

Can a Christian Be Demonized?

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Can demons reside in a Christian believer and oppress or possess them? This question has come to the forefront at many Bible schools and seminaries. Recently, at the Lausanne Conference for World Evangelism, delegates were split over the issue, and it remained the most glaring unresolved matter for the attendants. For those who hold that a believer can be inhabited by a demon, the deliverance and unfettering of such afflicted believers represents a crucial and essential ministry in the church. For those who affirm that a believer cannot be so tyrannized by a demon, the sensationalistic approach to such a ministry can be an affront to one's biblical sensibilities. In discussion of this subject, it is important to first clarify the points of agreement in all parties involved.

Resolved: *That there are demonic spirits that seek to disrupt or destroy the spiritual life of all mankind, particularly believers.* Most Christians accept at face value the fact that demons exist, and that they have malign intent towards humans. The "devil" and demons are not merely personifications of our flesh, or mythological figures. The Bible calls the devil "a roaring lion, seeking who he might devour" (1 Peter 4:8), and the apostle John said that the "whole world is in the power of the evil one." (1 John 5:19 Revised Standard Version). Furthermore, Paul tells us that we are to wrestle "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high [places]." (Ephesians 6:12 KJV). Consequently, we know that the Christian does indeed face opposition and struggle against demonic powers.

Resolved: *That name of Christ has absolute authority over demonic spirits.* Jesus' ministry demonstrated in the most unequivocal and graphic manner that all angelic beings had to submit to the power and authority of the Son of God. By extension, in His name, we have been delegated that authority over those evil spirits and demons that Jesus "disarmed" and "triumphed over" (Colossians 2:15, RSV). At Calvary, Jesus dealt a fatal blow to the kingdom of darkness, and merely the trappings of Satan's former reign still exist. The believer in Christ, due to the fact that Jesus dwells in their heart by faith, is called to "overcome the wicked one." (1 John 2:13,14). The authority of the believer includes casting demons out of other individuals, where necessary. (Mark 16:17, Acts 5:15, 8:7, 19:12)

There is a high level of agreement on the above points among most Christians. Furthermore, most Christians agree that a Christian cannot be truly "possessed" by a demon. The Christian has been "bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19,20) and therefore is possessed or owned by God. Rather, the argument that is made by those who support the idea that a Christian could be demonized would say that a believer could be "oppressed", not "possessed". However, when that term "oppressed" is loaded to mean that a demon takes up residence within the believer, causing that individual to express certain behaviors against their will, or "manifest" the demonic presence in bizarre and unnatural ways, it could be questioned as to whether this was not merely a semantic shell game. Other explanations used to defend the "demonization" hypothesis are that a demon is able to lodge itself in one's flesh, or old nature. Others will speculate that a demon can inhabit one's soul, yet the same individual's spirit is saved and in union with God. Each possibility will be examined.

The Real Issue:

Although a lot of the debate centers on parsing words such as “oppression” and the locality of demons spirits in relation to the believer, there is in fact a dimension to the issue that is frequently ignored which puts the matter to rest. The issue is solved not by delving into question regarding demonology, but rather soteriology, the study of the salvation process. In short, it could be stated in this simple thesis:

When an individual is saved, God effects a fundamental change in their nature or essence (read: spirit) of the person that absolutely precludes the possibility of a demon remaining inside of him or her. More specifically, it is the metaphysical union of the believer’s spirit with the Holy Spirit makes no room or allowance for any other spirit.

To see the logic and veracity of this, it is important to review some of the facts the Bible presents regarding salvation. When a person exercises saving faith in the finished work of Christ, and confesses Jesus as their Lord:

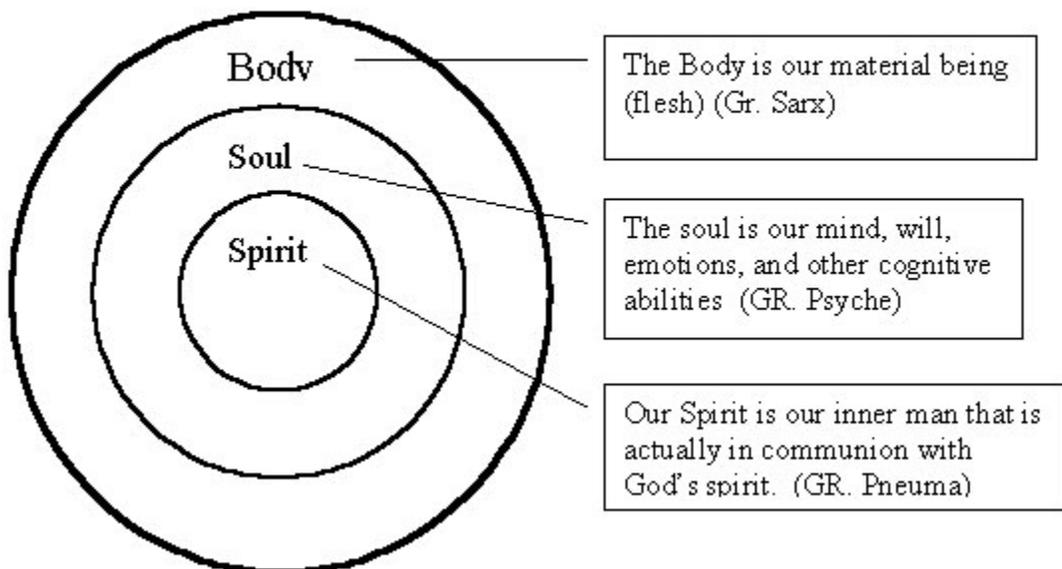
1. They are made to partake of God’s Nature (2 Peter 1:4)
2. They are sealed with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph 1:13, 4:30)
3. They are born again of God’s seed (1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 3:9)
4. They are forgiven (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; 2:13)
5. They are made righteous, that is, justified before God (Romans 3:21,22; 4:4,5; 2 Cor. 5:21)
6. Made alive and united with Christ and seated with him in heavenly places. (Eph 2:6)
7. Bought and owned by God (even their bodies) (1 Cor 6:19,20)
8. Declared to be a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16)
9. Declared by God to be holy and blameless (Eph 1:4, Col 1:22)
10. Adopted by God, and given a spirit of sonship (Romans 8:16,17; Gal 4:6,7)

It is clear biblically that an individual receives tremendous benefit to their person when they come to Christ. The Godhead permeates their spirit, and they are ontologically changed. They become the “temple made without hands” (Mark 14:58), a microcosm of the future spotless temple that God is fitting together using each believer as a living stone (Eph 2:21, 22; 1 Peter 2:5). With this imagery in mind, we would do well to ask ourselves if God Almighty would gracefully share his residence with a demon? Paul, utilizing the same image of the believer being a temple, asks just this question in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16.

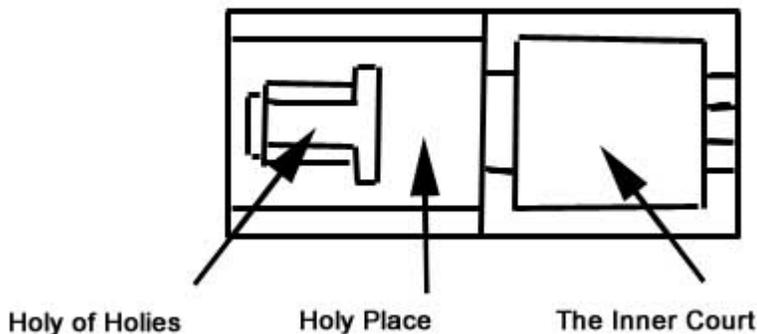
“For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in [them]; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

The question is of course, rhetorical. Christ and Belial (a demon from Jewish mythos) cannot have “concord” or agreement. They don’t co-exist very well at all. During Jesus’ earthly ministry, whenever he got within any proximity of someone with a demon, the demons typically

reacted with hostility and fear. If a Christian is indeed indwelt by the spirit of Christ, a holy temple, how can we imagine a demon residing peacefully in the same soul or spirit? Some theologians (namely Clinton Arnold of Biola University, and Jack Deer), in defense of the demonization hypothesis, have tried to make the case that the Spirit of God would tolerate cohabitation with a demon just as God's Spirit tolerates indwelling a believer that still sins and is subject to all the other frailties of the flesh. However, this analogy does not hold up under closer inspection. The flesh (ie. The "old nature") is merely the last vestiges of our adamic heritage, has only temporal existence, and will soon be swallowed up by the glorious resurrected body that we will receive at the end of the age. A demon, on the other hand, is a foreign intelligence, completely hostile to God, irrevocably evil, and without any chance of redemption. There is really no comparison.



The Temple



Keeping a view to the fact that it is our union with God, by the agency of the new birth and regeneration of the Holy Spirit, that purifies us and protects us from the possibility of a demon dwelling within us, we can immediately see that the "proof texts" that some utilize to

demonstrate the demonization hypothesis just don't work. For example, some might point to King Saul, who was called "God's anointed", as being tormented internally by an evil spirit. (1 Sam. 18:10-11; 19:9-10) However, he clearly was not a regenerated, Spirit-born son of God. He couldn't be, obviously, since it was not until the advent of Pentecost that anyone truly could have appropriated the full benefits of the new Covenant economy of salvation. Likewise, the "daughter of Abraham" who was bound by a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17) could not have had these benefits. A survey through the Book of Acts and the Epistles will show that there is no clear-cut example where a believer is suggested to have a demon inside of them oppressing them. Even in an extreme situation where there was an unrepentant individual in sexual sin (1 Cor 5:1-6), we are never treated to the idea that the person may have a spirit of lust or fornication and be in need of deliverance. On the contrary, Paul says that the man should be expelled from the church and handed over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit might be saved on the last day. Thus, the biblical response to this discipline problem was not to try to remove a demon from inside a believer, but remove the believer from the congregation and actually hand him over to a demonic spirit to be physically disciplined. Sort of a "reverse deliverance" one might say. Implicit in this exchange is the idea that the individual in question is spiritually secure, and even outside that church, is still only subject to whatever a demon might do to him physically.

There are a number of other Bible verses that touch upon "spirits" and their locale to the believer. Just to name a few:

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God." (1 Cor. 2:12)

Paul wrote these words to the Corinthian church, which, to their infamy, was frequently upbraided by Paul for their carnality and spiritual immaturity. This is significant because many who hold to the "demonization hypothesis" suggest that those who are most apt to have a demon would be those who are either young in the faith, or those who have "opened the door" to demonization by their pandering to either occultism or a sinful lifestyle. ("Generational curses", yet another innovation, notwithstanding.) Even a cursory glance of Paul's epistle shows that the Corinthian church had all these challenges. Just the same, Paul affirms that they had not received the spirit of the world, but that which is of God. If demons could inhabit a believer, this probably would have been a great opportunity for Paul to say that many of them likely had received a "spirit from this world", and give a little directive on how to cast them out.

Digressing for a moment upon the idea of "generational curses", it would appear that in this epistle, Paul makes no allowance for this concept either. In principle, the idea is unsubstantiated in scripture overall. Although it is true that the Mosaic law declared that God would visit the sins of the fathers upon the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5) it is clear that in the course of God's progressive revelation, that was superseded to the principle that God would not execute a curse upon an individual for the iniquity of their ancestors. The Book of Ezekiel deals specifically with this, with the Lord declaring that everyone was responsible for their own sin, rather than son's suffering the consequences of their father's actions. (Ezekiel 18:1-20). Jesus also affirmed this to his disciples when he told them that a man's congenital blindness had nothing to do with his parent's sin (John 9:2,3). Logically, we would affirm that no "curse"

could cross to the believer by virtue of the fact that the believer is a “new creation” and all old things pass away. (2 Cor. 5:17). Paul carries this one step further in 1 Cor. 7:14 regarding offspring. He says:

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.” (1 Cor. 7:14)

Paul is saying that simply having one believing parent assures that nothing “unclean” (ie. unclean spirit) would pass to a child. Based on this, it is fair to say that one could say that “generational blessing” is a biblical principle, but “generational curses” is completely wanting.

Returning to the subject of “spirits” in believers, Paul also says in 2 Tim 1:7 that:

“God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” (2 Tim 1:7)

The “us” of that sentence appears to be inclusive, suggesting that all believers should have “power, love and a sound mind” through God’s Spirit. It presumes that God does not allow a foreign spirit, in this case, a “spirit of fear”, to affect a believer. God’s perfect love casts out fear.

Looking at the Apostle’s John writing, there are two decisive verses in his epistles that leave essentially no room for the “demonization hypothesis”. He says in 1 John 4:4 that

“Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world”.

This is a favorite verse of many of those in the deliverance movement, however, it argues vehemently against deliverance ministry being at all necessary for believers in the church. Who does the verse suggest is in us? God Almighty. Who is in the world? The devil, or his demons. Why then, in context of a deliverance session, would someone cite this verse, and invoke the Holy Spirit to come (from without, no less) and remove a demon from a believer? Someone seems to have it backwards.

In a no less conclusive verse, John says in 1 John 5:18

“We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that **wicked** one toucheth him not.”

The wicked one does not touch those who are born of God. That does not preclude the possibility that the devil may not try to harass a believer. However, the begotten of God “keepeth himself”. The devil has no right, authority or ability to touch anything on the Christian that pertains to their “self”, that is, their inner man (spirit, soul).

Is it possible that a demon could somehow be said to inhabit a believer’s body or flesh (Gr. sarx)? Looking back at the text from 1 Cor. 6:16-20, one will notice that the focus is on the fact

that our very bodies are a “temple of the Holy Ghost” (v. 19). The same thought is in 1 Cor. 3:16,17, but there we are told that God will destroy anyone who seeks to defile that temple. God possesses the believer body, soul and spirit.

What did the Early Church Teach?

The early church (particularly before the Council of Nicea in 325 AD) had a tremendous amount of experience with demoniacs, possessed individuals and the like. It would be a mistake to think that, owing to the fact that we have nearly 2,000 years of church history behind us, that someone we should have a better grasp of this or any theological issue. In many cases, due to their chronological proximity to the apostles, they had a better grasp of the subject, and we are forced to wade through the muddy waters of centuries of bad theologians.

The Ante-Nicene church made no excuses for the fact that it was a demon-stomping powerhouse. In Justin Martyr’s 2nd address, written in the middle of the second century, he declared that

“And now you can learn from what is under your own observation. For numberless demoniacs throughout the whole world, and in your city, many of our Christian men exorcising them in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, have healed and do heal, rendering helpless and driving the possessing devils out of the men, though they could not be cured by all the other exorcists, and those who used incantations and drugs.” (Chapter 7).

Did the early church have a definitive view as to whether a Christian could have a demon or not? The earliest extra-biblical document that touches upon the subject is the Epistle of Barnabas, which may have been written sometime in the late 1st century. It is reputed to have been written by Paul’s traveling companion, Barnabas, although that cannot be proven. In this epistle, chapter 16, he says

“Before we believed in God, the habitation of our heart was corrupt and weak, as being indeed like a temple made with hands. For it was full of idolatry, and was a habitation of demons, through our doing such things as were opposed to [the will of] God. But it shall be built, observe ye, in the name of the Lord, in order that the temple of the Lord may be built in glory. How? Learn [as follows]. Having received the forgiveness of sins, and placed our trust in the name of the Lord, we have become new creatures, formed again from the beginning. Wherefore in our habitation God truly dwells in us...This is the spiritual temple built for the Lord.”

Notice the contrast presented between the condition of the heart before salvation, and that afterwards. Initially, a habitation for demons, now transformed into a holy spiritual temple for the Lord. Although this text does not explicitly say that it is impossible for a demon to remain in a believer, it is at the very least inferred. Clement of Alexandria, in the late 2nd century, quotes this entire text from Barnabas in Chapter 2 of his work “Stromata” as proof that a demon cannot inhabit a believer. In the paragraph just before the citation from Barnabas, Clement says:

“by Him alone can the heart become pure, by the expulsion of every evil spirit from the heart: for the multitude of spirits dwelling in it do not suffer it to be pure... So fares it with the heart as long as there is no thought taken for it, being unclean, and the abode of many demons. But when the only good Father visits it, it is sanctified, and gleams with light.”

When Christ enters a heart, every unclean spirit is expelled. Clement goes on to say that a “saved nature” affords “no entrance to an unclean spirit.”

There are numerous other examples, which demonstrate the fact that the early church did know that demons could not inhabit a true believer. Origen of Alexandria in particular, mentions numerous times through out his dissertation “Against Celsus” that a demon could do a believer no harm (Book 8, Chapter 27) and that they only “exist and exercise power among the wicked... But they have no power over those who have put on the whole armor of God.” (Book 8, Chapter 34). In Chapter 36 of the same work, he says that it is Celsus, the heretic, that suggests that the devil has any power among Christians. It is ironic that it is the deliverance ministries of today that have taken up that same unfortunate theme. Origen says regarding the devil and his minions that

For we have signs and pledges of the destruction of his empire, in those who through the coming of Christ are everywhere escaping from the power of demons, and who, after their deliverance from this bondage in which they were held, consecrate themselves to God, and earnestly devote themselves day by day to advancement in a life of piety. (Against Celsus, Book 7, chapter 17)

To the early church, deliverance was seeing the oppressed and possessed come to Christ and become fully committed believers. It would be all but a heresy to suggest that demons could remain in Spirit-born Christians.

One of the most explicit statements on this issues is found in the collection referred to as “Pseudo-Clementine” writings. They are a number of works that allegedly were written by Clement the Roman bishop at the end of the 1st Century. It is far more likely, however, that they were written in the late 2nd century. In the dissertation entitled the “Recognitions of Clement” Book 4, Chapter 17, we find this:

“But even the demons themselves, in proportion as they see faith grow in a man, in that proportion they depart from him, residing only in that part in which something of infidelity still remains; but from those who believe with full faith, they depart without any delay. For when a soul has come to the faith of God, it obtains the virtue of heavenly water, by which it extinguishes the demon like a spark of fire. There is therefore a measure of faith, which, if it be perfect, drives the demon perfectly from the soul “

When someone, even in the remotest sense, begins to trust God, the demons start packing. When a person exercises a faith unto salvation, the demon is driven “perfectly” “without delay” from the soul.

Why do so many people still believe that Demons can indwell Christians?

It is very likely that the reason why so many are inclined to believe that demons can indwell a Christian is because they have a low view of salvation. Many view “salvation” as not much more than “finding religion” or praying a single prayer. To many others, it is merely consenting to try to live a better life. In each case, the view is decidedly ego-centric, and reduced to triviality. When we have a theocentric view of salvation however, and understand to the best of our knowledge what God has entrusted to us, we get a clear picture of our authority over demonic influences. “Know ye not that you are the temple of God” is Paul’s challenge to anyone that hasn’t understood the position they have in Christ. Typically, the lower one’s view of salvation is, then the more menacing and powerful the devil looks. Ultimately, that is the devil’s goal, to give the appearance that he is more than he really is. In the famous text from Isaiah 14, commonly understood as prophecy regarding Lucifer (albeit identified as the King of Babylon), the nations of the earth finally get a look at what Lucifer has become at the end of the age.

All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?... How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! [how] art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, [and] consider thee, [saying, Is] this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms; [That] made the world as a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof; [that] opened not the house of his prisoners? (Isaiah 14: 10, 11-17)

The devil always wanted to be like the Most High. That was his ambition in the beginning, and in the end of the age on the earth, the anti-Christ will try to pawn himself as God in the temple. In the meantime, the best he could possibly ask for is to be reckoned as having god-like status, namely, occupying a habitation in the heart or soul of a believer, a place only fit for God Himself. He really can’t occupy that place, but making people believe he can is the next best thing. When the veil is rolled back at the end of the age, all those that he duped for so long will look in astonishment and say “This is the little imp that had us all so terrified? We were all afraid of him? He doesn’t have any power at all!” Notice in the above text, the last phrase is that he “opened not the house of the prisoners”. We know that Christ has “led captivity captive” and utterly and completely delivered all those who come to him, including all those who were held in his expectation before His advent. Yet the devil, the deceiver, wants people to believe that he is still holding prisoners. He isn’t.

Another reason why people are quick to accept the idea that demons may be indwelling Christians is because they themselves or someone they know may be struggling chronically with moral issues, temptations, or seemingly uncontrollable behaviors. It seems like a convenient answer to be able to say that one has a “demonic stronghold” and imagine that instantaneous deliverance may be just one deliverance session away. However, the Bible never gives the devil credit for controlling believers in such away. The “devil made me do it” doesn’t fly as a defense in court, neither here, nor in the heavenlies. When Paul talks about his struggle with his sin nature in Romans Chapter 7, he never suggests that a demon was behind it. He understood that it

was something intrinsic to his flesh, and only overcome by “reckoning” his old man dead in Christ. No deliverance meeting necessary.

Interestingly enough, the ante-Nicene church fathers were ahead of the curve on this one too. Clement of Alexandria said in the sixth book of his *Stromata* “let not them then say, that anyone who sins and transgresses does so through the agency of demons.” He understood that it was human nature not only to sin, but then to try to deny responsibility. Origen likewise in *First Principles* Book 3, Chapter 2 said that it was the “simple among the believers in the Lord Christ are of opinion, that all the sins which men have committed are caused by the persistent efforts of these opposing powers (demons)”. He goes on to explain how the mature in the faith understood that it was not the influence of demons at all, but the base elements of human constitution that incited individuals to certain behaviors.

The last reason why many may give credence to the demonization hypothesis is because they personally have witnessed or experienced deliverance ministry. Perhaps they saw someone get “delivered” at a church service. In some cases, individuals will have an unexplainable event where they describe some type of release, which is sometimes accompanied by unusual behavior, including vomiting or screaming. Since I am not a psychologist, I will not put forth any speculation as to any of the natural explanations for this phenomenon. I will, however, say that it is never acceptable to let one’s theology be driven by one’s experience. Only the Bible is the final arbiter of what is true and what is not. Let God be true and every man a liar.

Conclusion

The Bible clearly presents the devil as a beaten foe. Scripture nowhere allows for the possibility of a demon inhabiting a born-again, redeemed and justified believer in Jesus Christ. Thus, deliverance ministries today, as far as they relate to Christians, can only cause confusion and concede to the devil power and authority that he does not have. An untold number of believers who have sought pastoral counseling have been done a great disservice by ministers who have pursued a non-existent demon, rather than give biblical counsel.

How does the Bible exhort believers to relate to a demonic entity? We are told simply to “resist”, and he will flee (James 4:7). The Bible does say that he is “As a roaring lion” (1 Peter 5:8) looking to see whom he may devour, but in the context of who we are in Christ, that shouldn’t strike any fear in you. Picture it like this: if you were in an African savannah, out in the open, empty-handed, and a roaring lion started walking your way, it ought to be you that does the fleeing. However, if you had in your hands a loaded M-16, and a dozen M-1 Abrams tanks from the First Armored Division behind you, and the lion had no teeth and no claws, then the lion ought to be doing the “fleeing.” That is more representative of the actual situation. The devil has been completely and utterly vanquished, and you have been given all authority over him, you are armed to the hilt, and the devil knows it. So much for him.

The issue of whether a Christian can be demonized or not will probably not be going away soon. So many churches have accepted it as a presupposition, it will likely take a long time to root it out. I would expect that, as this age draws to a close, Satan will increase his “lying signs and wonders” to help prop up this unbiblical teaching. The Bible is clear: “Know ye not that you are the temple of the Holy Spirit?” May we always be able to answer that in the affirmative.

10 Reasons Why to Reject the “Christian Having a Demon” Scenario and the “Deliverance Session” as a model of ministry:

1. It has no biblical support, and lots of biblical evidence that argues against it.
2. It trivializes salvation, giving the devil a place inside the believer that is fit only for the Holy Spirit.
3. It may encourage an individual to deny responsibility for his or her own fleshly shortcomings by blaming it on a “demonic stronghold”.
4. Where habitual sin is concerned, an individual may look towards a quick, singular event (ie. Deliverance session) as a solution, rather than the biblical injunction to flee sin and pursue holiness.
5. It ascribes to the devil far more power than he really has
6. It creates a class of minister (“Deliverance minister”) that becomes a necessary intermediary for the believer, much like the priestcraft of the Dark Ages. This is contrary to the NT church model.
7. It has the potential to create an ongoing fear of demons, particularly if a person experiences some of the same moral shortcomings after their deliverance session. They would be inclined to think that they have become re-infested again.
8. As a matter of observation, events surrounding public “deliverances” tend to drive away seekers and weak believers, rather than draw them.
9. Two major corollaries behind it, namely “generational curses” and “territorial spirits” are decidedly anti-biblical.
10. The early church after the apostles unanimously rejected the idea of believers having indwelling demons.