such as muteness or dumbness, and other epileptic-like symptoms.

Other narratives in Scripture also indicate the devil's ability to inflict physical harm or affliction upon the children of God. These include the diseases that broke out all over the body of Job (Job 2:1-10). Paul also spoke about an affliction from the devil (2 Cor 12:7-10), a messenger from Satan, a thorn in his flesh, which some consider to have been near sightedness.

To sum it all up, demonization can be manifest in a wide variety of physical ailments, psychological conditions, or relational issues. Symptoms of the demonic activity can also have close parallels with mental conditions (Appleby 2012).

Degrees of Demonization

Demons are constantly working in order to tempt and influence people away from the will of God. However, whenever they are resisted through the Word of God or prayer, their hold over any victim is weakened. A survey of the Scriptures indicates clear efforts by demons to lead God's people away from the pathway of life, and from obedience to his commands. They also reveal that no one is immune from such attacks or influences; what is critical is the response of each individual to these demonic promptings.

An example of demonic attempts to influence believers is the experience of Peter, who in response to Jesus' question, had under inspiration, proclaimed that Christ was the Messiah. Barely moments later under the influence of Satan he sought to dissuade Jesus from his appointment with death on the cross (Matt 16:13-23). In this incident, Christ made it obvious that the identity of the spirit and the motivation underlying Peter's remonstrance was satanic. It was for this reason that Jesus' rebuke of Peter was swift, public, and stern. What is noteworthy about this account is that

no sooner had Christ commended Peter for being used by the Holy Spirit to reveal his true identity as the Messiah and Savior, he also condemned him for the role the devil sought to use Peter to play in hindering the plan of salvation. This is an object lesson on how one so recently inspired can fall prey to satanic influences once the believer's guard is lowered.

Apparently, that episode was not the sole occasion that the devil had sought to gain control of or destroy Peter. At Christ's last supper with his disciples Jesus lamented to Peter, seeking to alert him of the demonic influences around him and of the danger ahead: "And the Lord said, 'Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to *Me*, strengthen your brethren'" (Luke 22:31-34). Jesus' warning to Peter actually is a lesson for all believers to learn—the devil and his demonic lieutenants are relentlessly seeking to control Christians, to "sift them as wheat!"

Ralph Wilson outlines what may be described as several levels, or degrees, of demonization he finds in the New Testament. These are temptation, influence, oppression, obsession, and finally possession (2000). In this spectrum of demonic activity, Wilson seeks to demonstrate how the activities commence with seemingly innocuous temptations and then quickly graduate to the desired stranglehold of total possession. Similarly, Enoch Wan agrees that demonization may vary in degree and duration, and outlines the following stages: Oppression is the "state/process of being tempted spiritually with a sense of being weighed down physically and psychologically," as in the case of a Christian being disturbed or harassed by the devil. Possible symptoms are heaviness or obstruction in body and/or mind, depression, discouragement, dullness, etc. (2003).

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* suggests that obsession is "a persistent disturbing preoccupation with an often unreasonable and unnatural idea or feeling," as a result of the devil's (or evil spirits') intrusion into the life of a Christian, impelling the person to (or preoccupying the person with) certain ideas, emotions or actions from without. After his repeated oppression by an evil spirit, King Saul was obsessed by the thought of killing David because he was filled with jealousy and consumed by his hatred of David; though he had previously been anointed by the Spirit and prophesied (1 Sam 10:1, 9-13). Inhabitation is the process of being temporarily occupied, leading to being inhabited or indwelt by the devil or evil spirits (Luke 13:11-16; 1 Cor 5:5).

Possession is "the act or state of being dominated or possessed by an extra-ordinary force (e.g., passion, impulse, idea) or extraneous personality (the devil or evil spirits)." Demonic possession by evil spirits occurs among non-Christians who have not been born again and are subject to the complete control of Satan in the kingdom of darkness (Wan 2003).

While there are those who believe that Christians can be demonized, others like Hart take a contrary view. John Hart insists that the primary issue as pertaining to demons is the question of space—demons seek to inhabit their victims, and that is why in every instance in which the Scriptures deal with the subject of deliverance it entails casting out the demons (Gk: *ekballien*) (2001:207-240). In Hart's opinion the primary objective of demons is spatial inhabitation of humans to gain full control of their faculties. Although a number of the advocates of spiritual warfare such as Boyd, Wan, and Appleby cited above support the position that Christians can be demonized, I tend to agree with Hart that this may not be biblical. Among the reasons for this is:

1. Living in a covenant relationship with Christ indicates that the believer belongs to Christ, therefore Satan's ownership over their life is null and void.
2. The Spirit of the Lord dwelling in the Christian is at enmity with and wars against the flesh, the world, and Satan; these struggle to turn the believer away from the paths of the Lord, while the Spirit helps the Christian remain on track.
3. Although a Christian can be harassed, tempted, influenced, or oppressed by demons and Satan so long as they continue to resist demonic innuendos and refuse to yield their will to these evil forces they cannot be inhabited by these powers.

What the foregoing suggests is that there is a constant ongoing attempt by demons to gain control over humans—Christians and non-believers. Therefore, each Christian has a duty to be watchful and sober to hinder access into their heart via footholds of the devil. The counsel of the Wise man in this context is therefore far more significant: "Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life" (Prov 4:23). In another article the important subject of footholds and strongholds is discussed.

Regarding the significance of constant vigilance on the part of Christians against the wiles and snares of Satan and his demonic hosts, Ellen White states:

And it is because Satan can most readily control the minds of those who are unconscious of his influence that the word of God gives us so many examples of his malignant work, unveiling before us his secret forces, and thus placing us on our guard against his assaults. The power and malice of Satan and his host might justly alarm us, were it not that we may find shelter and deliverance in the superior power of our Redeemer. We carefully secure our houses with bolts and locks to protect our property and our lives from evil men; but we seldom think of the evil angels who are constantly seeking access to us, and against whose attacks we have no method of defense. If permitted, they can

distract our minds, disorder, torment our bodies, destroy our possessions, and our lives. Their only delight is in misery and destruction. Fearful is the condition of those who resist the divine claims and yield to Satan's temptations until God gives them up to the control of evil spirits; but those who follow Christ are ever safe under his watchcare. Angels that excel in strength are sent from Heaven to protect them. The wicked one cannot break through the guard which God has stationed about his people. (1969:335, 336)

Implications

Although the characterization of demon possession has been loosely ascribed to many persons and to various behaviors and conducts it is important that this concept be properly understood for a number of reasons:

1. If a person's condition is wrongly categorized or classified then the method of therapy will be faulty, too. I happened to have been invited to participate in a deliverance session involving a pretty, young lady who had been brought by her friends to be set free from her condition. However, before the main deliverance session, after much singing had preceded the period, I requested to hear the lady tell her story herself rather than through her friends. It emerged that she was actually plagued by the trauma of having accidentally killed a local shaman who had attempted to rape her in their home during the absence of her mother. After struggling and resisting him she found a metal object with which she struck the man, resulting in his death. Upon her mother's return that very day she made the decision to send the young teenage girl out of their country immediately, never to return. Thus, she became a refuge far away from home and family. Now married, she often felt put off at night whenever her husband approached her in bed. After listening to her account, it became apparent that we were dealing with the effects of trauma, rather than with demon possession. After conducting a brief counseling session and leading her through a prayer of confession, we opened our eyes to behold a new creature altogether, free from the guilt and shame of the accusation of being demon possessed, smiling and joyful in her new-found freedom in Christ.

2. Another reason the question whether Christians can be demon possessed is vital is that rather than encouraging careless living it urges careful living. Christians may live cautiously in this world. The awareness that demons are a reality and that they are relentlessly on the prowl seeking to influence, harass, oppress, inhabit, and possess the children of God should have a sobering effect on all. As many have noted, the language of Scripture speaks incontrovertibly of warfare, or what Adventists refer to as the Great Controversy. This is a major theme reflected throughout the Scriptures. Christians are living on a battleground, and in wartimes this

consciousness needs to seep in and remain with all. There is an enemy on our trail; we cannot be asleep or careless.

3. Accordingly, all Christians need the comprehensive coverage, which Christ alone can provide against demonic devices. Paul's call to put on the whole armor of Christ makes total sense in the light of the nature, intensity, and resolute character of the conflict Christians are caught in (Eph 6:10-18). The weapons of defense are critical to shield from the devil's attacks, just as the weapons of offense are needed to call for re-enforcement and to keep at bay the demonic forces.

4. Another critical feature this subject brings to light is the fact that the antidote for demon possession is complete possession by the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian secures the heart and life for the Lord and hampers the ability of demons to dwell in the Christian. Ultimately, God through the Holy Spirit, wants to dwell in believers, but demons also want to inhabit and control God's people. The only safeguard is being filled with the Spirit. No wonder Paul advocated being drunk with the Holy Spirit, rather than with wine or any other spirits (Eph 5:18).

5. Finally, there is the issue of command and control. Christians need to learn the authority given to them in Christ to expel and reject the power and attacks of demons. The weakest Christians, allied to Christ through the power of his name and by the blood of the Lamb, can obtain victory over the hosts of demonic forces they confront. Spiritual authority has been given by Christ through a chain of command over all demonic forces (Matt 28:18; Luke 10:17-19) so that in every confrontation with demons, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord (Phil 2:10). No longer are Christians to cower in fear or walk in timidity for the Gospel they preach is a message of power in the name of Jesus (1 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 1:7).

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