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## Lesson #10

### Demonization and the Christian

Can a Christian be demonized, i.e., indwelt by a demonic spirit? Three answers have been given: Yes, No, and Yes/No!

#### A. *Arguments for a Modified Demonization of Christians*

Mark Bubeck, Merrill Unger, Thomas White and others suggest that a believer can be demonized, but in a somewhat modified or restricted sense. Based on the doctrine of *trichotomy*, according to which a person is comprised of three faculties: body, soul, spirit, they affirm that a demon can inhabit a Christian's soul and body, but not his spirit. The body is one's physical constitution. The soul is comprised of one's mind, emotions, and will. The spirit is that element or faculty which relates to God and at regeneration is born anew, sealed and permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Objections:

- There is no explicit evidence for this in Scripture.
- It is based on the validity of trichotomy (1 Thess. 5:23), a doubtful doctrine (see Mark 12:30). Man is dichotomous: material and immaterial, body and spirit, together which constitute the soul. See Gen. 2:7. Soul = embodied spirit.
- Often times "spirit" and "soul" are used interchangeably in the NT, thus prohibiting us from drawing rigid distinctions between the two.
- The whole person is renewed by the Holy Spirit, not just one faculty or element within that person (2 Cor. 5:17).
- To restrict a demon to a person's soul and body, excluded from his spirit, is to suggest that there is a rigid, spatial compartmentalization of our beings. But "where" is the soul in the body? "Where" is the spirit? These are biblically illegitimate questions. It is an attempt to apply physical categories to spiritual realities.

Clinton Arnold (*Three Crucial Questions*) offers a slightly different interpretation. Without drawing a distinction between soul and spirit, he refers to "the core of the person, the center of his or her being, his or her ultimate nature and identity" (85). It is this within each person that undergoes a radical, indeed supernatural, transformation in the new birth. He explains:

"At the center of this person's being now lies a desire for God and a passion to please him in every respect. *This is the place of the Holy Spirit's dwelling. No evil spirit can enter here or cause the Holy Spirit to flee. To extend the image of the temple, we might say that this is the inviolable 'holy of holies'*" (84).

Here again we see an attempt to restrict the access of a demonic spirit to certain "places" or "spiritual regions" within the individual. Does Arnold's model successfully avoid the weaknesses and criticisms of the "trichotomist" theory noted above?

#### B. *Arguments against the Demonization of Christians*

##### 1. **Texts which describe the defeat of Satan**

John 12:31; 16:11; Col. 2:14-15; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8. The argument is that if Satan has been judged, stripped, and his work "destroyed" (1 John 3:8), how can he or his demons indwell a believer? Compare/contrast these texts:

Mt. 12:25-29 "versus" Mt. 16:23; Acts 5:3; 1 Pt. 5:8

John 12:31; 16:11 "versus" John 17:15

Eph. 1:19-22 "versus" Eph. 6:10-13

Col. 1:13; 2:14-15 "versus" 1 Thess. 2:18

## 2. **Texts which describe the promise of divine protection**

a. *Matthew 6:13* - Deliverance from the evil one is dependent (not automatic) on our prayer for it. What happens if we do *not* pray?

b. *John 10:22-29* - The question is asked: "If a demon could indwell a Christian, wouldn't that mean he/she had been snatched from the Father's hand?" No. This text simply asserts the same truth we find in Rom. 8:35-39, namely, that nothing, not even a demon, can separate us from the love and life we have in God.

c. *John 17:15* - But: (1) This text cannot mean that Jesus wanted the Father to make us utterly invulnerable to demonic attack (indeed, it was after this prayer that Jesus told Peter of Satan's request to "sift" him like wheat). (2) It may be a prayer for our eternal preservation. (3) It may be that the fulfillment or answer to this prayer is dependent on our availing ourselves of the Father's protection (Eph. 6).

d. *2 Thessalonians 3:3* - Again, we must ask: "Kept or protected from *what* regarding the enemy, and on what, if any, conditions that we are responsible to meet?" This promise of protection does not rule out attack or temptation from the enemy (see 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pt. 5:8; etc.). Therefore, either this is a promise pertaining to the eternal preservation of the believer (i.e., no matter how vicious the attack, no matter how bad life gets, Satan can't separate you from God), or it is a promise conditioned upon the obedient response of the believer. I.e., it is a promise based on the truth of v. 4. Dickason explains:

"This promise, then, is for those who walk in obedience to the Lord. Satan will not be able to take them unaware and render them weak, unfaithful, and unproductive in Christian life and service. It is a great promise for the obedient and watchful Christian, but is not a blanket protection promised to all. It does not promise that no Christian will ever be attacked or seriously affected by demonic forces. It does not address the matter of demonization" (91).

e. *1 John 4:4* - This text does not mean that all Christians are always automatically guaranteed of never being deceived by error. It does mean that we *need not* ever be deceived, for the HS is more powerful than Satan.

f. *1 John 5:18* - The argument is made that it makes little sense to say, on the one hand, that the evil one cannot "touch" a Christian and yet, on the other hand, that he could conceivably indwell him. Response:

- We can't press the term "touch", for according to 1 Pt. 5:8 it is possible to be "devoured" by the Devil! See also Rev. 2:10. Thus, whatever "touch" means, it does not suggest that all Christians are automatically insulated against demonic attack.

- To "touch" a believer may mean to rob him/her of salvation. If so, then Satan cannot "grasp so as to destroy" the spiritual life of the believer.
- The promise could be conditional, perhaps on the fulfillment of v. 21.

Clearly, no Christian can be swallowed up by Satan or robbed of the salvation, life and love of the Father. He/she cannot be owned by Satan, nor separated from the love of God in Christ. But none of these texts explicitly rules out the possibility of demonization. The promises of protection are of two sorts: either (1) a promise pertaining to the security of the believer's salvation, or (2) a promise dependent on the believer's taking advantage of the resources supplied by the Spirit.

### 3. Texts which appeal to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit

The argument is this: "A demon cannot enter and dwell within a believer because the HS lives there. Since the HS is greater and more powerful than any demon, there is no possibility that He would grant access into a Christian's heart."

But: is this protection against demonic invasion automatic? What if the believer grieves the HS through repeated and unrepentant sin? What if the believer fails to faithfully and prayerfully adorn himself/herself with the armor of God (Eph. 6)? Several texts are relevant to this issue:

a. *Psalm 5:4* - Does this text really mean to suggest that God cannot dwell alongside an evil spirit inside a person? Observe that the two lines of v. 4 are in synonymous parallelism, i.e., "no evil dwells with Thee" = "God does not take pleasure in wickedness." The point is not that God cannot be in close spatial proximity with evil [Note: the *omnipresent* God is in close spatial proximity with *everything!*], but that God detests evil and has no fellowship with it.

b. *Matthew 12:43-45* - The argument is that if the house *is* occupied (presumably by Jesus or the HS), demons can't enter. But does this mean the person himself/herself cannot "open the door" to intrusion by a demon through willful, unrepentant sin or idolatry? Also, the text does not say what the demon would have done had he found his previous home occupied. It does not say that *that* in itself would have prevented his re-entry. It may well have made re-entry more difficult, but not necessarily impossible.

c. *1 Corinthians 10:21* - But the "can't" in Paul's language refers to a moral, not a metaphysical, impossibility. If I say to a Christian who is contemplating committing adultery: "But you *can't* do that!", I don't mean that it is physically impossible for him to commit adultery but that it is *morally or spiritually incompatible* with his being a Christian. In other words, you can't expect to enjoy close intimacy with Christ and simultaneously give yourself to the influence of demons. It is a moral and spiritual contradiction to affirm your love for God while you simultaneously expose yourself to the influence of demons by participating in activities which they energize.

In fact, far from ruling out the possibility of a Christian "fellowshiping" with demons, Paul warns us to be careful of that very thing (v. 22). More on this later.

d. *1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16* - The argument from these texts at first glance seems persuasive: "Surely a Christian cannot simultaneously be both the temple of God and the temple of a demon!"

But Paul is not referring (in 2 Cor. 6) to the physical impossibility of a Christian being "yoked" in "fellowship" with evil or with an unbeliever. The fact is, we know it happens all the time (unfortunately). Rather, he is denouncing the *moral or spiritual incongruity* of such fellowship. The temple of God has no moral or spiritual harmony with idols. Therefore, avoid all such entangling alliances.

The argument from 1 Cor. 3 is based on the idea that a demon indwelling a Christian is a "spatial" and "spiritual" impossibility.

(1) ***It is a spatial impossibility*** - It is argued that there is "not enough room" for both the HS and a demonic being to co-exist in the same human body. It would be too crowded! Response:

- But this is to think of spiritual beings in physical terms;
- I could as easily ask, "how can the Holy Spirit and the human spirit both indwell the same body? Wouldn't that be just as 'crowded'?"
- Mary Magdalene at one time had "seven demons" inhabiting her (Luke 8:2). The Gadarene demoniac (Mk. 5) was inhabited by a "legion" (@6,000) of demons; enough, at any rate, to enter and destroy 2,000 pigs.
- If the presence of the HS "crowds out" demons, then demons couldn't exist *anywhere* because the HS exists *everywhere*.

(2) ***It is a spiritual impossibility*** - The argument is this: "How can the **Holy** Spirit inhabit the same body with an **unholy** demon?" Response:

- The HS in a certain sense "inhabits" everything and everyone in the universe, even unbelievers. The HS is omnipresent.
- Satan had access to the presence of God in the book of Job (chps. 1-2), indicating that the issue is not one of spatial proximity but *personal relationship*.
- The HS and demons are in close proximity when *outside* the human body, so why could they not be in close proximity while *inside* one?
- The HS indwells the Christian even though the latter still has a sinful nature or sinful flesh. In other words, if the **Holy** Spirit can inhabit the same body with **unholy** human sin, why could He not inhabit the same body with an **unholy** demon?

In summary, the force of this argument appears to be ***more emotional than biblical***. The idea of the HS and a demon living inside a believer is *too close, too intimate* of contact. The thought of it is emotionally provocative and scandalous; it violates one's sense of spiritual propriety. The *feeling* is that God simply wouldn't allow it. His love for his own is too great to let demonic influence get that far.

#### 4. **Miscellaneous arguments**

a. "How can a Christian who is *possessed* by Christ be *possessed* by a demon?"

But in this question the word "possessed" is being used in two entirely different senses. To say that one is "possessed" by a demon (although that in itself is an unbiblical term) is to say that he/she is severely influenced by the spirit. To say that one is "possessed" by Christ is to say he/she is owned by the Lord because purchased with His blood (1 Cor. 6).

b. "How can a Christian who is *in Christ* have a demon *in him/her*?"

Again, words are here being used in a way that provokes an emotional response but lacks theological substance. To be "in Christ" refers to eternal salvation whereas to say a demon is "in a believer" refers to influence or powers of persuasion.

c. "The internal struggle of the Christian is portrayed in the NT as between the HS and the flesh, not the HS and a demon."

In the first place, this is an argument from silence. Or to put it another way, what biblical text *denies* or *precludes* the HS from fighting against an indwelling demon? Also, if a Christian yields to the flesh and grieves the HS, wouldn't this open the door to demonic presence? Finally, Eph. 6 says that our primary struggle *is* against the demonic. Although there is no explicit reference to this being an *internal* battle, there is nothing here that precludes it being such (especially if we fail to employ the full armor).

### C. *Arguments supporting the Demonization of Christians*

#### 1. **Texts that describe demonic activity and attack**

Most of these texts fail to prove the thesis that a Christian can be demonized because they fail to say anything about the *location* of the activity relative to the individual.

a. *2 Corinthians 2:11* - Certainly it is true that Satan seeks to divide and disrupt, to exploit disagreements, to intensify unforgiveness, etc. But nothing explicitly is said here about demonization.

b. *2 Corinthians 11:3-4* - What does "spirit" mean? Is this a demonic being, an attitude, an influence, a principle? And what does "receive" mean? Is it invasion and subsequent inhabitation, or perhaps tolerance, attentiveness, etc.? Most likely the Corinthians were tolerating the presence and influence of false teachers who were energized by demons.

c. *2 Corinthians 12:7-8* - Although God used a demonic being to keep Paul humble, no one would wish to conclude that he was demonized! If he were, would he have rejoiced in its effects (vv. 9-10)?

d. *Ephesians 4:26-27* - Here we see that the devil can exploit the relational strains and tension that develop in the Christian community. Page is correct to point out "that the devil is not credited with producing anger; that is, its source is apparently to be found within the person himself or herself. Nevertheless, anger can provide the devil with an opportunity to wreak havoc in the life of the individual and the community" (188-89). It seems reasonable that Satan's activity in this regard would extend to the other sins mentioned in the immediately subsequent context: stealing, unwholesome speech, bitterness, wrath, clamor, slander, malice, unforgiveness (see vv. 28-32).

Arnold points to Paul's use of the term *topos*, translated "foothold" or "opportunity". He argues that this word is often used in the NT for "inhabited space" (cf. Lk. 2:7; 4:37; 14:9; John 14:2-3). Even more to the point, says Arnold, are passages that illustrate the use of *topos* to refer to the inhabiting space of an evil spirit, such as Lk. 11:24 and Rev. 12:7-8. Thus he concludes that "the most natural way to interpret the use of *topos* in Ephesians 4:27 is the idea of inhabitable space. Paul is thus calling these believers to vigilance and moral purity so that they do not relinquish a base of operations to demonic spirits" (88).

e. *Ephesians 6:10-18* - What happens to the believer who does *not* stand in the strength of Christ, who does *not* put on the full armor of God, who does *not* therefore "stand firm" (v. 13)?

- f. *1 Thessalonians 2:18*
- g. *1 Timothy 3:6-7* - Does being "entrapped" or "ensnared" entail demonization?
- h. *1 Timothy 4:1* - People often come under the influence of demonic doctrine, perhaps even a form of "mind control". But does this entail or require inhabitation?
- i. *2 Timothy 2:26* - Again, what does it mean to be in the devil's "snare" and to be "held captive" to do his will?
- j. *James 3:14-16*
- k. *1 Peter 5:6-8* - If we do *not* humble ourselves, if we do *not* cast our cares on him, if we are *not* sober and alert, we may well be *devoured* by the devil. "Devour" = to swallow up (Mt. 23:24; 1 Cor. 15:54; 2 Cor. 2:7; 5:4; Heb. 11:29; Rev. 12:16). Nothing, however, is said explicitly about how or from where this "devouring" takes place.

Two observations: (1) If given the opportunity, Satan or demons can make a serious encroachment on the life of a believer; simply being a Christian does not automatically insulate you from this sort of potentially devastating attack. (2) On the other hand, if we "resist" the devil, we are assured of victory.

- l. *1 John 4:1-4* - This text is relevant only if some of the false teachers "in whom" the spirit of antichrist operated were Christians. This, however, is highly unlikely.

## 2. **Texts describing the experience of individuals**

- a. *Balaam* (Num. 22-24) - Was Balaam a believer? Whatever answer we come to, nothing is said here about an indwelling demonic presence in his life.
- b. *Saul* - Was Saul a believer? Probably (1 Sam. 10:9). Because of his rebellion and sin he came under demonic attack (1 Sam. 16:14-23; 18:10-11; 19:9). However, the evil spirit is said to come "upon/on" him, not "into/in" him. Does the fact that this happened prior to Pentecost have any bearing on how we interpret it?
- c. *the woman bent double* (Luke 13:10-17) - Her condition has been identified by some as "spondylitis ankylopoietica" (which produces fusion of the vertebrae). Two questions: (1) Was she a believer? She "glorified" God immediately on being delivered (v. 13) and is called "a daughter of Abraham" (v. 16; cf. Lk. 19:9). The latter may simply mean she was Jewish. (2) Was she demonized? The NASB reads, "had a sickness caused by a spirit," whereas it literally reads, "she had a spirit of sickness (or of infirmity)," which is similar to the language of demonization ("to have a spirit"). See also v. 16. Others have argued, however, that this narrative reads more like a simple healing than an exorcism. But even if true, that doesn't answer the question of whether or not the demon indwelt her.
- d. *Ananias and Sapphira* (Acts 5) - Certainly they were both believers. It seems unlikely that the example of their deaths would have any relevance for the church if they were not (cf. v. 11). Were they demonized? Satan is said to have "filled" their heart. This verb "filled" is the same one used in Eph. 5:18 for being "filled" with the HS. But with what did he fill them? Did Satan fill them with himself, i.e., so as to indwell them? Or did Satan fill their heart with the temptation or idea or notion to hold back the money?

Two observations: (1) At minimum, this is the case of a believer coming under powerful Satanic influence. (2) Notwithstanding Satan's influence, *they* were responsible for their

sin. *They* were disciplined with death. See vv. 4b,9 ("you"). The point is that they could have said "No" to Satan's influence.

e. *the man in 1 Cor. 5* - This probably refers to the excommunication or expulsion of a Christian man from the fellowship of the church. To "deliver to Satan" = to turn him out into the world, back into the domain of Satan. "Destruction of the flesh" does not refer to physical death but to the anticipated effect of his expulsion, namely, the mortification or crucifixion of his carnal appetites so that he may be saved on the day of Christ.

Here we see yet another example of Satan intending one thing in a particular action (no doubt he wanted only to ruin this man) while God intended something entirely different (salvation).

### 3. The special case of 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Clearly, Paul thought it possible for a Christian to become a "sharer" or "partner" with demons. The word he uses here is *koinonia* = fellowship, communion with. It is the same word used in v. 16 for our sharing in or fellowshiping with Christ at His table! What does this mean? Is he referring merely to "agreement with" or the "holding of a common purpose with" Christ and/or a demon? Is it merely a description of external attendance at a pagan feast? Or does Paul have in mind a more active sharing of an internal spiritual bond or link or fellowship with a demon?

His point seems to be that when you sit to worship at the table of the Lord, or conversely, in the presence of idols, you open yourself to the power and influence of one or the other. There is a sharing of an intimate spiritual experience, an association of sorts, a relationship that is personal and powerful. But does it entail inhabitation by a demon?

#### Concluding observations

(1) Clinton Arnold makes this important comment:

"Although the Epistles do not use the terms *demonization* or *have a demon* to describe the experience of a Christian, the concept is nevertheless present. The ideas of demonic inhabitation and control are clearly a part of the biblical teaching on what demons can do to saints. To limit ourselves to the same Greek words that the Gospels use to describe the phenomena of demonic influence could cause us to miss the same concept expressed in different terms. No one, for instance, questions the validity of making disciples as part of the church's mission. Yet the term *disciple* (*mathetes*) never appears in the New Testament after the Book of Acts. It would be quite erroneous to conclude that the concept of discipleship died out early in the history of the church. What has happened is that Paul, Peter, John, and other New Testament authors have made use of a variety of other terms to describe the same reality" (92-93).

(2) It would seem the debate reduces to the question of the *location* of demonic spirits relative to the believer, rather than to their *influence*. In other words, all must concede that Christians can be attacked, tempted, oppressed, devoured, and led into grievous sin. Satan can fill our hearts to lie, he can exploit our anger, he can deceive our minds with false doctrine. The question, then, is this: Does all this take place from outside our minds, spirits, bodies, or could it arise from a demon who is indwelling us?

(3) The NT does not supply an unequivocal, indisputable answer to our question. Nothing precludes the demonization of a believer. Nor does any text explicitly affirm it or provide us with an undeniable example of a believer who was indwelt by a demon.

(4) What *practical* significance is there to the question? I.e., will the location of the demonic spirit affect how I pray for and minister to the person who is under attack? Will I use different words, different prayers, different texts of Scripture? Thomas White writes,

***"Whether a demon buffets me from a mile away, the corner of the room, sitting on my shoulder, whispering in my ear, or clinging to my corruptible flesh, the result is the same" (44).***

Is it, in fact, the same? Is it necessary for a demon to be spatially "inside" a person's mind to infuse or to suggest words, thoughts, or for that person to "hear voices" not their own? In the case of Peter (Mt. 16), Satan put the thought into his mind without indwelling him.

People often report "hearing voices" inside their head, not audibly, but ideas, words, images springing into mind involuntarily. They have the sense that the source is not themselves. Must a demon be *inside* for this to happen?

(5) What place or level of authority should we give to the testimony and experience of other Christians in deciding this issue?

(6) If I were to tell you that a Christian can be demonized, you might be frightened. But if I tell you that a Christian can be hit by a passing car, you don't get scared; you simply take steps to stay out of traffic! You don't walk into the middle of a busy street. You don't live in constant worry or fear simply because it is "possible" to get hit by a car. And if the car jumps the curb and chases after you, one need only run inside the building for protection.

Likewise, if it were possible for a Christian to be demonized, do not be afraid. Rather, follow the steps outlined in Scripture, employ the protection made available by the HS, and if you get chased anyway, seek refuge and protection in Christ Jesus!