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# Casting Out Demons: Adventists and Exorcism

by Debra Gainer Nelson

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On a Friday night in a small Ohio town, an Adventist minister and two laymen gathered in one of their homes with a 17-year old boy whom they felt was demon possessed. In long, intensive sessions throughout the weekend, the demons identified themselves in conversation and were commanded to come out, one by one. By Sunday morning, everyone was exhausted, but the boy was pronounced clean of demon possession. Less than an hour later, the boy tried to jump out of the family car on the freeway. He later attempted to commit suicide and was finally placed in a mental institution.

In 1981 at the neurological ward of the Loma Linda University (LLU) Medical Center, 43 different demons identified themselves to pastors, friends, and family members who took shifts in a 48-hour battle with demons possessing a young woman. The girl was at the Medical Center undergoing tests for unexplainable seizures.

A husband and wife who participated in the exorcism sessions wrote of their experiences:

Donna, Debbie's stepsister, called us early in the morning to ask us to come to the hospital as soon as possible, as she was very fatigued. It was then that we learned that she and Pastor Gale had been involved in casting out some demons for the length of the preceding night. Without delay, Carolyn and I proceeded to the hospital room, where we found Debbie resting and Donna on the verge of collapse from fatigue and stress. . . .

The group present in the hospital that morning then agreed on "shifts" in order that several of us would be by Debbie's side around the clock. . . . After spending a few hours at home, Carolyn and I returned to the hospital at 10:45 p.m. Upon our arrival, we learned that a number of victories had been won that afternoon. Marvin and some other friends had witnessed the departure of a number of demons who identified themselves as follows: Scott, Phil, contemporary gospel music, intelligence, nutrition, an obscene name, no name, and death. . . .

I demanded in the name of Jesus Christ any demons still present within Debbie to manifest themselves in order of their relative ranks, in descending order. Whereupon, Debbie's mouth opened and an almost imperceptible voice said "Excel." I then prayed, and addressing the demon, I said, "Demon Excel, do you admit that you must leave?" "Yes," was the reply, forced and reluctant. . . .

Debbie was awake for most of the last demons. Donna had said they couldn't get jealousy to come out. So I said, in the name of Jesus, if there was a demon by that name, that he must make himself known. Debbie's face changed into this terrible face. I don't have to try and tell you. His eyes just glared at me, but of course Jesus was much stronger and we had victory. . . .

No other demons have identified themselves. Debbie is apparently free of whatever demon oppression she had previously.

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Attending these marathon sessions along with Debbie's friends and family members were two retired Adventist pastors in the Loma Linda area. Elder Robert Gale, a retired minister who conducts seminars and widely distributes cassette tapes on "spiritual warfare," led in conducting the exorcisms. He was accompanied by Elder R.A. Anderson, a former director of the ministerial department of the General Conference, who has written books on spiritual warfare or "deliverance ministry"—delivering victims of demon possession from their bonds.

**T**his case and another case at the LLU Medical Center, in which a young woman with a multiple personality was exorcised by a ministerial team, caused some upheaval among the professors in the school of medicine faculty when the cases were presented in a medical center staff conference. Says Dr. Clarence Carnahan, a professor of psychiatry at the School of Medicine, "It was a shattering thing to the patient's psychologist, and conferences were difficult because of the different views represented. Some people wanted to see it entirely as a psychological phenomenon, and some chose to see it totally as a demon possession."

Gale has found that some sophisticated Adventists still find it difficult to accept that Satan can actually inhabit and control the human body. Carnahan, who has attended some sessions where demons were exorcised, believes that demons exist. Says Carnahan, "There are just some phenomena which can't be completely explained away. Psychiatric explanations don't necessarily exclude supernatural explanations." He has studied cases which seem to show demon possessions combined with some emotional or psychological crisis.

Carnahan cites an article written by non-Adventists in the *Journal of Operational Psychiatry*,\* which states that "these phenomena are more pervasive in our pluralistic culture than supposed." The authors observe that

many mental health professionals view possession by demons as unfamiliar and vaguely dangerous, and tend to misinterpret such cases solely in psychiatric terms. The article describes the dichotomy between (1) the Western naturalistic perspective, which considers religion and magic unrelated to illness and misfortune, and (2) the supernaturalistic perspective, which integrates those elements into a totality. "The most effective healers," say the authors, "are acute diagnosticians who . . . derive their authority and effectiveness from their role as intermediaries between humans and the supernatural realm."

California, Michigan, and Oregon seem to be the places where Adventist deliverance ministry is concentrated. Oregon is where the movement visibly surfaced in the Adventist Church about four years ago. A local pastor, Charles Brown, happened to read Mark Bubeck's book *The Adversary* at a time when his wife was experiencing unusual psychiatric problems. Brown became convinced that his wife was a victim of demonic influence, and based on what he

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learned in Bubeck's book, he was able to exorcise and heal her. A cassette tape of his account of that deliverance spread quickly through Adventist churches in Oregon and then across the country. Many consider Brown to be the "founding father" of an active deliverance ministry movement in Adventism.

While no one interviewed by *Spectrum* could document the total number of Adventists involved in deliverance ministry or spiritual warfare, most characterized the movement as "on the rise," "irrepressibly

growing," and "spreading rapidly." R. A. Anderson says that the increasing demonic atmosphere in the world today is "the most aggressive thing we've bumped into," and that more and more people are coming to him for help, in spite of the cautionary stance taken by Adventist administrators. Minon Hamm, a professor of English at Southern (Missionary) College, was fired

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two years ago after she participated in exorcisms of students. Controversy surrounding the subject has grown in recent years to the point where the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference issued in the spring of 1983 a 60-page research report addressing the issue.

J. Reynolds Hoffman, a retired evangelist now living in Oregon, and Adventism's most prominent and controversial "deliverance minister," had his ministerial credentials rescinded because of his activity. Hoffman estimates that more than 25 Seventh-day Adventists are active in conducting deliverance sessions. At least 60 Adventists in Oregon alone, he says, have been set free from various degrees of demonic influence. According to Hoffman, numbers of exorcists and exorcisms are difficult to estimate because of the lack of a formal organization and a network of communication. Hoffman himself has been involved in more than 200 encounters, with both Adventists and non-Adventists, all over the country. He has even conducted exorcisms over the telephone.

Hoffman is quick to perceive demonic forces in naturalistic manifestations. "Fif-

teen percent of American women," says Hoffman, "suffer from nameless depressions and fear," to him, an indication of the devil's direct harassment. He believes that many physical dysfunctions can be attributed to demons—particularly problems that will not respond to conventional medical treatment—and he includes healing as well as deliverance in much of his ministry.

Winston Ferris, an Adventist educator in the Berrien Springs area, has also personally worked with some 200 cases of demonic influence. Ferris, who is employed in program design and curriculum construction in the public school system, estimates that the number of Adventists active in deliverance ministry is closer to 100, few of whom are ordained ministers. He believes that the number of deliverances performed by Adventists must be in the thousands.

Encountering several cases of "disturbed" individuals in the emergency room led Dr. Glenn Toppenberg, an Adventist physician practicing in Berrien Springs at the time, to become convinced he was dealing with Satanic power. The changes he witnessed in voice and personality could not be explained in conventional schizophrenic terms. Eventually, says Ferris, who has assisted Toppenberg in several deliverance sessions since then, Toppenberg began conducting deliverance sessions in the emergency room, on six different occasions in one three-month period. He subsequently had to leave that hospital and is practicing in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Toppenberg has become another major figure in the Adventist deliverance ministry movement.

General Conference administrators, however, downplay the degree of Adventist involvement in this controversial movement. D. A. Delafield, an associate at the E. G. White Estate, says he can count on his fingers the number of Seventh-day Adventists actively engaged in deliverance ministry.

Ernest Bursey, a professor of New Testa-

ment at Walla Walla College, feels that the numbers of pastors conducting exorcisms may be fewer than before. "Adventist pastors have seen the dangers," says Bursey, "of dividing their churches and losing their credibility, and they have become more cautious about getting involved in the movement."

The Biblical Research committee first met in October 1980 to research the topic and subsequently interviewed a number of persons with first-hand experience in deliverance ministry. The chairman of the committee was the institute director, Richard Leshner, also a General Conference vice president. Roger Coon, an associate secretary of the E. G. White Estate, drafted the report. Other committee members included ministers, physicians, educators, and General Conference staff.

The committee's report addresses biblical and Spirit of Prophecy teachings on casting out demons, deals with some problems it sees in deliverance ministry, and makes recommendations for proper exorcism methodology. The report noted the two extreme perspectives on demon possession that Dr. Carnahan had also observed: (1) the tendency to immediately attribute to the direct presence of evil spirits every emotional and mental disturbance, and (2) the tendency to find purely naturalistic explanations for all such disturbances. The report chose a middle ground between the positions, acknowledging the validity of both.

The report also differentiates between the external harassment, annoyance, and temptation practiced by Satan and his angels against all of us, and internal demonic possession, or neurological control, experienced by a relatively few. Though affirming the need to deal with demon possession and offering its own recommendations for exorcism sessions, the committee declared that it was unable to endorse spiritual warfare and deliverance ministry as practiced in charismatic circles and by some Adventists.

Some of those involved with the move-

ment were disappointed with the report. Hoffman acknowledges the validity of some of the cautions expressed—because dealing with demons *can* be dangerous—but he urged that the committee focus more on establishing guidelines than making vetoes. "I don't believe any member of the committee ever conducted a deliverance session himself," Hoffman told *Spectrum*. "If they can do it better, why don't they come out in the field and show us how?"

One of Hoffman's patients wrote, "I am disappointed in the extreme conservatism and the message of negativism" in the report. This woman was freed of "several health-related demons," and also emotional and spiritual demons, in a session with Hoffman, her husband, and her pastor. She is so happy with her deliverance that she can only respond like the biblical blind man

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when questioned about his healing—"one thing I know . . . I have never felt better in my life."

Bursey, who has studied exorcism from a biblical viewpoint, sees the report as a "composite, compromise document." He notes that the report has attempted to make a place for exorcism in the church while trying to be sensible but not reactionary.

Delafield, a member of the BRI committee, believes that the report is a "message that bears divine signature," a prayerfully wrought research paper that will be a valuable tool for any student of the issue. He also refutes Hoffman's charge that no committee member has ever conducted a deliverance session by telling of the time that he and another pastor helped a woman who

had talked to an apparition in her attic who called himself Satan. The two pastors joined in fasting and prayer before anointing the woman with oil and praying a single prayer asking for her release. According to Delafield, this type of deliverance is just as successful as the hours-long sessions in which demons are called out one by one.

Pastor Gale is gratified to find that the Biblical Research Institute report does acknowledge "a place for this kind of ministry." However, he is concerned that the report implies that deliverance ministry is a work separate from the usual gospel ministry. Gale believes that spiritual warfare is a "much neglected" phase of Adventist ministry, one which some pastors refuse to carry out because of "ignorance or fear." He is concerned also that some administrators are advising their pastors not to get involved in this work, and, he says, perhaps the church needs to re-evaluate its position.

Winston Ferris believes that Adventists also need to re-evaluate the common argument that "a good Christian can't be attacked by the devil." The greatest manifestation of demonic influence he has ever seen was in an Adventist pastor. The pastor was vulnerable through his doubts about certain biblical teachings, says Ferris, and demons took advantage of this avenue of attack to try to "kill him before our eyes."

The primary area of debate among those involved in exorcism is the question of methodology. The practice most strongly opposed in the Biblical Research Institute's report is the dialogue with demons during exorcism sessions, in which demons are asked to identify themselves and give other information before being cast out. The committee felt that such dialogue was unnecessary, exhausting, and dangerous to both the exorcist and patient.

Ferris terms his own ministry "intercessory deliverance," as opposed to Hoffman's "dialogical deliverance." During his counseling sessions, Ferris forbids Satan to mani-

fest himself and he addresses only Jesus, through prayer. He has established guidelines for these intercessory encounters: don't do it alone—a support team is vital; don't leave the person alone until deliverance is completed; and beware of a spiritual high that may lead to physical collapse.

Ferris believes that talking to demons allows satanic forces to play games and that while the method can be successful, it is not the most efficient. He even avoids using the words "demon" and "exorcism," which invoke the ritualized process that came out of pagan culture and was absorbed by the early Catholic Church. No Adventists in deliverance ministry, says Ferris, are conducting what is truly defined as "exorcism," where the exorcist becomes the sacrificial victim; nevertheless, the term is commonly used.

Hoffman, who does converse with demons, agrees that there is a fine line between confrontation with demons and a seance or fortune-telling sessions. This line should never be crossed, or the results can be tragic for the exorcist, who may become possessed himself. Any information requested from a demon, says Hoffman, must be germane to the deliverance of the individual. However, he maintains that getting the names of the demons who have invaded a person is important. "We have to know what the demons are doing to people," he says, and he cites Jesus' experience in speaking with the demons of Gadara as precedent. "I talk with demons very little," says Hoffman, "only to ask them yes or no questions and their names. If they start babbling, I shut them up."

An Adventist pastor in Houston tells of his experiences in exorcising a church member's son, guided by Hoffman's instructions. When demons identified themselves in the course of the confrontation, the pastor asked them when and how they had entered the boy. They answered him with a specific date and a specific family situation that had allowed them access. "We asked the angels of God to make the demons go," remembers

the pastor. "The demons said very determinedly No. But after much prayer, they did go."

Gale concurs that danger is present when one dialogues with demonic forces, and "anyone who fails to recognize this should not be engaged in the ministry." However, he does see a clear distinction between a dialogue that may turn into a seance and a command to a demon in the name of Jesus.

All deliverance ministers are faced with knowing when such a confrontation session is warranted. The Biblical Research Institute Committee reported that there exist "comparatively few conclusive tell-tale evidences of supernatural activity." Both Gale and Ferris have identified a driving compulsion in the individual, or a lack of self control, as an indicator of Satanic influence in the life. This can occur in any area of

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human experience, but Gale has found it most likely to surface in these four areas: temper, appetite, the spiritual life, and the sex life. They think that those who are most

susceptible to demon attack: have undergone some crisis in their life or are emotionally unstable; have dabbled in demonic games such as ouija boards or seances; or have a family history of demon possession or harassment.

"The reality of what is happening," says Hoffman, "is staggering. The devil is attacking more strongly all the time."

Nevertheless, many Adventists are still cautious. Bursey, in fact, sees a theological danger in believing in the demon possession of church members. He feels that, for Adventists, the security of salvation should take away a fear—even a possibility, perhaps—of demon possession. "The deliverance ministry movement's recourse to exorcism to solve problems is not supported by the example of the early church, where demonic culture was much more prevalent," says Bursey. "Demon harassment is not demon possession."

Though deliverance ministry seems to be continuing to grow and to be controversial in a furtive way, it would seem that informed observers such as Bursey are accurate when they see the emergence of a trend: pastors learning to develop their own conservative exorcism methods, biblically-based and independent of the more flamboyant charismatic methodology from which the movement was spawned.

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#### REFERENCE

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