

Examining the evidence for the demonization of a Believer A Series on Whether a Christian Can Have a Demon: Part 2

Can Christians have a demon and / or be controlled by one? Is all sin, problem or health issue a consequence of a Christian's insincere faith or lack thereof? Is it legitimate to consider a demonic cause of Christian's problem or health issue when normal solutions fail as remedies? While understanding God's sovereignty is very difficult, there are legitimate concerns among those who affirm the possibility that Christians can have a demon:

- Failure to recognize the power of demonic forces causes the Christian to underestimate or acknowledge the reality of spiritual warfare that is upon them. There is a tendency to ignore the spiritual perspective and instead prefer the naturalistic explanation.
- Ignorance and denial of demonization, along with the passionate debate that produces factions within the church, is certainly in keeping with what Satan would intend.

What biblical evidence is there that supports the position that Christians can be indwelt and demonized? This will review some of the passages used to support the idea that Christians can be demonized.

Examine the cases of possible demonic invasion of Believers before the crucifixion of Christ and Pentecost:

Cain's angry reaction to God's refusal to accept for his offering (Gen 4:7).

Scholars have long noted the grammatical difficulties and awkward translation of the Hebrew in Genesis 4:7.

The ambiguities are removed by viewing the Hebrew word *robos* (translated as "crouching"), not as a participle modifying the term "sin," but as an Akkadian loan word *rabisum*, which means "demon."

From this perspective, the translation of Genesis 4:7 becomes:

If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is *a demon* at the door; and its [the demon's] desire is for you, but you must master it [the demon].

Some scholars view Genesis 4:7, taken with 1 John 3:12's characterization of Cain as "of the evil one," as suggesting the possibility that Cain was inhabited by a demon during his rebellion against God. However, is "demon" used as a metaphor and was Cain a Believer?

Balaam's questionable behavior and status as a prophet of God (Num 22:1-41; 23:1-30; 24:1-25).

Was Balaam a Believer, because he spoke the word of God?

Some consider Balaam as a Believer, because he was a prophet of God (Num 22:9, 20; 23:5, 16; 24:2). Since Balaam was noted as a "diviner" or "soothsayer" (Josh 13:22), a supernatural ability provided by an indwelling demon (Acts 16:16-18), some see Balaam as an example of a demonized Believer.

While the Bible does not explicitly say that Balaam was demonized, there is evidence that Balaam was not a Believer. Balaam was never noted as a prophet of God, and the Old Testament prophets condemned the practice of divination and soothsaying (Is 2:6; 57:3; Jer 27:9; Mic 5:12).

The New Testament never saw Balaam as an example of a Christian.

Peter compares Balaam to false prophets and teachers (2 Pet 2:15-16).

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Jude speaks of non-abiding Christians as being covetousness “in the error of Balaam” (Jude 1:11).

In Revelations 2:14, John refers to the “teaching of Balaam,” which was instructing others to place a stumbling block before the children of Israel. What exactly was John referring to? In this case, the seduction of the Israelites by the women of Moab to worship Baal (Num 25:1-3) was attributed to Balaam’s apparent advice to Balak as a method to defeat Israel.

The terrorizing of King Saul by an evil spirit (1 Sam 16:14-23; 18:10-11).

In this instance, after the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul (1 Sam 16:14), an evil spirit comes upon him. From the verbs “on” (1 Sam 16:16) and “upon” (1 Sam 18:10), there is the suggestion that the evil spirit was external to King Saul.

However, some see Saul’s abrupt personality and behavioral change (1 Sam 18:10-11; 19:9-10) as forms of mind and body control seen only in cases of demonization such as the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-5).

While the text is absent of any Hebrew words that are similar to the Greek terms for demonization (*daimonizomai* and *echein daimonion*), this is seen as evidence of a demonized Believer.

The trial of Job by Satan (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7).

It should be noted that God had a protective hedge about Job, which prevented any fallen angel from afflicting him. In allowing Satan’s initial assault, God forbade Satan from touching Job. In the second assault, it appears that Satan may have touched Job and produced the skin boils.

An interesting side note is that it is God who brings up Job’s name to Satan’s attention!

The woman who was bent over for 18 years (Luke 13:11-16).

In this case, a demonic being was inside the woman. Many theologians debate whether this woman was a Christian or not.

In Luke 13:16, Jesus identifies the afflicted woman as “a daughter of Abraham.” This term is used only once in the New Testament, and the debate is whether Jesus is referring to the woman as a physical Jew or a believing (spiritual) Jew.

In Luke 19:9, Jesus refers to Zacchaeus as “a son of Abraham,” which identifies him as a Jewish believer. Jesus pronounced Zacchaeus’ salvation, because of his faith.

In John 8:37, 56, Jesus identifies the Pharisees as Abraham’s physical descendants; however, He makes the distinction that they are not true children of Abraham (John 8:37-47). And His discussion is within the context of the Pharisees’ spiritual state.

In Matthew 3:9 and Luke 3:8, addressing the Pharisees (who were associated with the laymen of Israel and based their faith on the Law of Moses, Scriptures, and oral traditions) and Sadducees (who held to the Pentateuch and were associated with the priestly class), John the Baptist rebukes and calls for their repentance. Despite their physical genetic association with Abraham, it did not mean they were true children of Abraham.

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In Romans 2:28-29, Paul reveals that God's definition of a "Jew" is not based on physical circumcision, genetics or adherence to the Law, but instead based on whether one's heart is intrinsically circumcised – the mark of a true Christian.

In consideration of the biblical context of the New Testament, the term "daughter of Abraham" does appear to be in reference to a believing woman, and that she was demonized.

Jesus' rebuke of Peter (Matt 16:22-23; Mark 8:31-33).

When the Greek text is examined, the use of the term "Satan" here is not preceded by the definite article. Thus the term "Satan" does not function as a proper name but rather as a common noun meaning "adversary" (i.e. not "the adversary").

Jesus' rebuke of Peter is not identifying him as "Satan" but instead identifying him as an "adversary." Peter does not have a demon, such as Satan, residing in him or controlling him.

Examine the cases of possible demonic invasion of Christians after the crucifixion of Christ and Pentecost:

Ananias and Sapphira's deceit and greed (Acts 5:1-11).

After selling a piece of land, Ananias and his wife Sapphira conspired to tell Peter that their offering was the full selling price when they actually kept a portion of it. In verse 3 Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back some of the price of the land?"

The Greek term "filled" (plēroō), which is also found in Ephesians 5:18 (...be filled by the Spirit), means to "fill when there is something lacking or absent."

It is not clear whether Ananias and Sapphira were inhabited by a demon or controlled by Satan; however, they were at least filled with a motive to lie to the Holy Spirit such as the temptation or lust for greed (one of Satan's temptations – Luke 4:5-7) and willfully acted to satisfy that lust. While Ananias and Sapphira were likely not Believers, Peter judged them for their deceit and lust (see the article: Testing the Holy Spirit... The Mistake of Ananias and Sapphira at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/3HolySpirit/DeityTestingTheHolySpirit.aspx).

The immoral Christian (1 Cor 5:1-13).

In this instance Paul confronts the Corinthian church for its inability to recognize that a man who was having a sexual affair with his stepmother as a sin of immorality.

Contrary to the literal sense which suggests the demonic wish of one Christian to another, Paul's use of the phrase "handed over to Satan" is a figure of speech intended as an expression for the sinner's excommunication from the church body in hopes that he would recognize his blatant sin and repent. It is not about demonization of a Christian (see the article: What does it mean to "hand one over to Satan?" at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/DisciplineHandOneOverToSatan.aspx).

Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7-10).

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Some commentators have interpreted “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me” as evidence that Paul has been demonized in some fashion. Many others understand Paul’s thorn as a metaphor for a physical ailment or disease such as pain in the head, speech impediment or eye problems.

While there is debate as to what Paul’s “thorn” was, the biblical data is not supportive of the interpretation that Paul was demonized (see the article: What is Paul’s “thorn in the flesh”? at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/10ChristianLiving/CharacterWhatIsPaulsThorn.aspx).

In reviewing the biblical data, there appear at least three cases where a Believer may have been demonized. Two cases occurred before the Ascension of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost: King Saul and the woman who was bent over for 18 years. One case may have possibly occurred after the Ascension of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost: Ananias and Sapphira.

Just before the Ascension, Jesus promises the Apostles, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8), and shortly after, the power of the Holy Spirit is manifest on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13). It is at this time that Christians are graced with the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit (see the article: The Holy Spirit inside of me?! at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/3HolySpirit/WorksIndwellInsideOfMe.aspx and the article: The Holy Spirit in the New Testament...working in the Believer’s life at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/3HolySpirit/WorksPersonalNTBelieversLife.aspx).

This is the principal reason why many believe that a Christian cannot be demonized.

Does this mean that a demon can coexist with the Holy Spirit within the Christian? The Bible is not explicit in this matter.

However there is ample evidence that evil can coexist with good within the Christian namely the conflict between his sin nature (i.e. “flesh”) and the Holy Spirit.

Christians clearly belong to Christ, and any demonic attack is only permitted with the permission of Jesus Christ. So while evil is permitted, it is for a sovereign purpose that may not be easily understood. This includes demonization if it is possible.

Commentators such as Unger propose that a demon entered a person prior to their conversion to Christianity and continued to control some part of their life because the sin allowing the demon to remain was never renounced.

While there is little biblical data to support the thesis of whether a Christian can be demonized, most evangelical conservatives who hold to this position do so because of their clinical experience dealing with genuine Christians who appear to be demonized. To see such clinical data, consult the references cited below.

References:

1. Dickason CF, *Demon Possession & the Christian*, Westchester, IL: Crossway Books (1990).
2. Unger MF, *What Demons Can Do to Saints*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press (1977).