DELIVERANCE
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

It is difficult to imagine discussing deliverance as a new innovative therapeutic method when Jesus and his disciples were practicing it nearly two thousand years ago. It is troubling to imagine a group of fishermen, tax collectors, and other clearly non-professional, largely uneducated people working with men, women, and children in a way that brought about instantaneous, overwhelmingly powerful, and apparently lifelong change.

However, rather than examining why such persons experienced these changes in the physical, psychological, and spiritual realms, it is easier for most of us to think of deliverance as something that happened “back then;” sort of an interesting, but irrelevant, historical religious practice. Seeing “so called” practitioners of deliverance on television firms our conviction that we never want to go near it. It more than challenges our professional identity to think that such an unfamiliar practice might have a place in our therapeutic toolbox now.

My purpose is to give you intellectual whiplash; to frame deliverance as a legitimate therapeutic technique that is appropriate in clinical practice and miles away from the theatrical excesses that are often associated with those who purport to “cast out demons.” As one who works in this area weekly, I have to report that I regularly see clients’ lives turned around in three to four hours; and this after they have often spent many hours with their pastors and counselors with no change being visible.

Presuppositions
Let me begin by laying out some critical presuppositions.

First, I believe that deliverance is relevant for those who are believers in Jesus Christ or who want to be believers. It makes no sense to me that God would provide a way for people to be set free from demonic influence when they have no commitment to Him, nor the desire or power to resist future demonic attacks. In fact, the Scriptures warn us about the consequences of not being filled with the Holy Spirit after our house has been emptied (Luke 11:24-26).

I hold to this position because Christians cannot be possessed by demonic spirits. By definition a believer is one who is already in the possession of the Holy Spirit. The issue is not

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ownership, but influence. The Scriptures are clear that believers are owned by God and are part of His eternal family. But, just as believers bring unhealthy and sometimes destructive thinking and behavior patterns with them through the salvation experience, so can believers also carry demonic spirits with them through the salvation experience. And, just as we fall into sin while believers, we can also open the door to involvement by demonic spirits post salvation if we persist in sinning against God.

Many of us own homes. While I am away someone could come into my home and seek to destroy it. They could defecate on the floor, urinate on the furniture, write foul things on the walls, and seek to do whatever they could to destroy and deface my home. The likelihood of that happening increases tremendously if I leave the doors open. The chances of that happening increase even more if I put a big sign on the front yard that says, "No one home, please come in and help yourself."

At some point during our lives, we may open ourselves up to unhealthy spiritual influences.Sadly, this dark power is often directed toward Christians, who often wander through life in ignorance of the power and presence of such squatters. When we are unaware of such powers in other than the most abstract terms, why should we be surprised when something slips in, occupies and seeks to destroy our poorly defended home? Yet, even though my home may be occupied by those who have no right to be there; it is still my home. It still belongs to me; just as we still belong to Jesus, regardless of how unwise our choices and the fruit of those choices may be after we are saved.

As much as we may want to believe it, becoming a Christian does not fix everything in our lives. The newly saved (and the seasoned saint) still have emotional problems, family problems, financial problems, and problems with both their thoughts and actions. We all know that salvation does not mean sanctification—we are not instantaneously set free from either sin, the challenges of our flesh, or the influence of demonic influence.

We do recognize, however, (or at least we should) that the death, resurrection, and shedding of Christ's blood does offer us the potential and wherewithal to see the power of both sin and demonic influence broken in our lives and in the lives of our clients. Unfortunately, salvation is not a cure-all for every physical, psychological, or spiritual problem.

Second, the challenge for those who counsel is to determine the source of our client's problems so that we can accurately address them. Adopting a holistic model allows us to recognize that the roots of some problems are physical, some psychological, some spiritual, and some a combination of all three. As counselors and pastors, we know that medical personnel can sometimes address physical issues that have resulted in psychological disturbance in a client. Yet, even after medical intervention, we often find that other psychological and/or spiritual issues are still present. Issues in one area often spill over into other areas. Two aspirin, a warm bath, and a "call me in the morning" will do nothing for a broken leg. Proper treatment begins with accurate diagnosis.

Third, the process of diagnosing the presence of demonic spirits is not all that different from our standard diagnostic procedures. First you check the physical or medical realm. Has the client had a physical recently? Is there a history of mental disorder in the family? Are they on any new medication? Are they experiencing any unusual stress? Is there a known or unknown disease process influencing this trouble? These are all factors that need to be considered in any diagnosis. Once the physical component has been considered, then the psychological component can be examined.

A few years ago, when I was in the pastoral ministry, I had a man come into my office and say, "I think I've got a demon!" When I inquired as to why he felt that way, he told me that he had been awaken late at night caught up in the midst of horrible dreams. His behavior in the midst of these dreams was terrifying his wife and children. In fact, he said, the previous night he had been in such terror as a result of being pursued by an imagined unknown assailant, that he jumped out of his bedroom window in an attempt to escape his pursuers. Fortunately, he lived in a ranch house so he simply landed in a bush.

I asked him if he was on any medication. He said that he had been on a heart medication. Had the prescription been changed recently? He noted that it had been changed only a few days earlier. I went to my pharmacological reference book and found that hallucinations and delusions were rare side effects of this particular medication. I sent him back to his physician and he delightedly reported that his demon had left. We all know that the physical impacts the psychological and the spiritual.

We also know that environmental factors influence us. What does the client's family of origin look like? What kind of relationship did the client have with his/her parents, siblings, or other family members? Is there a history of divorce, abuse, alcoholism or drug use? In what kind of environment was the client raised? Was their family poor, middle-class, or wealthy? When did the presenting problem first appear? What else was going on at the time? Had the client experienced the loss of a family member, a job, a promotion? Was there a divorce or separation? Was the client experiencing significant physical problems? Again we know that the physical and the psychological are tied together. Each impacts the other.

Fourth, dark spiritual forces are actively involved in seeking the destruction of God's people—according to the Scriptures, demons have the power to influence our bodies, our minds, and our relationships. As Christians, we are all familiar with the power of an encounter with God through the
salvation experience. We have seen time after time people’s lives, families, careers, and eternal destinies positively reversed as a result of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. We know the transforming power of the blood of Jesus and recognize the need for the discipline of prayer, Bible study, Christian fellowship, and all the traditional spiritual disciplines so that we can successfully maintain that transformation. We’ve seen God’s goodness and power demonstrated in the lives of his children again and again; for that we are profoundly thankful.

But sometimes we encounter clients for whom nothing seems to work—nothing in our bag of tricks is useful. Sometimes we can’t even determine the etiology of the problem. The client doesn’t seem to have any related physical problems. Psychologically they are disturbed, but nothing that we try in therapy seems to work. Even the use of medication doesn’t seem to successfully address the problem. The client expresses a desire to follow Jesus that equals and sometimes exceeds our own, and sometimes even practices the traditional spiritual disciplines such as Bible study, prayer, fasting, meditation, silence, etc., but with no apparent change. That which is tormenting them continues unabated and we don’t know where to go or what to do next. Perhaps there is a dimension that we’ve not yet explored.

Recently, I worked with a young woman who had been involved with self-mutilation since she was 12 years old. She is now in her mid-20s and is one of my graduate counseling students. She had tried to stop cutting herself for a number of years, but with no success. Although she had been to a number of therapists, she found no relief. Finally, she sought out a highly respected, Christian academic who suggested that she memorize 500 Scripture verses. After months of work, she successfully completed her assignment.

When I met her, she was one of the most scripturally-literate young cutters that I had ever encountered. When she shared her struggles with me, I suggested that I might be able to help her. After four hours of work with my team and me, she was set free. She no longer cuts. Or, as she said in her written testimony, “The deliverance itself didn’t heal me; it just allowed me the freedom to heal.” Now counseling is proving to be effective.

Now I want to be very clear here. I am NOT saying that all cutting has a demonic root. All I am saying is that deliverance is a tool that God has given the Church so that His people can be healed and restored. Deliverance, when applied as needed, may open doors for positive therapeutic change and position the client for healing. When a client is thus positioned, counseling can become effective and the traditional spiritual disciplines that are designed to begin to bring the “flesh” into submission to the Spirit of God will now work. Through deliverance, the spiritual power that keeps the client in bondage is broken and the ability to choose is returned.

Finally, it is possible to have a counseling practice that incorporates a model of deliverance that is biblical, holistic, and thoroughly professional; one that brings the respect of your peers, is successful, and does not require screaming. After being involved with deliverance for nearly 25 years, I have developed a model that consistently results in often significant changes in the lives of my clients.

Christians may find that demonic powers have access to them through four main entrances:
1. Generational curses, oaths, and souls
2. Involvement in the occult
3. Trauma and victimization
4. Plain old-fashioned sin that is regularly practiced over an extended period of time

We know from the Scriptures that generational curses are a reality that can affect generations of people (Exodus 20:5-6; Deuteronomy 28:15-26). In Bible days, oaths were taken very seriously and were considered binding (2 Samuel 3:35). Soul ties (unhealthy connections between people, living or dead) are a non-biblical construct that may be based upon the “one flesh” principle.

Involvement in the occult is a powerful predictor of demonic presence. Being involved in occult practices was considered a capital offense in biblical times. It opens a person up to involvement with demons and the inevitable captivity that goes with it (Isaiah 8:19; Jeremiah 27:9, 29:8; Zechariah 10:2; Acts 16:16-18).

Trauma and victimization may open the door to demonization. Events in which a person loses or surrenders control over their mind or body to another may result in demonic infestation. In a sense, a psychological wound is produced by such events. The demonic spirit finds ways into this wound primarily by offering to “help.” Opening the door to these demonic “helpers” who offer ungodly coping mechanisms will lead to increased long-term bondage and wounds that will not heal.

The last “doorway” to demonic involvement is through plain old-fashioned sin. This is not the, “Oops, I’ve slipped today variety of sin,” but sins where a person, often knowingly, makes a decision to pursue a course of behavior that they know is contrary to God’s Word. Ephesians 4:26-27 tells us, “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold (NIV).” This verse refers to a situation where a person chooses to sin, and maintains that sin for a specified period of time. Long-term failure to yield to the Word of God may result in demonic involvement.

The principles of equifinality and multifinality both apply to the process of demonization. Equifinality holds that many different ways may exist to arrive at the same end state (demonization). These same factors, in a different sequence, could yield dramatically different results.
Multifinality, on the other hand, holds that a particular condition may lead to many different end states. Similar initial conditions, as they play out over time, may produce very different results.

In short, sometimes different situations lead to demonization and other times they do not. Factors that influence receptivity may include neurological sensitivity to stress, frequency and duration of the experiences, prior history, age of the client, spiritual sensitivity, and something as simple as whether a demon happens to be around to take advantage of the situation.

Pattern
The actual model for deliverance for the Christian is, in itself, rather simple. It involves:
1. a general all-purpose prayer for forgiveness, protection, and the presence of the Holy Spirit
2. a breaking of curses, ungodly oaths, and soul ties
3. a command that the demon identify itself by telling us its name
4. a determination of the meaning of the name or its function in the life of the client
5. a renunciation of the demonic spirit
6. a confession of the sin (often involving an underlying lie) and a request for forgiveness for believing the lie that is the source of the demon’s power
7. a command that the demon leave
8. a repetition of points three through seven until there are no more demonic spirits present
9. prayer asking that the Holy Spirit fill the client and heal all wounds

Now while this seems very straightforward, it is not a checklist. The problem is that demons resist this process at every step. They hide, refuse to cooperate, confuse the client, keep them from speaking or hearing, seek to lead those involved in the deliverance astray down endless rabbit trails, threaten the client, their children, and those on the team, try to exhaust and discourage everyone present, and generally do all the things that you would expect of an entity that hates God, the client, and you.

I never do this work alone, and always work with a team who prays and supports this work in an ongoing way. If you choose to become engaged in this ministry, I suggest you do the same. Those who are licensed and want to protect their credentials may desire to “assist” a counselor or pastor who has experience in this area. Based upon advice of an attorney, I chose not to pursue licensure so that I would be free to work in this area. Those in the clinical community are overwhelmingly important to both minister and client, as you affirm and pray for those who minister and provide follow-up and aftercare to those clients who receive this ministry.

Finding success in this process requires an absolute determination to see the fruit of what Jesus Christ did in His death and resurrection applied to one of His children. It is difficult and time-consuming, but the investment in time and energy will produce often incredible results in areas that we have been unable to touch in our counseling.

Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, Christian counselors and pastors should have more than a Christian worldview. The truth of Ephesians 1:18-21 must move past our heads and tongues to our hearts:

18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,
19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength,
20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,
21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (NIV).

If we as Christian counselors and pastors are not willing to do all that we can for those for whom Christ died, who will? As the Apostle Paul put it so succinctly, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power” (1 Corinthians 4:20).

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