Diagnosing the Demonic

Can you recognize the presence of evil spirits?

by David W. Appleby

Recognizing the presence of demonic spirits would be easy if each demonized person had symptoms that were as dramatic as those we saw in movies like *The Exorcist*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, and *The Rite*. They've taught us what deliverance looks like: projectile vomiting, head spinning, levitating, a sudden drop in room temperature, a total distortion of the individual's appearance, a guttural voice, a sense of evil, and the ability to make objects fly about the room.

After being involved in deliverance ministry for more than 30 years and having seen more than 1000 people set free in the name of Jesus, I can attest that deliverance rarely looks like this, for which I am extremely grateful.

Brokenness can be covered with a smile, torment with service, and compulsive behavior with secrecy. Most of the time what others see on the outside doesn't reflect what is going on inside. We can give ourselves to the Lord, be baptized, and try to walk with him, but still be oppressed and victimized by spiritual forces beyond our control. And we can do it with a smile on our face.

Because everything we do and think and feel is the result of a mix of biological, cognitive, psychological, social, and spiritual factors, it is very difficult to say, "This is what a demonized person looks like." The Bible itself lists a broad assortment of symptoms that are attributed to demonic spirits.

In the physical realm, we see demonization resulting in muteness (Mt. 12:22), deafness (Mk. 9:25), blindness (Mt. 12:22), and bodily deformity (Lk. 13:10-17). In Matthew 4:23-25 we find the demonized among those who were ill from various diseases, those suffering severe pain, seizures, and paralysis. Mark 9:17 indicates that physical symptoms and demonization are not mutually exclusive. Jesus healed those who were sick and those who had demons. The word "healed" was applied to both.

In the psychological realm, some of the symptoms that demonized people displayed in the New Testament would be categorized as characteristic of a mental disorder today. Unprovoked violence, crying out uncontrollably, raving, and being troubled are mentioned (Mt. 8:28, Mk. 1:23-24, Lk. 6:17-18, Acts 19:13-16). These are not stable, healthy behaviors. Mental health symptoms and demonic symptoms can be similar.

In the relational realm, we see demonic involvement in Luke 8:27-28, manifesting in a man who lived naked among tombs and was impossible to restrain. This behavior would, at the least, hinder successful interaction with family, friends, and those in the community.

So Scripture shows us that virtually any physical, psychological, or social symptoms might be attributed to demonic spirits. The enemy attacks on all possible fronts, which complicates the whole process of diagnosis.

The most accurate diagnoses come not from looking only at symptoms, but at predictive life experiences. If

an individual has opened certain doors, there is an increased probability that demonic involvement is present. These include (1) generational curses, oaths, and soul ties, (2) occult involvement, (3) trauma or victimization, and (4) long-term ongoing sin. These create areas of spiritual vulnerability into which demonic spirits may move.

CASE STUDY OF A FOOTHOLD

In order to see these played out in real life, let's consider a case study written by a former client we will call "Michelle."

I was number six of seven children. I never felt like I really belonged to the family. I was a burden, or a mistake. We lived in the projects of Philadelphia until I was six. We moved to a very rundown house when I was seven. Both my parents drank a lot. They became angry, abusive, and scary when they drank.

My father worked; my mother stayed home. Both of my parents had sexual and physical abuse in their pasts, and they carried that into our home. We were poor and we went without food on several occasions. To avoid embarrassment, I would lie about stuff to cover up the truth. If a teacher asked me where my coat was, I would tell her I did not like wearing coats. When friends would ask to come over to play, I would say my mother was sick. At Christmas I would lie about the presents I got; I never received any gifts from my parents, but I did not want anyone to know that. The Father of Lies got his hooks in me at an early age. Lying made me look like something I was not.

The first sexual abuse I can remember was at age five. My mother came into my room, picked me up from bed, and carried me to my dad's bed where he touched me all over. The nighttime ritual went on for several years. He showed me nude pictures. He read sexual events to me, and then wanted me to act those things out with him.

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At age seven, I accepted Christ as my savior, and I loved God as much as I could at that age. I believed that God would stop the abuse if I was just good enough. But soon I believed that I was not good because the abuse continued and even got worse.

My father wanted to introduce me to oral sex; I was seven years old. I said no. He became outraged. He grabbed me and took me to the basement. He made me watch him as he killed my kitten, and he told me if I ever said no to him again he would cut my throat just like he did with my kitten. I was sent out back to bury the kitten. I remember looking up to the sky and praying to God for help, but help didn't come.

I felt so alone and scared, and I was angry with God. I didn't let go of my belief in God, but it didn't offer much comfort. I just wanted to die and go live with Jesus forever. God was the only thing I had to hold on to.

The sexual abuse continued for years. I thought no child should ever have to endure such horrible things, especially from her parents. My mother was just as abusive as my father.

I always wondered why I was so singled out. The answer to that came when my mother, in a moment of weakness and rage, told me that she had been raped by her brother 13 years ago. I was the result of that rape. Now I knew why I felt from the beginning that I didn't belong. I guess my father felt it was okay to molest and rape a child who was not his own.

At 14, I became pregnant from the molestation and was forced to have an abortion. It was very painful and heartbreaking. At this point I had just had enough; I didn't care about myself, my life, my family, or anything else. I continued to attend church, but I felt empty inside, disillusioned by the whole idea of God.

I was sixteen when hope came back into my life. The pastor of the church I was attending and his family asked me to move in with them. They knew some of what was going on at home, and they knew I had to get out or I would not survive mentally, physically, and especially spiritually. I moved in with them and finally found a place where I could trust someone and someone could show me what God's love was all about. My life changed and I give God all the praise.

At the age of 18, over Christmas break, my birth family called and wanted me to come visit. For some stupid reason I listened to them and went for a visit. I was raped again by my father that night. I never told anyone what happened, but three months later, I tried to kill myself and came very close to succeeding. I spent a couple of months in a mental hospital.

At the hospital, a therapist thought it would be a good idea to have me offer forgiveness to my father for what he had done to me over the years. He didn't tell me that my father would join us for the session. When I saw him, I went nuts. I felt lied to. I felt afraid, and my mind just snapped. I don't remember much. I remember being torn off my father, held down, and shot up with drugs. That mistake cost me another three weeks in the hospital.

I remember praying that I would die. I was angry at

God for letting me live at all. Life to me seemed like a cruel joke God was playing on me.

I thought I had resolved the past, but all I had done was put a bandage on a gaping wound. When my daughter was born, all these horrible memories came flooding back. When she was seven, I attempted suicide again. I had four more attempts over the next five years. I tried to deal with my past with the help of non-Christian therapists, and that just made things worse.

One therapist used hypnosis to take me back to the past, and that was a horrifying experience. Another one read my aura and listened to my spiritual guide. I finally sought the help of a Christian therapist. Just because she was Christian didn't make dealing with the trauma any easier, but I did feel the presence of God, and with his help I started to see there might be some hope. **—Michelle**

Let's look at the four predictive "doors" that can be found in Michelle's story.

CURSES, LIES, AND SOUL TIES

Michelle notes that her parents both had been sexually abused as children and that they brought that history with them into their marriage. It expressed itself as child molestation, rape, and abusive behavior. These were multigenerational patterns transmitted from one generation to the next and not limited to one individual.

Lies or ungodly oaths appear in the internal talk that an individual experiences. It manifests in statements such as "I am not worth anything" or "I was created to be abused" or "God hates me, and I will never find love with anyone."

Soul ties come about as a result of ungodly physical or emotional intimacy. Did you notice the unhealthy connection between Michelle and her father? In spite of years of sexual abuse, she kept putting herself into dangerous situations with him. Many times these unhealthy connections are associated with the "one flesh" principle that normally occurs in a healthy way between husbands and wives (Mt. 19:5, Mk. 10:8) and in an unhealthy way between a man and a prostitute (1 Cor. 6:16).

These curses reside outside the individual but empower the demons to move within the individual. In a sense they connect the individual to the destructive powers of present or previous generations. This connection can be renounced and severed in the name of Jesus, thus weakening the power of the demonic spirit in the family line.

OCCULT INVOLVEMENT

Many times an individual turns to occult practices seeking freedom from the pain of past experiences, though this was not a major theme in Michelle's story. Her abortion, her suicide attempts, and the threat of death at the hands of her father could have opened the door to the occult spirits of Death, Destruction, Suicide, et al.

Having her aura read and being encouraged to follow her spirit guide opened the door for even deeper levels of bondage. These demons feel they have a legal right to stay, and often say, "She came to me. I didn't seek her out. She came to me."

TRAUMA AND VICTIMIZATION

The most common point of entrance is through victimization and trauma. When people are assaulted, they are vulnerable on two fronts. The first danger comes in the attack itself as it produces fear, insecurity, mistrust, and a sense of being powerless. The second danger comes in their response to the victimization and trauma: they hate the person, want him dead or destroyed, etc. This is a spiritual double whammy.

They often get angry at God, question his love for them, and believe that he can't be trusted. "How could you not rescue me, God? You knew that I was just a little kid." Forgiveness does not readily come to the victim's mind.

Awaiting them in the midst of that pain is what I call an "Unholy Paraclete," a sinister counterfeit of the Holy Spirit. Alliances are formed and an immediate way out of the pain is provided. This is not usually a conscious decision, but it comes about as the wounded one decides to believe lies that the enemy presents as being

Possible Indicators of Demonic Influence

- Feelings of shame or guilt that don't yield to God's forgiveness.
- Accusatory voices in the mind that won't stop; mental torment.
- Ungodly coping mechanisms that just make the situation worse.
- Difficulty making connections with people and with God.
- Recurring nightmares/thoughts that disrupt sleep.
- Sins that don't yield to traditional spiritual disciplines like meditation, prayer, fasting.
- Inability to experience the love, peace, joy that the Holy Spirit produces.
- A sense that your life is not your own and something else is working against you, trying to destroy you and all that you and God hold dear.
- Inability to change any of the above no matter how much you want to or how hard you try.
- Personal or family problems that don't respond to therapy.
- Physical or psychological problems that don't respond to medication.

—David Appleby

obviously true: "God doesn't love you if he would let something like this happen to you." "You're the only one who will take care of you." "You can't trust anyone." Then the demonic defense mechanism locks into place and the pain lessens, along with the ability to connect to others and God in any meaningful way.

The wounds are kept fresh by demonic spirits with long memories who constantly remind the individual of their wounds.

How many wounds did Michelle experience? She was emotionally abandoned by her parents, sexually abused by her father, betrayed by her mother, saw her kitten killed; and these were only a few of the brutal experiences in a life full of pain.

THE NEW TESTAMENT VIEWS DEMONS AS SQUATTERS OR INVADERS OF TERRITORY THAT DOES NOT BELONG TO THEM.

Can a Christian Be Demon Possessed?

No. A Christian is already possessed by Jesus. This point of confusion/contention, however, has theologically paralyzed the church. Demon "possession" is the confusing and misleading term. Certain translations of the Bible refer to a person being "possessed by a demon," but the word referring to possession is not present. The Greek words used, *daimonizomai* ("to be under the influence of a demon") or *echein daimonion*, ("to have a demon") may be better translated as being "demonized."

Possession implies ownership, and demons own nothing. The New Testament views demons as squatters or invaders of territory that does not belong to them. A burglar can trash my home but that doesn't make it his. Demonization is defined as being under the influence of one or more demonic spirits. This continuum of influence can range from mild to serious, even life-threatening.

The Bible tells believers to stop giving a place to the devil in Ephesians 4:27, suggesting at least a minimal association with a demonic spirit. Acts 5 says that Satan "so filled" Ananias and Sapphira, two members of the early church, that they lied to the Holy Spirit, an involvement major enough that God struck them dead (a particularly effective, but not recommended form of deliverance).

So Christians may not be "possessed," since they belong to Christ, but they can certainly be demonized, or "under the influence" of demons. For such situations, deliverance is the biblical remedy. —David W. Appleby

LONG-TERM SIN

I am not talking about an "Oops, excuse me, Lord. I've sinned" kind of sin. I am talking about a situation where an individual decides, consciously or unconsciously, to disobey and live in rebellion against God. The apostle Paul suggests that dynamic in Ephesians 4:26-27. "In your anger do not sin." There's a choice to be made and it has spiritual consequences: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold."

What sins held Michelle in their grasp? Many were, from a human perspective, justified. She was angry at God for his apparent abandonment of her. She tried to end her life. She gave herself to hatred. She believed the lies of the Enemy. We can easily understand how she could fall into such sin. However, each opened the door to a demonic spirit.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

The wild card in diagnosing demonic spirits, even using these predictors, is the reality that each person responds differently to life's situations. Each of us has different levels of resilience and emotional, cognitive, and spiritual strength. These factors, the varying intensity of life situations, and cumulative effects will influence the extent to which we may be vulnerable to demonic spirits.

A few years ago, I was demonized briefly after a traumatic experience. Ironically, it came as a result of writing a book on the subject and doing deliverance ministry. This unexpected event opened the door to demons named Terror, Anxiety, Persecution, Status, and Preservation.

For three days my mind was tormented by unrelentingly uncontrollable thoughts. These continued 24 hours a day until the Lord revealed the source of my torment.

"Dave, it's a demon!" Duh! That same day a few close friends led me through the deliverance process and the torment simply stopped. Yet, as was the Lord's plan, this trauma resulted in my pursuing a whole new direction for my life in this ministry. God is good and faithful.

These four doorways: hereditary curses and afflictions, occult involvement, trauma and victimization, and long-term sin are helpful predictors. Opening these doors can lead to demonic involvement.

In talking with people who come to you for help, see if any of these "doors" have been opened in their lives. If so, there may be a need to address the demonic elements.