



Demonic Activity Today

A rough guide for pastors

John Benton

Demonic Activity Today

A rough guide for pastors

Dr John Benton is Director of Pastoral Support
with the Pastors' Academy
at London Seminary

CONTENTS

	Page number
Introduction	3
1. Demon possession in the Bible	5
2. Christ's victory over Satan and demons	13
3. Christians and demons	17
Appendix: supporting troubled people	23

© 2023 John Benton

Cover image: iStock

Introduction

What do we think about demonic activity today?

On the large canvas of world events, the book of Revelation makes it quite clear that Satan is at work through oppressive regimes, the moral corruption of society, false teaching and the persecution of Christians. Here are the beasts and the harlot of the Apocalypse, Revelation 13 & 17. But it is not this panoramic view of the power of darkness at a societal level that I have in mind in this booklet. Rather the questions considered here centre around the individual Christian and what power or supernatural influence the devil might have against them.

There are a couple of reasons for needing to address this matter.

The multi-cultural church

First, the church in the UK has been much strengthened in recent years by Christians from overseas moving to Britain. Many local churches which, humanly speaking would have died, have now been revitalised and blessed through brothers and sisters from Commonwealth countries and beyond making their home with us.

However, Christians from different continents often have quite contrasting understandings of things supernatural to those of the average white middle-class British believer or pastor. For right or wrong, they have a different take on those things. Having recognised that fact, however, we have to say that it would be very foolish of those of us brought up in 'Britishness' to think that our understanding of reality, seen and unseen, is the correct one and others have necessarily missed the mark. It would be arrogant of us to think that we are always right. Secularism, with its denial of the supernatural, will have influenced us. It dominates our ubiquitous media and our schooling. We are very likely to be unbalanced somewhat in this area.

In a multi-cultural church, it may be that at some point a member of the congregation from Africa or from the Far East or elsewhere will come to a pastor with concerns about possible demonic activity or curses affecting themselves or their family. How is a pastor to react to such a brother or sister? Obviously, the pastor must take these friends to Scripture. But how is he to handle the Biblical texts concerning the powers of darkness in an accurate and convincing way

which is helpful to the enquirer? Are there any principles to guide us?

Deliverance ministry?

A *second* reason for considering this subject is as follows.

In the Great Commission, Jesus told his disciples, 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,' Matthew 28.19.

On the back of that, sometimes a pastor might face an accusation which goes something like this: 'In Matthew 10, Jesus told the twelve to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy and drive out demons. If Jesus taught his disciples to do that, why aren't we doing those things in our church? And why aren't we teaching Christians to do the same? You are not preaching the full gospel. You are being disobedient to Jesus' command.'

That's quite a charge against a servant of God. It can be very hurtful, discouraging and damaging to a conscientious pastor. And often it is presented as an open and shut case. 'This is what Jesus says and you are not doing it – end of discussion.' How are Reformed churches and pastors who do not see 'deliverance' as an essential part of the gospel message to respond to this?

The purpose of this booklet is to try to establish a straightforward Biblical framework to bring to bear on such questions.

1: Demon possession in the Bible

We must begin by immediately affirming our belief in the supernatural realm.

In his *Studies in Theology*, B. B. Warfield has a fine essay on 'Christian Supernaturalism' in which he explains that belief in the reality of the spiritual and invisible world is at the core of Christian profession. He writes: 'The supernatural is the very breath of Christianity's nostrils and an anti-supernaturalistic atmosphere is to it the deadliest miasma'.¹

We believe in a supernatural God, who has revealed himself in Scripture, which has come about via supernatural means under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We believe in the supernatural incarnation of the Son of God as a human being. We believe his person and purpose were accredited by supernatural works of power. We believe in his resurrection, brought about not naturally but supernaturally. We believe that the new birth is a spiritual birth 'from above' – something supernatural has happened to us if we are Christians. We believe in the reality of angels, the devil and his demons. We believe in a future supernatural intervention in this world when Christ returns in judgment and to usher in a new heavens and earth.

In other words, we can't be Christians without believing in the supernatural. So it is not at this level that we have any quarrel with those who would enquire concerning deliverance ministries today. So, where do we demur? A number of points need to be considered.

The symptoms of demon possession in Scripture

We must be clear that, although the devil is involved in all sin to some extent, demon possession is a distinct category. Peter fell into sin in denying Jesus, but there is no indication that he was demon possessed. But, on the other hand, Satan had entered Judas, John 13.27, which turns him determinedly against Christ and led to his self-destruction, Matthew 27.5.

It is particularly in connection with demon possession that people think of 'deliverance ministry'. The first question must therefore be how to diagnose such a thing. What are the marks or symptoms of someone being possessed by a demon?

¹ *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, vol. 9*, Baker Book House, 1981, page 29

If we are not clear about this, then we place ourselves in the hands of those who see demons in everything and around every corner. They often claim to see what is invisible to others. And because they operate using their own discernment, they are effectively a law unto themselves and not accountable to anyone. This is extremely dangerous. It is an open door for spiritual abuse. In Warfield's essay on supernaturalism, he argues that both the denial of the supernatural and an over-emphasis on the supernatural lead to people being misused and abused. Atheistic regimes have their concentration camps, while the extremes of pagan worship end up sacrificing children to placate their deities. Hence, we need to be very sure of what we are about here. We must be guided by Scripture.

Supernatural symptoms

In the Gospels not every illness or disability is because of a demon. But as Jesus meets those who are demon possessed sometimes the marks are very obvious. There are clear signs that something supernatural is going on. These include the following:

- a violent reaction to the presence of Jesus. Mark tells us that 'whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out,' Mark 3.11. We find this repeated when Jesus confronts the man with a 'legion' of demons, Mark 5.6. Of the demon-possessed boy whose father asked Jesus for help after he returned from the Transfiguration we read, 'When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around,' Mark 9.18.
- a supernatural insight into spiritual realities. For example, we read that when Jesus was in the synagogue at Capernaum, 'a man in the synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!"' Mark 1.23-24. Mark tells us that, when the evil spirits saw Jesus, they cried out, "' You are the Son of God.'" But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was,' Mark 3.11,12. This is all the more remarkable when we realise that not only the Pharisees but even the disciples struggled to recognise who Jesus really was. In Philippi, the apostle Paul met the demon possessed girl who predicted the future through the evil spirit – clearly supernatural. But she too had insight concerning spiritual realities and shouted out day after day, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved,' Acts 16.16-18.

- a preternatural strength, which is difficult or impossible to control. We are told of the man possessed by a legion of demons that, 'He had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No-one was strong enough to subdue him,' Mark 5.4. This same strength, far beyond what is normal, was manifested when the seven unconverted sons of Sceva tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus to drive out an evil spirit during Paul's ministry in Ephesus. 'The evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding,' Acts 19.15, 16.

When we encounter such things as these in dealing with a possible case of possession by an evil spirit it would be safe to say, (so long as we have all the facts and nothing else unknown to us is going on), that some kind of demonic power is involved.

Accompanying symptoms

Alongside such supernatural signs of demon possession, we meet other symptoms in the Gospels and Acts. These are symptoms which may be caused by the presence of a demonic power, but could also have a purely natural, medical, or psychological cause. These symptoms on their own are not enough to give certainty about the presence of evil spirits. In Scripture these symptoms include such things as:

- Shouting Mark 1.23; Acts 8.7
- Convulsions Mark 1.26
- Self-harm Mark 5.5
- Loss of ability to speak Matthew 9.32-34
- Loss of sight Matthew 12.22, 23
- Change of voice Mark 5.9
- Falling Mark 9.18
- Foaming at the mouth Mark 9.18
- Gnashing of teeth Mark 9.18
- Self-destruction Mark 9.22

Relatives of those suffering such things can understandably be very distressed and concerned for a pastor to do something, Mark 7.26, 9.22. But though such

symptoms may indicate the presence of a demon, they may have other causes.

‘The writers of the New Testament, like the Jewish people of their day... distinguished between ordinary illness and demon possession, Mark 1.32, 34; Matthew 8.16. They even distinguished between ordinary madness and possession, Matthew 4.24.’²

Though Jesus was able to ascertain demonic possession from such symptoms because he was the Son of God, we need to be careful. We do not have his discernment. Given the absence of clear supernatural activity, confronted with such symptoms, it is best to make the medical profession and their expertise our first port of call. That does not at all preclude us praying about a situation or offering support,³ but we acknowledge that, as part of common grace, doctors have training and skills which we may not have.

Some churches and Christian leaders have brought the gospel into disrepute and landed themselves with understandable accusations of spiritual abuse through being too quick to diagnose demon possession from symptoms which are purely medical. The devil is a deceiver, one cannot help but think that, at another level, he is at work in such cases to dupe the church into jumping to conclusions and so undermining the work of the gospel.

Discernment

In many situations demon possession also involves people showing violence against themselves or other people, Mark 5.5. The father of the demon possessed boy who met Jesus immediately after the Transfiguration explained to the Lord that, ‘He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water,’ Matthew 17.15. It is interesting that when the Syro-Phoenician woman comes to Jesus to ask him to deal with the evil spirit that is afflicting her daughter, the daughter is not with her. This may well have been because the daughter was usually kept at home for her own safety and the safety of other people, Mark 7.30. However, again we need to be careful to be balanced. Though self-harm can be a concomitant of demon possession it can be the result of less dire causes, like despair or false teaching, 1 Kings 17.28.

² *Satan Cast Out*, by Frederick S. Leahy, Banner of Truth, 1975, page 79-80

³ See appendix on supporting troubled people

Suicidal thoughts, on their own, do not establish beyond doubt an incidence of demon possession. Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah all went through phases in which they wished they could die. During the time that Job was under direct attack from Satan, he expressed similar thoughts, but there is no indication that he was demon possessed. 'Why is life given to those in misery, and life to the bitter soul, to those who long for death that does not come,' Job 3.20,21.

Again, because someone has an addiction or besetting sin that does not seem to be a sure mark of demon possession in Scripture. Jesus speaks of the possibility of someone who keeps repenting but continues sinning against you seven times in a day, Luke 17.4, but there is no indication that demon possession is the potential problem.

So, let's be very clear about what demon possession looks like according to the Bible and not be taken in by those who are, perhaps, a little too keen to see the dramatic in church. The Scriptures have painted the symptoms for us in vivid colours. We are looking at demon possession when we see a violent, spontaneous reaction to the presence of Christ, supernatural strength that will not and cannot be restrained and supernatural insight into spiritual things.

The frequency of demon possession

Now we need to take up a second consideration. The assumption of those who think that the church ought to be regularly involved in a ministry of casting out demons today seems to be that the occurrence of demonic possession is the same now as in the days when Jesus was here on earth. But is that true? Should we expect to encounter demons as often as Jesus did?

The witness of Scripture should cause us to rethink that assumption. Even within Bible history the amount of demonic activity shows large variations.

The Old Testament

Once we leave behind the sad story of the Fall in the garden of Eden, although there is evidence of demonic activity of various kinds, e.g., Deuteronomy 32.17; Job 1 & 2, it is hard to find any direct reference to demon possession in the Old Testament. King Saul's bouts of depression are seen as being 'tormented by an evil spirit,' 1 Samuel 16.14, 15, but was that actually a case of demon possession? It could be. But it is not clear. The people of God are warned away from practises of the pagan nations who consulted those who had 'familiar

spirits' (Authorised Version), Leviticus 19.31, 20.6. The idea refers to demons that are literally close or familiar to a person, such as a medium or a wizard. This could include demon possession, but again we cannot be certain. The witch of Endor, 1 Samuel 28.7, was in this category. The worship of demons or dabbling with the occult is clearly and stridently forbidden in the OT, Leviticus 17.7. But whereas there are many instances of the healing of illnesses in the OT, there are no occurrences of anyone being delivered from demon possession. Why is that?

What is made very evident throughout the OT is that demons and even Satan himself are under the control of the LORD, 1 Kings 22.21-23. When Satan wanted to attack righteous Job, the Lord allowed it but set limits which Satan could not cross, Job 1.12; 2.6. This is very reassuring for all believers.

Demon possession in the Gospels

But once we come into the New Testament with the incarnation and subsequent ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are suddenly confronted with what seems to be a vast epidemic of demon possession, Mark 1.27, 34 etc. Such were its proportions that the Lord Jesus early on in his ministry, of necessity, had frequently to perform exorcisms. This led his enemies to accuse him of being demon possessed himself and that he cast out demons through the prince of demons, Mark 3.22.

If Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil, 1 John 3.8, and his arrival on earth was the signal for the final battle to begin, then it is not surprising that a great deal of Satanic activity would follow, including such things as demon possession. It is worth noting, with our original question in mind, that the disciples of Jesus were sent on their mission, including being given authority to cast out demons in Matthew 10.8, during the time of this particular upsurge, when the powers of darkness were raging and in turmoil because of the presence of the Saviour, Mark 1.24 etc.

It is also worth noting at this point that, though the Lord Jesus did cast out demons (and indeed heal the sick), his primary calling was always to preach the good news of the kingdom, Mark 1.37-39. Preaching was his first priority and exorcism occurred only as a consequence. There are no public meetings in Scripture held specifically with an agenda of healing or exorcism. Such things only occur incidentally. The declaration of the gospel is the main feature.

The rest of the New Testament

Once we leave the Gospels behind, as Jesus has died, risen and ascended, we find a curtailment in the occurrence of demon possession. While the Gospels cover a period of around three years and, especially the Synoptic Gospels, have many references to demon possession, the book of Acts covers a period of some thirty years and has relatively few references to demon possession. Furthermore, as we read through the NT epistles, we find that the apostles give no instructions to the churches concerning how to carry out exorcisms. They did not expect it to be a central part of the programme of the churches.

This is very different from the situation when Jesus sent out the 12 and the 72 during his ministry on earth. At that time, as we have already noted, specific reference is made to the need to cast out demons as well as heal the sick, Matthew 10.1, 8; Mark 6.7, 12; Luke 10.17. However, once Christ has accomplished his work of salvation, the 'Great Commission' to his disciples, makes no mention of the need for exorcism. It is preaching and teaching the gospel which is highlighted. They are to 'Go and make disciples of all nations,' Matthew 28.19. Christ, having suffered and risen from the dead, 'repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations,' Luke 24.47.⁴

The evidence points to a substantial change between the Gospels and the rest of the NT. So, the supposition that demons, under God's sovereignty, are just as ubiquitous and active today in possessing people as they were in Gospel times does not stand up to Biblical scrutiny.

Teaching the churches

This shift in the frequency of demon possession needs to be recognised and taught to the churches from the Scriptures. This is needed...

- *First*, because it will help us to see that the idea of just taking what Jesus said to his disciples and applying it without any qualification directly to the modern situation is too simplistic.
- *Second*, because it explains the fact that the experience of Christians and churches in the contemporary Western world, and indeed for many

⁴ In the disputed ending of Mark's Gospel, we read that Jesus says, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation,' Mark 16.15, and yes, there may arise occasions of driving out demons, Mark 16.17, but even here this is only an accompanying sign, not the main thrust of the commission. The central command is to preach.

centuries, has been so markedly different in this matter compared to that of first century Palestine.

- *Third*, because unless we grasp this and show the Biblical reasons for teaching this, then the secular explanation that the early Christians were just rather gullible superstitious people who had a totally wrong view of reality, would appear to have traction.

Teaching this clearly could save the churches from much confusion and heartache.

2: Christ's victory over Satan and his demons

How are we to understand the relative curtailing of demon possession from the Gospels compared to now? What happened to bring this about?

The New Testament does not leave us in the dark concerning this.

Stronger than the strong man

In the Gospels, the devil and his demons are identified as the great enemies of Jesus and of the kingdom of God he came to announce, Mark 1.15. Jesus has come to destroy the works of the devil, 1 John 3.8, and his exorcisms are the first step in his defeat of Satan. Devils being cast out is a sign that the kingdom of God has come, Luke 11.20. Further, the Lord Jesus, in these exorcisms, is binding Satan (the strong man) in order that he might plunder his possessions, Luke 11.20-22. He demonstrates that he is stronger than Satan.

Satan's top priority in the wilderness temptations was to deflect Jesus from his mission of establishing God's kingdom through the cross. The devil wants to turn Jesus from trusting his Father to provide his daily bread, disrupting his walk of faith, and instead to use his own miraculous power to provide for himself, Matthew 4.3. He wants Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple in order that he might be killed before Calvary, Matthew 4.6. He tries to divert Jesus from his purpose of humbly carrying out the Father's plan of glory via Golgotha, by offering him the riches and splendour of this world now, Matthew 4.8,9. All these temptations have the object of stopping Jesus pursuing his commission from the Father which leads to the atonement. Satan is seeking to secure his own kingdom. But he can't do it. Jesus withstands all the strategies of the evil one. This is the initial step in Satan's downfall.

The cross

Peter's misguided rebuke of Jesus concerning going to the cross is seen as a strategy of Satan, Mark 8.33. The cross is crucial in Satan's defeat. As the time of his crucifixion draws near, and he publicly refuses to ask the Father to save him from it, Jesus affirms, 'Now is the time for judgment on this world' (because instead God's kingdom will come), 'now the prince of this world will be driven out,' (because by the cross he will be utterly defeated), John 12.31. If Jesus' exorcisms and resistance of Satan's temptations was the first step in Satan's defeat, then the cross is the second great step. At Calvary, in procuring atonement, Jesus will strike a such mighty blow against Satan that it will be

impossible for him to recover.

Colossians 2.15 states concerning Christ, 'And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.'

Keith Ferdinando comments, 'The presupposition behind the text is...that the 'principalities and powers' are able to afflict humanity as a consequence of human rebellion: they are essentially parasitic upon sin, which would explain the underlying purpose in temptation. When Christ makes atonement for sin their power is also broken as a logical but secondary consequence, and those enslaved by them receive not only forgiveness but also, by the very same act, redemption from that power.'⁵

Interestingly, John's Gospel (written later than the Synoptics) contains no example of Jesus exorcising demons. However, it is John's Gospel which is the Gospel which makes most explicit the defeat of the devil at the cross. As he speaks of his impending passion, not only does he speak of Satan being cast out, Jesus declares, 'The prince of this world now stands condemned,' 16.11.

Revelation 20

John's Apocalypse is full of symbolism, and he indicates Satan being bound by Christ's Passion.

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. Revelation 20.1-3

At the beginning of Revelation, John has a vision of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ, who tells him not to be afraid because as the One who died and rose again, he holds the keys of death and Hades, Revelation 1.18. In Revelation 20, under the auspices of Christ, a great angel uses the keys to lock up Satan and to curtail his activities. Since it is the risen Christ who has the keys and because, as we have seen, the cross disarms the dark powers, it makes sense to interpret John's vivid picture in terms that would see this restriction of Satan as following

⁵ *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm*, Edited by Anthony S. Lane, Paternoster Press, 1996, page 128

on from Christ's Passion. Also, John speaks of Christ reigning, Revelation 20.4, and we know that Jesus already has all power in heaven and on earth and is enthroned in heaven, Matthew 28.18; Ephesians 1.20, 21. So, it is best to see that John's reference to 1,000 years is symbolic of the present gospel age.

Greg Beale comments on these verses, 'Satan's binding was climatically put in motion immediately after Christ's resurrection, and it lasts throughout most of the age between Christ's first and second comings. According to 20.7-9, the end point of the binding occurs immediately before Christ's final coming.'⁶

The general purpose of this binding is that Satan should not be able to deceive the nations anymore. How should we understand that, given that there is, for example, still much false teaching in the world? We should see its meaning to be that though, before Christ came, false religion had ruled everywhere except in Israel, the truth of the gospel will now go into all the world bringing salvation to the lost and its purposes cannot be thwarted by the powers of darkness and their lies.

The wording of Satan being 'bound' used in Revelation 20, is first mentioned with regard to Jesus' exorcisms, Mark 3.22, 27. The same Greek word is used for the idea of 'binding' both by Mark and John. It seems right therefore to see that the binding of Satan in Revelation 20 includes a restriction of demon possession.

Revelation 20.1-3 is John's way of telling us that the cross has disarmed the dark powers.

Satan destiny

The Son of God is now in heaven, not on earth, until he returns. That trigger that particularly stirred up the powers of darkness has been removed. The kingdom of God has arrived, not in its fullness but nevertheless in reality. The vital bridgehead against Satan's realm has been established. The cross has brought ensured victory over Satan. The last step in Satan's demise will occur when Christ returns in judgment.

The devil, who deceived them (the nations), was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever, Revelation 20.10.

⁶ *The Book of Revelation: The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, G. K. Beale, Eerdmans 2013, page 985

Satan's demise comes via Christ's victory over temptation, his victory at the cross and his final destruction at Christ's return. Once we see this pathway to Jesus' final conquest over the devil, we can understand why we are not to expect the same amount of demon possession as was current during the earthly ministry of Jesus. Indeed, to expect the same volume of possession now would be a denial of Jesus' victory.

Conclusion

Jesus did tell his disciples to teach God's people everything that Jesus had taught them. But that needs to be understood in the light of the cross, which has changed many things.

We would be overstepping the mark to conclude that there are never to be any examples of demon possession today. No doubt such things still happen among those brought up in cultures and cults in which evil spirits are invoked. But to expect the church to be involved in a ministry of exorcism parallel in size and scope to that of the Lord Jesus would be to deny what Scripture teaches concerning Christ's defeat of Satan and his demons.

In particular, in the light of the Saviour's victory, Scripture furnishes us with not a single example of a Christian being demon-possessed, nor should we ever expect such a thing. We take up this point in the next chapter.

3: Christians and demons?

There is no doubt that Christians are in a battle with Satan and the powers of darkness. In fact, in many ways these are our main opponents. Paul writes,

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, Ephesians 6.12.

In distinguishing these beings from 'flesh and blood' it is clear that what the apostle principally has in mind are evil spirits of different kinds. Yes, these spirits may well use human beings in various ways to attack Christians and the church, but it is ultimately not the people who are our chief enemies.

In this battle the Christian soldier is exhorted to use his 7-fold batch of equipment – the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; the boots of the gospel; the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation; the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God; and all prayer. We need all these to stand and keep going with Christ against the devil's schemes, Ephesians 6.10-18. Spiritual warfare is not some separate, especially intense form of struggle. Though there may be particularly severe periods of battle, spiritual warfare is the everyday struggle for every Christian.

But given that we are all involved in this battle, the question is how far can the devil go in his attacks on a Christian? For example, can Satan actually rob a Christian of their salvation? Can a Christian be possessed by a demon? Can a Christian be under some kind of curse? These are some of the crucial questions which pastors may get asked.

We will try to address these questions one at a time from Scripture.

Why a Christian cannot lose their salvation

The apostle Paul repudiates the idea that the Christian can be lost through the work of evil spirits. He declares this plainly in wonderful climax to Romans 8. 'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons (heavenly rulers), neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,' Romans 8.38, 39. The word translated 'demons' here is the same word used in Ephesians 6.12 translated 'rulers'. In

other words, the very opponents we face in the spiritual warfare Paul specifically says are not able to remove us from the saving love of God.

Biblically there are at least three reasons for this.

- *Election*

The origin of a Christian's salvation does not ultimately reside in his/her actions or efforts. It is founded in the electing love of God. It is because of this unconditional love that the Christian came to faith and is in Christ and nothing can thwart God's purpose. 'For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers,' Romans 8.29. When God predestines something, it means it will happen. 'And those he predestined, he called; those he called he also justified; those he justified he also glorified,' Romans 8.30. Notice that though we are not yet in heaven or totally conformed to the likeness of Jesus, the word 'glorified' is in the past tense. It has as good as happened already. We could think, for example, of the Lord speaking to Joshua and telling him, 'See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men,' Joshua 6.2. It had not yet happened, but the Lord spoke as if it had, because he had determined it – and of course, Jericho fell. In just the same way, God has determined to save all who trust Jesus, and nothing can thwart his plans – not even demons.

- *The work of Jesus*

On the cross Jesus paid for all our sins, past, present and future. The Father 'has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins,' Colossians 1.13, 14. Through the work of Jesus, the Father has qualified us to share in his kingdom. That can't be undone. In Christ we are qualified. Furthermore, Jesus did not just die for us but he ever lives to make intercession for us – so that grace may be given us to keep trusting, Romans 8.34.

- *Eternal life*

The promise of the gospel is that 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,' John 3.16. Very simply eternal life that can be lost or come to an end is not eternal life – it is something else. But God, who does not lie, promises all believers eternal life in Christ. The essence of eternal life is that God himself, by his Spirit, has taken up residence in our hearts and will not leave. He who began a good work in us will see it through to completion, Philippians 1.6.

For such reasons as these, we can be sure that no demonic power can rob a Christian of his / her salvation. Jesus said of his followers, 'they shall never perish, no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand,' John 10.28, 29. No-one includes Satan and his demons.

Why a Christian cannot be demon-possessed

The Christian is someone who is indwelt by God himself through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. With regard to demon possession, Jesus takes up the picture of a house and its resident owner. Jesus says in this context, 'When a strong man, fully armed guards his own house, his possessions are safe,' Luke 11.21. If the Christian is the dwelling place of God Almighty, he or she is safe. The devil cannot force an entrance against God. We are specifically informed by the apostle John that 'the One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world', 1 John 4.4.

- *The Father and the Son*

A Christian is someone who loves the Lord. He / she may not do that perfectly but there is real affection for the Lord which shows itself in seeking to obey him. Of such people Jesus said, 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him,' John 14.23. In order to take possession of a Christian, the devil would have to be stronger than the Father and the Son. But that cannot be. Repeatedly in the Gospels we are shown through Jesus' exorcisms that he is stronger than the devil. God is the One who can ask, "'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One,' Isaiah 40:25. It is a rhetorical question. There is no-one equal with God in power or any other attribute – certainly not the devil. Even were he to try, the devil could not win.

Furthermore, the writer to the Hebrews tells Christians, 'God has said, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you,"' Hebrews 13.5. God is never absent from us. It is not as if God could vacate our hearts and leave us vulnerable like some absent-minded parent. He is ever with us.

- *The Holy Spirit*

Paul writes to Christians, 'Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God?' 1 Corinthians 6.19. God, the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in the 'house' of a Christian's heart and life. For an evil spirit to possess a Christian would mean that the

demon would have to overcome and eject the Holy Spirit. To do that the evil spirit would have to be stronger than the Holy Spirit – whose power fashioned heaven and earth and created all things visible and invisible.

It is only when someone stronger comes that the resident can be overcome and evicted. But there is no power in heaven and earth that is stronger than God. With this in mind, the NT speaks of a Christian as someone who is ‘sealed’ with the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 1.13.⁷

Frederick S Leahy sums up the situation as follows: ‘The Biblical doctrines of regeneration and the permanent indwelling of the believer by the Holy Spirit makes demon possession of a believer utterly impossible. We are not asking if a *professing* Christian can be demon possessed, but if a regenerate person can be demon possessed. The answer to this question is firmly in the negative. The man in Christ is ‘born again’, John 3.5; he is a ‘new creation’ in Christ, 2 Corinthians 5.17. He is part of the body of Christ, Ephesians 1.23...The Holy Spirit and an evil spirit cannot be joint occupants of the same heart.’⁸

Why no-one can put a Christian under a curse

In the popular sense of the words, a blessing or a curse is some kind of spell, pronounced by priestly people, and containing some kind of ‘divine’ name which calls down the favour or disfavour of the ‘god’ or ‘gods’ invoked. As we consider whether or not a Christian can be cursed there are a number of things to say.

First, of course we all deserve to be cursed by the only true God, because of our sin. But Jesus bore that curse at the cross for all believers. Paul tells us ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,’ Galatians 3.13. Every Christian has been bought and redeemed from any curse we might deserve from God. And Paul goes on to tell us that that has happened ‘in order that the blessing given to Abraham’ might come upon us, Galatians 3.14. (Paul’s use of the word ‘bewitched’ in Galatians 3:1 is metaphorical.)

Second, part of the blessing which God promised to Abraham was ‘I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse,’ Genesis 12.3. To

⁷ The fact that the Holy Spirit indwells the Christian from the day of his/her new birth that we are safe. However, Jesus warns against exorcisms which leave the ‘house’ of someone’s life empty. If the house is left empty the previously resident demon may return with others and make things far worse than they were before, Luke 11.24 – 26. It is therefore essential that true exorcism must lead to new birth. We cannot help anyone who wants to be free of a demon but does not want to become a Christian.

⁸ *Satan Cast Out*, by Frederick S Leahy, Banner of Truth, 1975, pages 95-96

become a Christian is to have faith in the promises of God, just as Abraham did and to be under God's blessing. In the OT we read of Balaam who was called in to curse God's people Israel and promised money for doing so. But when he tried to curse them all that came out of his mouth were blessings, Numbers 22-24. This was God's promise to Abraham about curses in action, Numbers 24.9. Balaam explains, 'God is not a man that he should lie...he has blessed and I cannot change it...There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel,' Numbers 23.19-23. Notice, there are no powers or evil spirits who can over-rule or thwart God's blessing for his people – not even through magic arts.

Thirdly, In the discourses of Jesus we do find blessings and curses, e.g., Luke 6.20-26. They are however, simply the authoritative declarations of the consequences of either obeying or disobeying his teaching. In that sense people bring blessings or 'curses' upon themselves. However, for the Christian, when we disobey the Lord that may bring God's discipline upon us, but even that is meant as a blessing. It is meant to bring us back to our senses, to repent and walk in Christ's commands again. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us by saying, 'the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son,' Hebrews 12.6.

Pastoring those concerned about demonic activity

The truth is that no Christian can be lost, possessed or put under a curse by someone invoking demons. However, although this is the truth, if a Christian person has not been well-taught and believes the opposite then those ideas will cause them much anxiety and discouragement. Though these things are the truth, the devil is a liar and will do his utmost to lead people into error concerning what powers he and his demons have over them.

Therefore, it is the pastor's job to use the Scriptures to persuade Christians of their freedom and refute such damaging lies. This may not be an easy task and will require much prayer – especially if brothers and sisters have been brought up in churches which have not been clear on these issues.

Perhaps a summary and some pastoral comments for those concerned about demonic activity might be helpful at this point.

- When someone becomes a Christian, the demon loses its power and must depart. If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation - the old has gone the new has come. 2 Corinthians 5.17.

- But though expelled that does not mean that the demon will not come back and try to attack. Jesus speaks of expelled demons returning Matthew 12.43f. For the Christian the 'house' is now occupied by the Holy Spirit - so it cannot re-enter. But it can continue to attack / tempt / mislead etc. And the person - like all Christians - must resist the devil by faith and obedience, James 4.7.
- The Lord's Prayer calls us to ask the Lord to 'deliver us from evil / the evil one', Matthew 6.13. The content of the prayer indicates this should be a daily prayer by the individual. If someone has had a demonic problem in the past, they may be particularly vulnerable and Christian brothers and sisters might want to pray for them daily until the attack recedes.
- The early church had baptismal candidates 'renounce the devil and all his works' before baptism. Again, it might help the person to repeat something like that before the Lord regularly. If appropriate even to do so before the church. This might let light into the situation and help them to get a firmer grasp on their new status / identity in Christ and so strengthen them.

Appendix: Supporting troubled people

Often a situation which presents itself initially as demon possession is actually a mental illness. Clearly in such situations medical professionals need to be involved.

Although professional expertise is required in such an instance, nevertheless the church has a part to play. In his excellent book, *Tackling Mental Illness Together*, Professor Alan Thomas, an evangelical Christian and elder in his church, has an excellent section on how a pastor / church can be a help to people facing mental psychosomatic illnesses. It is best if you get hold of a copy of the book, but here are the basic headings and ideas contained in 'stepped care'.

Professor Thomas writes: 'Stepped care refers to a graded approach to treatment and is employed widely in psychiatry and medicine... The early steps do not require specialist expertise. They can be used by church leaders, resulting in real benefits for sufferers in our churches.'⁹

Supportive relationships

The essential context for effective medical treatment is a good relationship, just as it is for effective pastoral ministry. This requires commitment from both sides. With no meaningful relationship, little progress can be made. You don't help people with mental illness without deliberate effort to establish and maintain good relationships.

Meaningful work

The creation narrative in Genesis shows us that human beings were created to work. This work is not synonymous with paid employment but includes all kinds of endeavours pursued with our heads and our hands. It is good and healthy. Activity that is pleasurable, achievable and fulfilling is part of the whole healing context. We should aim to help people find as much good and enjoyable working activity as we can. This will combat the anxiety and depressive symptoms of psychosomatic illness. It can also provide structure and routine to people's lives which provides a sense of stability.

⁹ See *Tackling Mental Illness Together: A biblical and practical approach*, by Alan Thomas, IVP 2017, pages 129 - 134

Diet and exercise

Regular moderate exercise and a balanced diet should fit into a person's daily and weekly routine. Regular exercise is good for the mind and body.

Substance avoidance

Illicit drugs don't help mental illness, and the long-standing legal substances, accepted by society, like alcohol, nicotine and caffeine can all worsen anxiety. They do so when they have been taken in excess or when people withdraw from their excessive use. Within the context of a good relationship, careful, sensitive exploration of the use of substances is important.

Sleep quality

People can mess up their sleep by being irregular about bedtimes, getting up at different times, sleeping during the day, not exercising, drinking too much tea or coffee or alcohol. Also, if the bedroom is noisy or has too much light or the bed is uncomfortable sleep will be impaired. Taking mobile phones to bed is not a good idea either. Sleep quality effects mood and anxiety levels.

These are simple steps to bear in mind as you try to support a troubled person. They can make small but important differences.