

**In the name of Jesus Christ I command you, you spirit of [name], to depart without doing harm to [name of counselee] or anyone else in this house<sup>1</sup>**

### James McCabe

Are you aware of the enormous number of people now calling themselves either Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, or Charismatic? As of the year 2000, David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia* estimates that these new movements contain 27.7% (over 500 million people) of the world's Christian population. They are movements that span across all branches of the church (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox) and most people groups.<sup>2</sup> Yet, they originated a recent one hundred years ago from the Pentecostal movement that began in Kansas. Indeed, when considered together numerically, transculturally, and transdenominationally, they are one of the most impressive social movements arising in the twentieth century.

Despite their impressiveness, I do not remember studying them in sociology, or even hardly in theology. This paper begins to fill the gap in my own studies and what I assume is a similar gap for others by theologically engaging one characteristic that these movements share — a characteristic that has significantly contributed to their remarkable yet often neglected growth: the renewed and more extensive practice of exorcism, often called 'deliverance ministry'.<sup>3</sup>

L. Grant McClung Jr., Professor of Mission and Church Growth at the (Pentecostal) Church of God School of Theology, claims that exorcism has been a central aspect 'in the expansion of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements'. But he adds, 'A clarified doctrinal statement on demonology and exorcism does not exist among major Pentecostal bodies.' He suggests that for Pentecostals and Charismatics, exorcism means 'the act of expelling evil spirits or demons by adjuration in the name of Jesus Christ and through his power'. Again, though, he reiterates the problem of informality: 'Like many themes in

Pentecostal/Charismatic belief and practice, exorcism has been practiced but not formally theologized.<sup>4</sup> This theological informality makes a systematic study and general evaluation of their exorcism, or deliverance, ministry quite difficult and even precarious.

Despite the diversity of their positions, some trends have been observed among the exorcists. One of these trends is the naming of demons or spirits associated with ethical problems that are being exorcized. For instance, Grant McClung lists spirits of fear, lying, deceit, jealousy, whoredom, bondage, and even among some, spirits of alcohol and nicotine, to name a few.<sup>5</sup> These demons inflict particular sins or addictions by indwelling, infesting, or attaching to the person. According to various authors surveyed, the solution for such cases—what might be called ethical possession—is exorcism.

Following Eric Sorensen's evaluation of exorcism in the New Testament, I will argue that this recent extension of exorcism to 'ethical spirits', or 'spirits of sin', has gone further than the New Testament warrants. In the New Testament, we do not see exorcism practiced on people exhibiting phenomena associated with bondage to sin (e.g. lustful thoughts, pride, anger). Instead, exorcism in the New Testament is performed on those who exhibit more abnormal phenomena than what is associated with bondage to sin, phenomena that we would usually identify with physical or mental disorders (e.g. foaming at the mouth, convulsions, living naked in the wilderness; also, supernatural phenomena like demons speaking through a person to Jesus in accusation). Further, the New Testament applies other methods, primarily baptism, in order to free those who exhibit the former phenomena associated with bondage to, or being possessed by, sin. Therefore, I will argue that exorcism when applied to ethical problems and their associated phenomena conflates the distinction found in the New Testament between exorcism and baptism.

Unfortunately, none of the authors surveyed argues against this criticism, so it is somewhat preliminary or out of place to attack them on an issue they do not directly address or argue for. Nevertheless, to a certain extent, they reveal their arguments concerning exorcism of ethical spirits in their debates about whether a Christian can be 'possessed'. They claim to be following the model of Jesus' ministry of exorcism, and the New Testament in general. My criticism is one way in which I think they have misapprehended the New Testament practice of exorcism.

After mentioning a few notes about the terminology of possession and exorcism, we will reflect on the background of exorcism for the New Testament in the intertestamental period, discovering its significance in two ways for the New Testament practice of exorcism. Next, we will survey the instances of exorcism found in the New Testament and find that exorcism never clearly involves an ethical possession, rather it involves a psychological or physiological possession. This finding forms the first reason for thinking that exorcism does not apply to ethical possession. Building upon this premise, we will conclude that if exorcism had applied to ethical possession in the New Testament, then we would expect to find it in contexts where remedies are offered for those who have serious ethical problems. We will find instead that, in these cases, there are other remedies for ethical possession like baptism, repentance, discipline, faith, and love—all of which, perhaps, can be included as part of living out what it means to be baptized into Christ. Since other means—in a word, baptism—are offered to free those who are ethically possessed, those who claim that exorcism applies to ethical possession in the New Testament have conflated significant differences between baptism and exorcism and, in addition, have conflated the two different kinds of possessions these remedies apply to in the New Testament. Finally, we will examine some of the exegetical and theological problems found in the works of Francis MacNutt<sup>6</sup> (a Catholic Charismatic), C. Peter Wagner,<sup>7</sup> Merrill Unger,<sup>8</sup> Neil Anderson,<sup>9</sup> and Charles H. Kraft<sup>10</sup> (Protestant Charismatics) that seem to be part of what leads them to their position that exorcism applies to ethical possession.

### Terminology

These authors do not all share a common terminology of possession, and most of them prefer to call what they are exorcizing something other than possession, like an ‘infestation’ or ‘demonization’.<sup>11</sup> Further, some think that Christians can be ‘possessed’ or ‘demonized’ in the same sense as non-Christians, while others do not. These differences are not particularly relevant to this evaluation, because we are concerned primarily with one variously described but common trait among all these ministries of deliverance, specifically, that they all believe that having demons cast out is not restricted to those suffering from extreme psychological or physiological disorders as a result of demon possession, but includes those suffering from spiritual or ethical problems as a result of demon possession.

The above authors, as far as I know, do not make the distinction between ethical and physiological/psychological possession. However, Franz Joseph Dolger makes a similar distinction between what he calls a ‘corporal’ possession and ‘ethical’ possession in the New Testament, which he argues that the early church (in the second to fourth centuries) conflated ‘by applying exorcism to ethical possession in the baptismal ceremony’.<sup>12</sup> Eric Sorensen, in his outstanding dissertation on exorcism and demon possession in the New Testament and the early church, similarly concludes that the application of exorcism to ethical possession is not found in the New Testament, but rather was a development of the early church due, in part, to changes in the church’s setting as it spread out into the Greco–Roman world. He summarizes his conclusion about the New Testament understanding of possession and exorcism saying, ‘Although the New Testament juxtaposes divine and demonic possession in ethical contexts, neither Paul nor any other New Testament author connects exorcism with the ethical purification achieved through one’s renunciation of demonic forces.’<sup>13</sup> I agree with Dolger and Sorensen that these two kinds of possession arise from a survey of the New Testament, but that exorcism is not applied to the ethical kind of possession. Because the New Testament idea of possession relates to both ethical and physiological/psychological problems, one can see how natural it would be to assume that exorcism is applied to both, especially when one adds the corollary idea found in ethical contexts of being filled, or ‘possessed’, by the Holy Spirit. However, we will see as Sorensen and Dolger do, that this assumption does not follow from the New Testament.

### **The Background of Exorcism and Demon Possession for the New Testament<sup>14</sup>**

According to Sorensen, a shift was occurring in Mesopotamia around the first century. In particular, many began to view demonic activity not only as an external activity upon people, but also as an inward activity within people (this shift is also evident in a comparison of the Old Testament with the New Testament with respect to demonic activity). Zoroastrianism, Sorensen thinks, was a ‘likely forerunner’ to this shift, which he supposes was motivated by its ‘ethical dualism, in which the human being makes a conscious decision to side with what is wise and good, or with what is deceitful and evil’.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, some in inter-testamental Judaism thought that through ‘indwelling possession’ the demonic world ‘both influences the human ability to make ethical decisions

and adversely affects human physiology'. So, he concludes that the New Testament had been greatly influenced by this shift, even saying, 'The New Testament writings presuppose the Jewish demonology of the inter-testamental period.' However, in one significant way as related to exorcism, the New Testament did not follow the practice of some Jewish exorcists in the intertestamental period. In the New Testament, Sorensen concludes, 'it is as indwelling possessors who adversely affect human physiology that they are subject to exorcism', not as possessors who affect human ethical decisions.<sup>16</sup>

This background calls our attention to two things as we approach the New Testament examples of exorcism. First, it calls attention to how the practice of exorcism in the New Testament followed this trend by internalizing demonic possession in ways that the Old Testament did not. On the other hand, though some exorcists took this shift to the point of applying their practice to ethical problems, the New Testament did not apply exorcism to ethical problems, but only to physiological or psychological disorders that resulted from demonic possession. This latter point depends upon showing that the New Testament does not apply exorcism to ethical problems so that truly, in this way, the New Testament practice and understanding of exorcism distinguishes itself.

### **Exorcism in the New Testament**

A full study of all the terms associated with exorcism in the New Testament, including their usage in the ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Greco-Roman contexts, would be the comprehensive way to approach a study of exorcism in general, but that approach is beyond the limits of this study and unnecessary for the more limited aspect of exorcism being addressed here.<sup>17</sup> There are many New Testament passages that mention exorcism<sup>18</sup> (Sorensen estimates forty-eight),<sup>19</sup> but few have the biographical information that gives a sense of the role that demons played in the life of the people who were being exorcized. The passages that do should be studied to determine whether exorcism applied to cases of ethical possession in the New Testament. First, we will highlight the dubious relationship between the ministry of healing and exorcism in the New Testament. Next, we will survey the particular instances of exorcism that provide relevant biographical information, discovering that these instances reveal that exorcism was performed only on those with physiological or psychological problems as a result of demonic possession and not to those with ethical problems as a result of demonic possession or influence.

Exorcism and healing ministries in the New Testament are often paired, thus making it difficult to understand the relationship between them. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that John does not mention exorcism of evil spirits in his accounts of healings. Dennis Hamm summarizes this situation well saying, ‘On the one hand, such passages make it difficult to appreciate deliverance/exorcism as a distinct ministry [from healing]; on the other hand, some of the passages tempt one to think that all healing is a kind of deliverance.’<sup>20</sup> Sometimes, however, there are symptoms of demon possession that seem different from the ailments that require healing (e.g. a demon speaking through a person in Mark 1:23-24). Assuming that there is a distinction between healing and exorcism (something more noticeable in Mark, who always distinguishes the two,<sup>21</sup> than in Matthew and Luke, who sometimes uses the verb for healing in reference to exorcism),<sup>22</sup> the general correlation between healing and exorcism is prevalent (e.g. Matt. 4:24; 15:28; 17:17f.; Luke 6:18; 8:2; 9:42; Acts 5:16).

Sorensen describes the effects that demons have ‘as physiological ailments or as self-destructive and isolating behaviours that often appear as the subjects of medical treatment in the Greco-Roman world’.<sup>23</sup> This seems to be a fair description according to the survey below.

1. The Gerasene demoniac is clearly suffering from insanity of some sort (Mark 5:1ff.; Luke 8:26 ff.; Matt. 8:28 ff.).
2. It is unclear what the Syro-phenician’s daughter was suffering from (Mark 7:24 ff.).
3. A boy suffers from a spirit that makes him mute, and it causes him to roll around on the ground and foam at the mouth (Mark 9:19 ff.; Luke 9:39 ff.; Matt. 9:32-33; 12:22 ff.).
4. Jesus heals the ‘unclean spirit’ in the man who speaks of Jesus’ identity, but it is not clear what the demon’s effect was upon the man beyond throwing him down on the ground (Luke 4:33 ff.).
5. Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law from a fever with language that sounds like he is casting out a demon (Luke 4:39; Matt. 8:15-16; cf. also 5:13ff. with leprosy).
6. Jesus heals the boy who is suffering from a spirit that inflicts him with epilepsy (Matt. 17:14ff.).
7. Jesus casts out a demon that causes muteness in a man (Luke 11:14).

Other cases of exorcism or possible exorcism, however, seem to come closer to a description of ethical possession, so these cases need to be discussed more fully. First, the accusations against Jesus and John the Baptist appear as if they might be examples of ethical possession. The crowd accuses Jesus of having ‘a demon’ because Jesus accuses them of desiring to kill him (John 7:20). However, they seem to be accusing him more of madness than slander. Even if one thinks the crowd’s indictment against Jesus describes something within the category of ethical possession (cf. Mark 3:21-30, where the crowd accuses Jesus of being ‘out of his mind’ and of having an unclean spirit), since no exorcism occurs, this example does not provide an instance of exorcism applied to a case of ethical possession.<sup>24</sup> John’s practice of fasting from food and drink, and probably his living in the wilderness, explain why he might have been considered mentally disturbed and was accused of being demon possessed (Luke 7:33).

Again, even if John’s alleged demon possession is understood as a supposed ethical possession, no exorcism is performed on John. Therefore, these examples also do not provide support that exorcism was applied to ethical possession.<sup>25</sup> In addition to these instances of accusation, the parable in Luke 11:24-26 (also Matt. 12:43-45) does not refer to an ethical spirit, but rather is referring to a prophecy of the afflictions the people will endure for their rejection of the Messiah (cf. Luke 11:14-26). Lastly, there is the incident where the seven sons of Sceva attempt to exorcize a man with an evil spirit, but instead, the man who had the evil spirit savagely jumps upon them, tears off their clothes, and sends them running out of the house naked (Acts 19:14-16). Now, conceivably this spirit could be called a ‘spirit of anger’; however, it seems that this is more like madness than anger because of the insane or beastly nature of the man’s reaction to the name of Jesus. In the rest of the New Testament, instances of exorcism are surprisingly absent. Exorcism may be in view in 1 Corinthians 12:10 and 2 Corinthians 12:7, but even if it is in view, no information is provided that would suggest that these passages support exorcism in cases of ethical possession.

In summary, the survey above indicates that exorcism in the New Testament applies to those who exhibit phenomena associated with psychological or physiological disorders that are understood to be the result of demon possession. Also, there are no examples in the New Testament of exorcism

being performed on those who exhibit phenomena associated with ethical problems that are understood to be the result of demon possession. Therefore, the presence of many instances of exorcism in psychological/physiological possession together with the absence of any instances of exorcism in cases of ethical possession provides the first reason for thinking that the recent Pentecostal/Charismatic application of exorcism to cases of ethical possession is a misapplication of the New Testament practice of exorcism. One may argue, on the other hand, that the lack of any instances of exorcism in cases of ethical possession does not mean that exorcism could not apply to cases of ethical possession, but simply that none were mentioned. This is a possibility, but the presence in the New Testament of means other than exorcism for freeing those suffering from ethical possession makes this possibility unlikely.

### **The Conflation of Exorcism and Baptism**

A short survey of Jesus' ministry shows that he did not respond to those who are in bondage to sin by performing exorcism on them, even in cases where a demonic force is clearly involved in the sin. Rather, he indicates that faith, repentance, and discipline, among other things, are the ways in which they can be set free from their sin. In one instance, a woman who has a reputation as a sinner comes before Jesus and anoints his feet. He responds to her saying that her faith has saved her, but he does not cast out any spirit from her (Luke 7:36-50).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in the parable of the prodigal son, though the son falls into serious sin, he does not undergo an exorcism (Luke 15:11). Zachaeus had a reputation as a tax collector and a sinner, so perhaps he would have had a 'demon of greed'. But no exorcism is mentioned to have occurred on him; rather, Jesus tells Zachaeus to follow him (Luke 19:1-10). When Jesus calls his disciples, he does not cast out any ethical demons from them (Matt. 4:18 ff.; 9:9 ff.). In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount concerning the chief sins and ethical problems of man's inner being, he does not suggest exorcism as a remedy (Matt. 5-7). Rather, he distinguishes between those who merely hear his words and those who do them (Matt. 7:26). When sin severely bondages the members of one's body, Jesus does not recommend that they go to an exorcist for help; instead, he warns them that they should cut off that member from their body (Matt. 18:8-9). In addition, as a general way of dealing with severe cases of repeated and unrepentant sin, Jesus recommends methods of church discipline rather than exorcism (Matt. 18:15-18). This discipline sometimes even leads to death. In Acts 5:3, it says that 'Satan has filled' the heart of Ananias so that he



would lie. This instance is particularly revealing since, more than any other example, it explicitly indicates that a kind of demonic possession was the cause of Ananias' sin. The response was not an exorcism of the demonic force that led Ananias to lie, as in the cases of physiological/psychological possession, but rather the death of Ananias. One last passage should be mentioned. After Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he commanded Satan, 'Depart,' with the result that 'the devil left him' (Matt. 4:10-11). On the surface, this would seem to support exorcism in ethical possession, since Jesus was being tempted ethically by Satan's presence. But is this temptation even an instance of possession? It does not appear to be, since Jesus could not be possessed, at least not without giving up his sinless life. The idea entailed in possession is that a person has been taken over or controlled in some way by demons with the result that the person sins (as in the case of ethical possession) or that the person's body and mind becomes disordered (as in the case of physiological/psychological possession). Since Jesus was not controlled by Satan or his demons in this context to do such things (cf. Matt. 4:1-11), it is not right to say that his response, 'Depart,' was in regard to possession. Further, his response follows as the last response in a series of Satan's temptations and Jesus' responses in which Satan has been presently (presumably in some form) and verbally tempting him while Jesus has been resisting and reproving him with verses of Scripture. In other words, Jesus' final response is a final resistance and reproof of Satan's final temptation rather than an exorcism that he performs on himself with the result of freeing himself from Satanic possession.

It is important to recognize that though this language ('Depart') is the same as some exorcistic language (cf. Mark 7:29), the context indicates that this is not exorcism of a demon within him, but rather this is Jesus' resistance to Satan's temptations. Jesus responds in a similar way to Satan's temptations elsewhere in the gospels, where it is also clear that what he is doing should be described as resistance to Satanic temptation rather than exorcism of a demon (e.g. Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:33). Jesus' resistance seems to become a model for all Christians, so that James is probably following Jesus' model when he commands all Christians, 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you' (James 4:7). James is not commanding exorcism for cases of possession but rather resistance to temptations, just as Jesus resisted and the Devil fled from him. The context supports this interpretation also because James' command is a

general one to all Christians rather than a specific one to particular Christians who have become the victims of possession and need to be freed by an exorcist (rather than their own resistance), as in the cases of exorcism in the Synoptics. In other words, it is more likely that the resistance in view here is a resistance to Satan's temptations rather than an exorcism of Satan's possession. Though these last few examples do not support the application of exorcism in ethical possession, they do, interestingly, support resisting the Devil using exorcistic language in order to be freed from his temptations.

Paul, similar to Jesus, does not respond to ethical possession with exorcism. Rather, Paul, in particular, considers baptism—all that it accomplishes, signifies, or symbolizes (depending upon one's view of baptism) in terms of going from death to life, from sin to righteousness, from the flesh to the spirit—to be the primary way in which one is freed from ethical possession, even when that possession is the result of demonic forces. This view is especially evident in Romans 6–8 and Ephesians 2:1-10. In Romans 6–8, Paul does not explicitly mention Satan or his demons exercising control over the ethical dimensions of a person's life; rather, he personifies sin, the flesh, and death, among other things, as forces that control or possess one's life. In Romans 6, his message to his readers is that through their baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, they have been given new power, freedom, and life, overcoming the forces that controlled them in sin and death, so that he exhorts them no longer to live as slaves of unrighteousness, but as slaves of righteousness. This act of baptism is similar to exorcism in that it is a one-time act that frees the believer from a possessing force, but there are also some significant differences between baptism as Paul describes it here and exorcism in Jesus' ministry. One in particular that arises out of Romans 6 is that in Jesus' ministry, exorcism was something that not all people were in need of, but only those who were possessed.

In Romans 6, however, it is assumed that all believers have been baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:1-3). Further, since baptism was the way in which they were freed from the power of sin that enslaved them, it is implied that before they were baptized into Christ they were all under the power of sin. In other words, ethical possession applies to all believers before baptism, not just some particularly severe cases. Therefore, since they apply to all believers and not just a few people, baptism and this kind of possession, though no demonic

forces are related to it in Romans 6, are clearly distinguished from exorcism and its kind of possession as found in the ministry of Jesus and the disciples.

Though in Romans 6 Paul does not explicitly mention the possessing control of the demonic forces in the ethical dimensions of life, in Ephesians 2:1-3 he describes this whole age as being under the control of the ‘prince of the air, the spirit that is at work in the sons of disobedience’, which leads people to walk in the sinful ways of this age. But in Ephesians, as in Romans 6 and the rest of the Pauline corpus, he does not encourage exorcism as a way to find freedom from the bondage of sin and demonic forces. Rather, for instance, in Ephesians 2:4-10, he explains that through the grace of God and their faith in Christ, believers were made alive in Christ, being raised in the heavenly realm and having had broken for them the power that the ‘prince of the air’ once had upon the way in which they walked, according to the lust of the flesh, with the result that they should now walk in good works (cf. Eph. 2:9-10 with Eph. 2:1-3). The similar language and concepts in both Romans 6 and Ephesians 2 of going from death to new life, from a sinful way of living to a good way of living, by uniting with Christ in his resurrection makes it very likely that Ephesians 2 parallels Romans 6 in these respects, so that what Paul is describing in Ephesians 2 is what he referred to explicitly in Romans 6 as baptism. As with Romans 6, Ephesians 2 implies by the universal language it uses (‘this age’, 2:1-2)<sup>27</sup> that this process of breaking the power of the demonic forces through the power of Christ is something that every believer must go through. In this respect, then, it similarly distinguishes itself from exorcism.

Baptism is not the only way in which Paul and other New Testament writers responded to the ethical problems of believers, but baptism may be said to be the core or primary act that provides the basis for the other responses or the act in which the other responses are contained. Regardless of what the exact relationship of baptism is to these other ways of responding, though these still all represent ways other than exorcism in which the New Testament responds to the particular ethical problems that people face.<sup>28</sup> Paul, like Jesus, urges repentance, discipline, faith, and prayer, among other things, as ways to overcome sin in one’s life. In Ephesians, then, Paul does not recommend exorcism but rather prays that his readers would know through the divine spirit that they have been given new power and life through the power of Christ’s death and resurrection (Eph. 1:16-23; cf. with parallels in Eph. 2:1-

10). In addition, he urges them to turn away from the ways of this world and to walk in good works, the purpose of their new creation, by being in a community of gifted members who minister the word, speak the truth, and avoid godless speech, among other things (cf. Eph. 4:1, 17; 5:1, 7, 15). Finally, in Ephesians 6, which is often suggested as support for deliverance ministry, though Paul highlights the fact that our struggle is against evil powers in the heavenly realm, he does not describe nor does he recommend exorcism, not, at least, as we find it in the gospels. Rather, he exhorts believers that we must put on faith, righteousness, peace, the word of God, and truth to stand firm against the demonic forces. Even some of the major proponents of deliverance ministry admit that Ephesians 6 does not explicitly refer to exorcism as found in the synoptic gospels or even as practiced by deliverance ministries.<sup>29</sup> While exorcism theoretically could be a way of applying Christ's authority to remedy the ethical ways in which Satan and his evil spirits enslave or 'possess' people (e.g. Eph. 2:1-3), exorcism is not explicitly mentioned in these contexts while other ways of dealing with these situations are.

This short survey of the New Testament examples of ethical possession suggests that the New Testament responds differently to those afflicted in ethical ways by demonic forces than it does to those afflicted in physiological ways by demonic forces. In particular, Paul pinpoints baptism instead of exorcism as the way in which believers are freed from ethical possession, a possession that all believers are subject to before their baptism. Therefore, on the basis of this significant difference between baptism and exorcism, and in light of the previous conclusion that there are no instances in the New Testament that apply exorcism to ethical possession, the recent application of exorcism to ethical possession conflates the New Testament understanding of exorcism with baptism.

Sorensen similarly argues that the early church conflated the distinction between exorcism and baptism found in the New Testament, and he adds some further support to the conclusion above. He argues that the idea of 'possession', that enslaves one's 'ethical decisions' does occur in the New Testament as in Paul's concept of sin (Rom. 7), but that it is not in this kind of possession that exorcism is applied.<sup>30</sup> He goes on to point out some differences between Paul's concept of possession and the one that is found in the exorcism passages of the synoptic gospels. I will explain a couple of them in order to

show other points of discontinuity between these possessions. First, Paul's idea of possession includes two different forces, sometimes called the flesh and the spirit, which work against one another in the same person and force the person to constantly choose between them (e.g. Rom. 6; Gal. 3:16).

The idea of possession found in the exorcism passages does not allow for the ability of a person to choose or to overcome the possessing force through an inward struggle. Rather, the passages present someone who is possessed by an evil spirit (seemingly innocent and passive victims of this spirit) but then is completely freed from this possession at once by Jesus' command. In Paul's writings though, as Sorensen says, 'Rather than the expulsion of the harmful demon and the consequent restoration of well-being as seen in the Synoptic stories of exorcism, this struggle to act in accordance with the law of God is more similar to the internal ethical struggle seen earlier in the sectarian writings of Qumran (e.g. 1 QS 4.20-5.1).'<sup>31</sup> Second, Sorensen observes that Paul does not apply exorcism to this possession by evil, but rather baptism. He explains, 'For Paul, the ritual that releases one from the body of death is not exorcism or exorcistic. The resolution to this ethical struggle comes instead through the believer's adoption by God achieved through baptism.' This failure to distinguish between Paul and the synoptic gospels, between exorcism and baptism, between two different kinds of possession, as Sorensen argues, seems to be one of the important theological problems confronting the early church's application of exorcism to ethical possession, as well as that application by some of the Charismatic/Pentecostal's recent exorcism/deliverance ministries.

### **Evaluation of the Exegetical/Theological problems**

In the writings of the authors surveyed, various exegetical and theological problems occur generally and seem to be part of what leads them to their position that exorcism applies to ethical possession. Below are short sketches of, and responses to, various problems.

**A.** Some authors<sup>32</sup> in one way or another establish or suggest practices of 'exorcism' based upon incidents in Scripture that do not actually involve exorcism.

1. For instance, Merrill Unger cites the examples of Job (Job 1-2), Saul, who was driven to 'jealousy, hatred, and murder' (1 Sam. 28:3; 1 Chr. 10:13), and

the ‘incestuous believer at Corinth’ (1 Cor. 5:1-5) as instances showing that believers ‘actually suffer infestation by evil spirits’, which they would then need ‘deliverance’ from.

*(a) However, none of the people in these examples, at least as far as Scripture reports, undergo a ‘casting out’ of their respective demons.<sup>33</sup>*

2. MacNutt offers John 13:27 and Acts 5:3 as possible examples of deliverance but Acts 5:3, he thinks, may be only metaphorical.<sup>34</sup>

*(a) Really, though neither of these contexts involves exorcism or deliverance.*

3. Peter Wagner admits that Scripture does not deal directly with the issue of demonization and exorcism of believers, but he finds ‘indirect’ support in Ephesians 6 and 1 Peter 5:8-9. If Christians cannot be harmed by demons, he asks, then why would the Bible stress resisting them?<sup>35</sup>

*(a) It seems agreeable that Christians can be harmed by demons, but that is not the same as saying that exorcism is the means of protection against them. Even Wagner concedes that Ephesians 6 and 1 Peter 5:8-9 do not explicitly speak of exorcism.*

**B** Sometimes these authors identify the meaning of words used in exorcism contexts with the meaning of the same words as used in other contexts.

1. Some define ‘unclean spirits’ as ‘sexual immorality,’ which may be suggested by the use of ‘unclean’ in some contexts (e.g. 2 Cor. 6:17; Eph. 5:5). For instance, Unger assumes that the incestuous Corinthian ‘was undoubtedly possessed with an unclean spirit, being guilty of a sexual offence not even mentioned among godless pagans’ (1 Cor. 5:1-5).<sup>36</sup>

*(a) But Unger merely assumes the Corinthian to have an ‘unclean spirit,’ since there is no mention of one in the passage. Furthermore, Paul does not respond by having a demon cast out of her but by casting her to Satan (1 Cor. 5:4-5). In any case, in contrast with Unger’s conclusion, there is no evidence to associate the meaning of ‘unclean spirit’ with sexual immorality when the phrase is used in the context of exorcism. Of the instances that are in the context of possession or exorcism, only some of them give detailed accounts of*

*the effects of the unclean spirit. Among these none refer to sexual immorality. (Compare Luke 8:29, where the man who has an unclean spirit seems to be suffering from insanity or madness, not sexual immorality; also, in Luke 9:38-42, there is no trace of sexual immorality since the effect upon the boy who has an unclean spirit is not sexual immorality but rather ‘seizures’ and ‘convulsions’; in Mark 9:25, the unclean spirit is identified as a ‘mute and deaf spirit’; in Acts 8:7, the unclean spirit refers to the ‘paralyzed and lame’).*

C Another major problem is that the authors pull the language ‘spirits of...’ from other contexts into exorcism contexts.

1. This is something they presuppose with their language of ‘spirits of lust, pride, [etc.]’ more than an argument that they make.<sup>37</sup>

(a) Nevertheless, the ideas behind the language involved are important and difficult matters to distinguish and keep separate. The correct method, as suggested above, is to begin with clear exorcism passages themselves; when biographical material is given, it always suggests that the role of the demon is to inflict a psychological or physical disorder upon the person. Jesus or the disciples (except when the disciples fail) respond by confronting the demon in such a way that the person is immediately relieved of the problem.

b) The New Testament does see Satan and his evil ones as forces effecting not only natural evil but also moral sin and bondage (e.g. Eph. 2:1-3; Rom. 6; Rev. 6-22). However, the New Testament does not suggest that exorcism is the method of dealing with this active evil in man, as the authors surveyed argue.

D. The authors also argue that where Scripture is silent on a topic, as in the demonization of Christians, then experience should determine our conclusions as long as the conclusions from experience do not contradict Scripture.

1. Wagner follows Dickason’s conclusion that there is ‘no clear-cut biblical evidence either for or against the demonization of believers’.<sup>38</sup> In cases where the Bible is silent, he says, as with cancer (the Bible does not say that someone can get it), then we must use ‘human experience’ to determine the matter, as long as our results do not ‘contradict Scripture’.<sup>39</sup> In a later work, Wagner expands this argument, saying, ‘The Bible does not prohibit activities such as celebrating Christmas as it does prohibit, for example, homosexuality.’<sup>40</sup>

(a) *This argument does not apply directly against the criticism of this study, since Wagner is actually arguing against those who think that Christians cannot be demonized. Nevertheless, his position does contradict Scripture by applying exorcism in contexts in which Jesus and the disciples applied baptism or some other solution.*

E. Finally, the authors testify to the experiences of deliverance they have had as support for their position.

1. Unger gives an example of a ‘prominent woman in the church’ who, though a ‘tireless and consecrated worker for Christ, was nevertheless possessed by a spirit of intense jealousy and spite, from which so far as the writer knows she was never delivered’.<sup>41</sup>

2. Wagner tells of a demonization event related by Doris, his secretary, who ‘found out...there were 10 demons’ in a demonized woman which had been cast out of her. The first spirit to come out of the woman was ‘a spirit of lust’, then a ‘spirit of fear’, then a ‘spirit of death’. The next was named ‘Ugly and had persuaded the woman that her teeth were so ugly that she would avoid looking into a mirror’. The next was ‘a spirit of tongues’, the next was ‘a spirit of resentment’, next was a ‘spirit of anger’, next a ‘spirit of tiredness’, next a ‘spirit of rejection’, and then last was a ‘spirit of handicap’.<sup>42</sup>

3. Kraft says that ‘hundreds of His [God’s] beloved servants are free now because He has led us to use His authority in this way’.<sup>43</sup>

(a) *Surprisingly, these arguments from experience are the most arousing, persuasive, and numerous points of their arguments for deliverance ministry. Indeed, after reading of so many examples of deliverance, could it be wrong? I am not arguing that such deliverance ministries have not done a lot of good, but the ends do not justify the means, and it does seem that there are some possible harmful implications of their practice. M. J. Barker, a Christian psychiatrist, says, “The hyper-supernaturalist and the anti-supernaturalist both seem to do the same thing. For both, responsibility for certain behaviour and attitudes is not with the individual but is seen either as demonic activity or as a result of one’s upbringing and society generally. For both, there is a deep personification of the individual. In both, personal accountability is denied.”<sup>44</sup>*



*That does not mean, however, that all deliverance ministries necessarily lead to the end Barker describes, since many of them emphasize very much that human sin is the root of the problem that must be dealt with either before or after exorcism. For instance, Neil Anderson advocates a ‘truth-encounter’ approach in which the ‘exorcism’ does not occur until the end of the session. He tells how that previously, in advocating a ‘power-encounter’ approach, ‘when he exposed the demonic influence it would turn into a power encounter’ in which he would ‘command it to come out’ and the people would ‘go catatonic, run out of the room, and become generally disoriented.’ He says, ‘Although progress was made, the episode would often have to be repeated again.’ But he continues, ‘This is where the Epistles come in. It is the believer’s responsibility to resist, renounce, forgive and confess.’ So, he concludes, ‘I have not attempted to ‘cast out a demon’ in several years, but I have seen hundreds find freedom in Christ’. He then cites 2 Timothy 2:24-26 as the ‘definitive passage in Scripture that describes the role of the pastor.’<sup>45</sup> Still, at the very end of his session he advocates praying a prayer of renunciation and expulsion. Besides this deliverance emphasis that remains at the very end of his sessions, his model looks a lot more like a traditional evangelical, and as he says, an Epistles way of dealing with sin. But his model also looks a lot less like the exorcism in Jesus ministry, which lacks all of Anderson’s emphasis on preparation and upon the demonized in deliverance, and for this his fellow exorcists criticize him.<sup>46</sup> In sum, I am not and cannot here argue for or against the possible good or bad ends that deliverance ministry has been used for, weighing them as it were, to then find out whether the ends are generally good. However, all of these varied opinions and experiences should send us back to Scripture. And since this particular form of exorcism ministry is not supported by Scripture, the ‘good’ ends of those claiming them do not justify their means.*

## **Conclusion**

The recent trend in exorcism, or deliverance, ministries among Pentecostals/Charismatics of applying exorcism to ethical possession misapplies exorcism as it is found in the New Testament by conflating exorcism and baptism. While exorcism in the New Testament is performed on those who exhibit strange phenomena often associated with physiological or psychological disorders, none of the examples of exorcism involve people who exhibit phenomena associated with ethical problems. Other means, primarily baptism, are instead applied to ethical possession, which is something all

Christians are subject to before they are baptized into Christ. Because baptism and exorcism are distinguished in this way, this recent application of exorcism informally conflates exorcism with baptism by applying exorcism to ethical possession. Therefore, this application is a misapplication of the New Testament practice of exorcism, and it is similar to the application of some Jewish exorcists in the inter-testamental period as well as those in the early church who formally conflated baptism and exorcism.

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1. This is an example prayer offered by Francis MacNutt in *Deliverance from Evil Spirits: A Practical Manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 279.
2. David Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford, 2001), p. 19.
3. Some do make a distinction between exorcism and deliverance, like Francis MacNutt, who refers to the former as 'total possession' while to the latter as 'partial possession'. Despite the distinction, though, for MacNutt, the typical language of exorcism, or of 'casting out' spirits that control only 'a part' of the person, is the meaning of deliverance. He further clarifies the difference by saying that, in the case of total possession, the 'core' of the man has been taken over, whereas in the cases of 'partial possession', which he goes on to call 'infestation', or 'demonization', only part, or an area, of a man's life has been taken captive by a demon. This, he says, is not something that comes from the outside or upon him, but rather, 'here we are talking about demons somehow getting inside people and affecting their attitudes or actions, yet not possessing them'. So this different kind of 'possession' is what motivates him to call it not exorcism, but deliverance. The same essential method, however, of 'casting out' the demon from the person is assumed. See his *Deliverance from Evil Spirits: A Practical Manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 67-9.
4. See Grant L. McClung, "Pentecostal/Charismatic Understanding of Exorcism," in C. Peter Wagner and F. Douglas Pennoyer (eds.), *Wrestling with Dark Angels: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Supernatural Forces in Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura: Regal, 1990), p. 197. This definition is a quotation from Carl Richardson in *Exorcism: New Testament Style* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1974), p. 5. Grant L. McClung's article also appears in "Exorcism," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Maas (eds.), rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 624-8.

5. McClung, "Pentecostal/Charismatic Understanding," pp. 207-208.
6. MacNutt, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*. After completing both his B.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard in theology, he taught for seven years in the Dominican Seminary. In the 1960s, after experiencing a second work of the Holy Spirit, he became one of the pioneers of the Catholic Charismatic movement.
7. Peter Wagner, *How to Have a Healing Ministry Without Making Your Church Sick* (Ventura, Regal, 1988) and Peter Wagner, *Confronting the Powers: How the New Testament Church Experienced the Power of Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura: Regal, 1996). Wagner was Professor of Church Growth for twenty-eight years at Fuller Theological Seminary, and he has been a major figure in the Protestant Charismatic community.
8. Merrill Unger, *Demons in the World Today: A Study of Occultism in the Light of God's Word* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971). Unger, somewhat surprisingly, was an OT scholar at Dallas Theological Seminary for almost two decades.
9. Anderson, "Finding Freedom in Christ," in C. Peter Wagner and F. Douglas Pennoyer (eds.), *Wrestling with Dark Angels: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Supernatural Forces in Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura: Regal, 1990), pp. 125-68. Anderson is Professor of Practical Theology at Talbot School of Theology.
10. Kraft, *I Give You Authority* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 1997). Kraft did his undergraduate at Wheaton College; he is a distinguished professor of anthropology at Fuller Theological Seminary.
11. Douglas F. Pennoyer, "Trends and Topics in Teaching Power Evangelism," in *Wrestling with Dark Angels*, p. 349. Following a symposium at Fuller Theological Seminary on demonic warfare that included various Pentecostals and Charismatics, Douglas F. Pennoyer noted some trends among them. He says there is a 'growing trend to do away with the term 'possession' for the term 'demonization' which 'allows for degrees of demonization, such as Kraft's scale of 1-10, indicating the observable degree of resistant power or supernatural strength of the demon or demons. This avoids what many consider to be a terminology problem since the terms 'possessed' or 'inhabited' do not actually occur in Scripture. Rather, the Greek term *daimonidzomai* is used.'
12. Eric Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism in the Early New Testament and Early Christianity* (Tubingen: Mohr, 2002), p. 16. Sorensen cites Franz Joseph Dolger in *Der Exorzismus im altchristlichen Taufritual: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Studie, Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums 3:1-2* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoningh, 1909), pp. 12-13, 127.

13. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, 167.
14. No explicit exorcisms occur in the OT; see the evaluation of authors below for an assessment of possible examples of exorcism in Job and Saul's lives.
15. There is an interesting comparison here with Gnosticism, which Henry A. Kelly, in *The Devil, Demonology, and Witchcraft: the Development of Christian Beliefs in Evil Spirits* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), p. 102 (cf. p. 72 also), argues had a role in the early church leaders' (especially in the East; e.g. Origen) extension of exorcism to moral matters.
16. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 119. The hermeneutical problem of how to relate the Bible's inculturation of demonology to the twenty-first century (Was Jesus just condescending to the world of his day? Should we believe demons are personal entities that afflict people?) is perhaps a more important topic to consider as it has held centre stage in many debates within Catholic and Protestant churches in the West; but this is beyond the consideration of this paper, since my main purpose is to criticize the application of exorcism to ethical possession.
17. See Sorensen's book *Possession and Exorcism* for a comprehensive study.
18. There is a problem with my own usage of the word. Sorensen explains that the Greek term ἐξορκισμῶ only occurs once in the New Testament, and it occurs as the noun ἡ ἐξορκιστή in Acts 19:13., but through history it came to have a technical meaning for the ritual. I am using this term to refer to all the incidents in the Synoptic gospels and Acts (which include all the incidents in the New Testament) in which an exorcist (usually Jesus or the disciples) casts out from a person a demon or spirit or unclean spirit. In actuality, there are many different terms used in reference to the act (See Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 132). 'By far the most common terms are ἐξερχομαι and ἐκβαλλω,' but six other words occur once each in contexts of exorcism (See Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 133).
19. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 122.
20. Hamm, "The Ministry of Deliverance and the Biblical Data: A Preliminary Report," in Matthew Linn and Dennis Linn (eds.), *Deliverance Prayer* (Paulist: New York, 1981), p. 56.
21. Cf. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 135.
22. Cf. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 136, who argues that Matthew and Luke may have been motivated to do this in their attempts at 'connecting Jesus' activity to the biblical prophetic tradition about the works that identify the true messiah which otherwise did not mention exorcism' (e.g. Matt. 11:2-6; Isa. 53:4).
23. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 124.
24. Cf. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 124 who describes this example[?] as

- ‘symptomatic of emotional or mental disturbances’.
25. See also, Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 124.
  26. Perhaps this woman did not have an unclean spirit, which would explain why there was no exorcism, though the absence of an unclean spirit in such a sinner would seem to go against the instinct of some of the deliverance ministers surveyed. See below, where Unger claims that the serious immorality of the Corinthian must have been the result of being possessed by an ‘unclean spirit’, even though the text does not indicate that the sexually immoral person had an unclean spirit.
  27. to.n aivw/na (cf. Eph. 1:21).
  28. Even if one does not understand ‘baptism’ in this relation to these other responses, however, the main point remains that these other acts do not include exorcism but represent other ways in which the New Testament responds to ethical problems.
  29. See Wagner, *How to Have a Healing Ministry Without Making Your Church Sick*, p. 196, who admits that Scripture does not deal directly with the issue of demonization and exorcism but that he finds ‘indirect’ support in Eph. 6 and 1 Pet. 5:8-9. Also compare Hamm, “Ministry of Deliverance,” p. 56 who says that Eph. 6:10-17 is a classic text used to support deliverance ministry, though no deliverance ministry is described. ‘Rather it uses military metaphors from the Old Testament to describe the whole of Christian life,’ and this ‘points to something broader than a deliverance ministry,’ an ordinary means for Christian life. It seems the same could be said of James 4:7-8, which is an ordinary means of Christian living prescribed for all believers, rather than an imperative for exorcism ministry to be performed on fellow believers.
  30. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 153, says, concerning the New Testament exorcism stories, ‘the synoptic authors associate demonic possession nearly exclusively with human physiology without ethical causes or consequences’; see also Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 160, concerning Paul’s concept of possession.
  31. Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism*, p. 160-1.
  32. I have attempted to select instances of what I see as the more general problems, since it is unreasonable and unnecessary to argue against every instance of the same problem.
  33. See Unger, *Demons in the World Today*, pp. 184-5; cf. *ibid.*, p. 198.
  34. MacNutt, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*, p. 71.
  35. Wagner, *Healing Ministry*, p. 203.
  36. Unger, *Demons in the World Today*, p. 185.
  37. For names of spirits that have ethical function, see Unger, *Demons in the World*

*Today*, pp. 185-6, 195-6; MacNutt, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*, pp. 174, 279; Wagner, *How to Have a Healing Ministry Without Making Your Church Sick*, p. 183, 203; Anderson, "Finding Freedom in Christ," pp. 127, 129, 130; and Kraft, *I Give You Authority*, pp. 244-6.

38. Wagner, *How to Have a Healing Ministry*, p. 193.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
40. Wagner, *Confronting the Powers*, p. 87.
41. Unger, p. 185.
42. Wagner, *How to Have a Healing Ministry*, p.183.
43. Kraft, p. 248.
44. M. J. Barker, "Possession and the Occult-a psychiatrist's view," *Churchman* 94, no. 3 (1980): 248.
45. Anderson, "Finding Freedom in Christ," pp. 133-6.
46. John D. Ellenberger criticizes Anderson in Ellenberger's response, "Finding Freedom in Christ," in *Wrestling with Dark Angels*, p. 165, saying that the 'counselor' as a catalyst is much different than the style of Jesus' deliverance ministry, which is a 'confrontational, power-encounter-oriented, counselor-dominated model'.