

Response to Lawrence Burkholder

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Lawrence Burkholder's article gave me a framework to begin organizing things that I have come to believe over the past several years. I once heard the statement, "A man with an argument is no match for a man with an experience." It is very descriptive of the nature of this subject. While there is certainly Biblical support for a concept of demons and Satan, as the author documents well, for most of us our theology of demons is largely based on our experience or lack thereof.

There are usually two sides on a roof from which you can fall off. You could ignore any role that the demonic might play in the need for healing. Modern science has given the tools we need to heal mental disorders. Disorders like schizophrenia, epilepsy, and others that were once seen as demonization or possession are now understood more fully as mental or physical conditions. Likewise, you could see everything as rooted in demonic activity. There is no need for understanding one's feelings, no need for medications. Just command the demons to leave. If things do not change, it is due to lack of repentance or unwillingness to part with the demons. Education and knowledge have no value.

Like many Mennonites I grew up believing in a literal Satan, a spirit world that included angels and evil spirits, and a need for protection from evil through a relationship with Jesus. However, I did not take these beliefs too seriously because in the United States demons were not really active (just in third world countries), and if any visited the United States, I was automatically protected as a Christian.

My main introduction to people who had experienced serious emotional, physical, and spiritual abuse, and subsequently to the question of deliverance several years later, began at Philhaven Hospital, a Mennonite psychiatric hospital in Mt. Gretna, Pennsylvania, during my psychology internship and

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employment from 1987 through 1991. During this time I became involved with several clients diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), now renamed as Dissociative Identity Disorder. All the Christian psychologists that I knew were treating it as solely a psychological disorder. There were occasional questions and comments regarding some of the symptoms observed and the possible spiritual interface, but the general attitude was to focus on a psychological explanation, even among dissociative clients presenting with a history of satanic ritual abuse.

In 1991 I joined a group practice with several other Christian psychologists whose faith was an important part of their identity. During the next six years my own view of deliverance was largely formulated. My work with cult abused dissociative clients increased. Somehow word got around that I was willing to work with this disorder, and I had been educating myself about MPD. I also began to believe that God had called me to work with occult survivors as a ministry. Although the others in the practice were open to a belief in Satan and demons, they expressed some concern regarding my involvement with clients dealing with satanic ritual abuse, and some fear about the reputation it could give our practice and about retaliation from active cults. While they never forbade me to do deliverance as part of therapy, they questioned why it did not happen as easily for me as it did for Jesus, and suggested that this practice is not the realm of psychology but a job for pastors to do. I was delighted to have a pastor do this part of the work when one was around, which did happen on occasion. I even taught or encouraged some pastors to practice deliverance.

I began to meet other people working with dissociative disorders who had become aware of dissociative issues during ministry of deliverance. They realized that everything that manifest was not demonic, and were looking to the professional community to learn more about MPD. Some of these people taught me a lot about deliverance, although much of what I learned was on the job training or reading, including the Bible. I and my wife, who was also a therapist working with dissociative clients, would share experiences and try to make sense of what we were witnessing.

I am currently in solo practice. Now I am the one who worries about my reputation. I realized this is still an issue for me when I saw that Burkholder had included me in a list of Mennonite deliverance healers in the Notes to his

article. But I keep giving my reputation, along with my psychology license, to God's keeping. I have been very careful to move in a spiritual direction in therapy only when it is clearly a part of the belief system of the client. Now many of my clients come looking for God to be a central focus in therapy. Deliverance is for more than just those coming out of occult backgrounds. It can even be an area of my own personal need.

One area I would like to see further developed in the discussion of demons is the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the deliverance process. I realize this may open another whole theological can of worms if one believes that some gifts of the Spirit are no longer operational. Some people are deeply committed to a concept of deliverance but approach it more as a structured formula: if a certain truth is applied, then there will be a specific response. Specific prayers are prayed for specific problems. God has certainly honored His word and people have found release. As clear as the Bible is that Jesus directly addressed the issue of demons and gives us authority over them (Luke 10:19), there is very little teaching on how to do it other than preparation through prayer (Mark 9:29) and perhaps fasting. To me this speaks of the importance of our daily relationship with God rather than concern for technique. This seems to allow for a diversity in how deliverance is practiced. Personally I enjoy working more directly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The realm of the demonic is a spirit realm, one I cannot see for the most part, although God shows me glimpses at times. Some people can see more clearly in this realm, but I believe we are all better off to let the Holy Spirit lead the way. This allows for freedom and creativity in the act of deliverance, and makes it more fun, but it also means you can't always rely on formulas or past experience to inform you of what a new situation entails.

One day I was meeting with a woman dealing with an extensive array of mind control and demonic bondage in spite of a relationship with God that was very committed and genuine. We had already experienced deliverance in a variety of ways. On this particular day I had just finished a soft drink from a plastic bottle and was absentmindedly playing with it as the session began. We had exchanged greetings, and we were both quietly pondering what we were going to talk about for the session. I realized I had begun to rhythmically beat the bottle against my other hand, and thought I should stop and put the bottle

down so as not to distract or annoy her. But just as quickly I had a second thought to continue and sensed this to be God's direction, so I continued – still with no obvious reaction from my client. Shortly I became aware of an extremely evil and glaring presence looking at me through her eyes. I commanded it to leave in the name of Jesus, and there was a relaxing in her demeanor. Then just as quickly the look returned and I responded again, with the same effect. This went on for several minutes; my rhythmically tapping the bottle and dispelling demons by the authority Jesus gave me. Eventually this came to an end, and the woman told me of her experience of the demons literally being drawn into manifesting one after the other by the drumming sound.

I have been reluctant to commit this experience to writing because of its unorthodox nature, although we did joke about writing a book on Pop Bottle Deliverance. I share to demonstrate the spontaneity, creativity, and lack of religiosity of the Holy Spirit as well as to warn against codifying experiences into formulas.

Relying on the Holy Spirit also means following God's timing and agenda, which may be quite different from what we would prefer. God has been known to ignore people's theology. I remember watching with some humor as a Baptist colleague of mine was working with a satanic ritual abuse survivor, demonstrating new methods he had been learning. The Holy Spirit was speaking to him, giving very clear and intricate directions on how to walk through and disconnect the maze of demons and mind control programming that held this woman in bondage. As my friend the Baptist would share what God was showing him, he would repeatedly concede that what he was experiencing did not fit with his theology.

One caution I would add to Burkholder's article is that not all unpleasant things, apparent curses, come from Satan as God's judgment of sin. Sometimes because of His love for us, God uses Satan to sift us (Luke 22:31). I view this as a cleansing process and an educational process where God is preparing us for things ahead. To move into deliverance instead of obedience, asking God what our response should be to the situation, could result in a lot of frustration about why deliverance does not work.

Many people dealing with demonic activity have begun to focus more on the "cracks" through which demons enter or the legal ground that gives

them the right to operate in a person's life. What is it that continues to allow the demonic to harass a person? The actual act of commanding demons to leave is fairly simple, if we understand the authority we have in Jesus and the power of His blood. The difficult part is gaining awareness of their presence and right to be there. Even more difficult at times is helping the person reach the place of exercising his or her will to have them leave. Some people have grown quite accustomed to their demons and the power, perceived protection, or other benefits they are getting.

The stories of attempts at deliverance that I have heard from the Mennonite mental health community presented those involved as being on the fanatical edge, having departed from a true methodology of healing. Scientific understanding of emotional and psychological problems is certainly the standard. Some therapists, especially those working with dissociative disorders, quietly depart from that constraint when psychology does not explain their experience. They tend to move outside the mainstream, or connect with ministries more open to a joining of the psychological and the spiritual. This is more or less true across the Christian mental health field. There are pockets of Christian therapists and counselors who include deliverance in their healing but are cautious about disclosing to "outsiders".

I deeply appreciate Lawrence Burkholder's challenging us to take seriously the concept of demons from a Biblical understanding. There are many areas for further clarification and learning on this subject, but he has laid a solid foundation and pointed us in a direction we need to go if we are to move to a deeper understanding of what God has for us. As God has opened my eyes to a spirit realm that is very active, He has also begun to show me more and more of His power and love. We do not need to fear evil, because He has overcome evil and His love overcomes the fear.