

The Demon Debate

Back in March when we published author John Eckhardt's article, "Can a Christian Have a Demon?" I didn't expect it to trigger an avalanche of negative comments. Yet as soon as the magazine arrived in homes, my mailbox was jammed. (Hint: When you discuss the issue of demons, don't be surprised if all hell breaks loose!)

Charisma subscribers used fairly rough language to describe Eckhardt's position on the subject. They described his message as "flawed theology," "junk," "crook" and words I can't repeat here. Whoever says Christians aren't passionate about what they believe should spend a day going through my in-box!

Eckhardt believes that most Christians need deliverance when they first come to the Lord. That's why he makes sure every person who is born again at his church in Chicago goes through intense prayer ministry. Whether the people were involved in drugs, immorality or occult practices, Eckhardt and his team pray for wounded hearts and cast out devils so everyone can enjoy the freedom Christ purchased for us.

That sounds good to me. Yet judging by the negative response we received, many charismatics don't believe deliverance ministry is necessary—or biblical. They maintain that when a new believer is converted and baptized, demonic forces automatically leave because God's Spirit can't coexist with darkness.

The tension is really about terminology. We're arguing about whether demons "oppress" or "possess" believers. Can't we meet in the middle and find a healthy balance?

I don't believe Christians can be "possessed." God's Spirit lives in our spirits. Yet I do believe demons can influence us in the soul realm if we've given them an open door through sin.

Of course we receive total forgiveness at the moment of conversion. Yet I know I did not find victory over certain sinful habits until years after I made Jesus the Lord of my life. Sanctification is complete at the moment we find Christ, yet we must also walk it out. It's a process.

That means that a person (yes, even a pastor!) may realize that they need deliverance years after their initial encounter with Jesus. This does not minimize God's saving grace. On the contrary, it makes me more thankful for the Holy Spirit's ongoing power to break the chains of my bondage.

On the flip side, those of us who see the value of deliverance ministry need to avoid its pitfalls. I know people who veered off track and ended up in serious deception after they began seeing demons behind every bush. Don't go there.

If deliverance is not kept in proper perspective, it can lead to an unhealthy focus on Satan. And if we blame demons for our failures, people in our churches won't take responsibility for their sins. (Note: "The devil made me do it" is not in any version of the Bible.)

We also need to hold those in deliverance ministry to high standards. I know an "evangelist" whose public deliverance sessions are nothing more than publicity stunts. Those who sensationalize this ministry by using barf bags or Exorcist-

style stage antics would do us all a favor by closing down their sideshows immediately.

We're in a spiritual war, and deliverance is a powerful weapon. But let's keep the focus on the One who sets us free.