

UGOCHUKWU ELEMS

Discerning the Condition: Disease or Demonic

Introduction

In 2006, a woman who had earlier been diagnosed as psychotic and who was on medication suddenly quit taking them on the instruction of her pastor who told her that instead her case was one of demon possession. Unfortunately, shortly after quitting her medication, she killed her own daughter (Korosec 2006). In this case a pastor denied the existence of a mental illness.

Psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, anthropologists, some pastors, and other related professionals tend to go to the other extreme and dismiss the reality of demonic manifestations. They often explain that the Bible narratives of demonic encounters are myths, hence the need to demythologize the Scripture's claim. Yet it is not possible to deny the historicity of the biblical claims, nor can any objective reader of the Scriptures ignore the existence and influence of demons among people today. In fact, the Bible clearly asserts the reality and existence of demons.

The dividing line between disease and demonic possession is very thin, which poses problems for pastoral and clinical professionals on the where, how, or when they can properly function within their given boundaries without encroaching into one another's domain. This understanding is particularly relevant in the African context where the supernatural is intrinsically linked to almost every aspect of life and natural occurrences.

Until the mid-19th century, it was generally believed that any abnormal behavior was an indication of demon possession. However, by the late 19th century with the rise of the influence of science on human activities, many people began to doubt the existence of demons and labeled

everything as a mental illness instead. Surprisingly, in Africa the present generation is returning to a strong belief in the reality of demonic activities in everyday human existence, and even in Western nations this view is increasing as shown by related studies and statistics (O'Connor 2005:16, 17). M. W. Cuneo observed that there were over six hundred exorcism ministries in the United States of America alone (2001). In fact, Rodger Bufford believes we now exist in a world that is unprecedentedly drawn to the occult and demonism (1988:15) and Kathleen Sands postulates: "to ignore, or trivialize or apologize for earlier *belief in demon possession* is not merely arrogant; it is also bad history" (2004:3, emphasis mine).

Hence, this chapter is based on two assumptions: that disease is real and that demonic possession is real. However, it is vitally important for Christians to know the difference. Therefore, every section of this chapter will serve the purpose of helping the reader develop principles for discerning pathological cases from demonic possessions.

Definition of Key Terms

Disease—a state of "disorder of structure or function in a human, animal, or plant, especially one that produces specific symptoms or that affects a specific location and is not simply a direct result of physical injury" (*Oxford Dictionary*).

Demonic—the state of being possessed or fully under the influence of demons. "Demons are satanic emissaries" (Unger 1971:102). According to Unger, to be possessed by a demon(s) is "a condition in which one or more evil spirits or demons inhabit the body of a human being and can take complete control of their victim at will" (102).

Demons or Demonic Possession in the Old Testament

Demon activity is not as obvious in the Old Testament as in the New Testament. It is, in fact, possible to argue that demonic possessions or demons as understood today are not found in the Old Testament (Bufford 1988:21). Angel Rodriguez in his article "Old Testament Demonology" in the *Ministry Magazine* of June 1998, also concurs that the demons as understood in the present era are foreign to Old Testament believers. The Old Testament simply speaks of God, the Spirit of God (Exod 31:3; Isa 42:1; Num 24:2; 1 Sam 10:10), the devil, gods, and evil spirits (Judg 9:23; 1 Sam 16:14; Zech 3:1-2). The Old Testament recognizes only One God who is the Creator and supreme Controller of all things whether visible or invisible. Interestingly, evil spirits are sometimes portrayed as serving the will of God (1 Sam 6:14).

Although certain portions (Lev 17:7; Deut 32:17; 2 Chr 11:15; and Ps 106:37) of the Old Testament speak of devils, there is no singular Hebrew word that corresponds in meaning to demons as understood in contemporary times (Bratcher 2018). Nevertheless, the “Old Testament testifies to the existence of a demonic being in conflict with God and His people (Isa 14:12-14). This archenemy of God is found throughout Old Testament narratives, hymns, and prophetic speeches” (Rodriguez 1999:7).

Demons or Demonic Possession in the New Testament

Demons or demonic activities are real in the New Testament. The New Testament presents many case studies about demonic powers and instances of demonic possession and manipulations. Mark’s Gospel supplies an account of one of Jesus’ encounters with a man possessed by an unclean or evil spirit while He taught in the synagogue in Capernaum. On seeing Jesus, the evil spirit or demons in this man spoke up saying, “Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God! But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet, and come out of him!” And when the unclean spirit had convulsed him and cried out with a loud voice, he came out of him” (Mark 1:24-26 NKJV). It is obvious that the demons are real in these stories and that they are personal beings possessing ability to reason and assert themselves. Moreover, they also recognized Jesus Christ as their Master and Creator. When Jesus commanded them to come out and depart from the man they obeyed.

Another instance of demonic activity is recorded in Matthew 8:28-34 where Jesus encountered two demon-possessed men in Gergesenes. Once again, the demons recognized him and begged him not to destroy them before the appointed time and to allow them to go into a herd of pigs feeding close by. Jesus granted them their request. In Acts 16:16-18, Paul casts out a demon from a slave girl who was used for money-making by her masters. The demonic influence enabled her to act as a fortune-teller.

In Matthew 9:32-33, a dumb and deaf man was brought to Jesus for healing, and Jesus immediately rebuked and commanded the demon to depart from the man and immediately the man was able to speak and hear.

Matthew 17:14-21 reports another case of a boy who suffered seizures and was suffering a lot. While Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration, unfortunately his disciples could not deliver the boy. When Jesus came back down the father of the boy reported the situation to Christ, who immediately rebuked the demon and caused it to depart from the boy and he was instantly set free. The symptom as reported by the boy’s father was seizures, which is a sign of a common mental condition. Jesus

immediately rebuked the demon, and the boy was instantly whole again. Thus, it is evident that demons are real in the New Testament era and that Jesus possessed the gift of discernment that enabled him to determine whether the origin of the problem was disease or demonic.

Can Demons Afflict Humans with Sicknesses or Diseases?

The Bible affirms the reality of Satan and his angelic loyalists (demons). Lucifer was created and endowed with beauty, power, and honor above every other creature in heaven and was indeed perfect in all his ways until iniquity was found in him (Ezek 28:11-15; Isa 14:12-14). When he was cast out of heaven, the Bible does not say his power and abilities diminished; rather, he lost his position as the covering cherub (Rev 12:7-10; Isa 14:12, 15-20).

Demons can cause afflictions (Luke 13:10-17) such as blindness (Matt 12:22), deafness (Mark 9:17-27), and dumbness (Matt 12:22). In Matthew 4:23-24 those who were demonized were ill from various diseases and suffered severe pain, seizures, and paralysis.

The experience of Job as recorded in Job 1-2, reveals that the devil has power to inflict sickness and disease on human beings. He inflicted Job with a terrible skin disease (Job 2:7).

Matthew 12:22 describes the case of a man who was possessed by demons who made him blind and dumb. When Jesus cast out those demons, the man was able to speak and see. Another instance is recorded in Matthew 17:14-18 in which a boy was said to be epileptic as a result of demonic possession. He was brought to Jesus and after he cast out the demons the boy's health was restored, and the epilepsy gone.

In 2000, a church member asked me to visit her son in the hospital who was in a critical situation. On arriving at the hospital, I learned that the doctors and nurses had tried all they could do medically to no avail and were in the process of discharging the young man. He could not be restrained, nor was he aware of what he did. We finally took him to the church, and I called a few church members who were available at that moment to join in prayers for the deliverance and healing of this young man. After praying for about an hour, the demons in him shouted and then he fell down like a dead person. I asked everyone present to leave him alone and we continued singing and praising God for about another hour. He woke up and acted like a new person and was surprised that he was in the church. When he heard what had happened, he joined us in praising God.

It is evident that the devil and his demonic agencies can and have indeed afflicted many people in biblical and contemporary times with sicknesses and diseases; hence, it is reasonable to assert that some sicknesses and/or diseases are inflicted by demons.

In the biblical account, Jesus recognized the distinction or dividing line between disease and demonic cases. In Matthew 10:1, 8, Jesus empowered his apostles to cast out demons (unclean spirits) and to heal every disease. Further, in Luke 13:32, Jesus said to the messengers from John the Baptist, “I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow.”

Contemporary Evidence of Supernatural Interventions in Medical Cases

A national survey of 1,100 medical doctors, piloted by HCD Research and the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, revealed that 55% (605) of these doctors attest to miraculous healing of their patients (Bishop 2017). Thus, even many physicians recognize the supremacy of supernatural powers over medical conditions.

In 1996, a church member (in Rivers State, Nigeria) approached me with a desperate request for help because she was so confused. Her only son was in a critical health situation and needed an urgent blood transfusion. Unfortunately, she did not have the funds needed. I did not have money—like Peter and John; however, the Holy Spirit inspired me to give what I had, so I prayed with her for the healing of her son. A few hours later she came running back to the parsonage. She was excited and praising God. Why? On getting back to the hospital, God had already performed a miracle for her son, and to the surprise of the doctors there was no need for a blood transfusion. The doctors said the boy was healed and discharged him that same day.

In another instance (in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria), we had just finished an evening evangelistic meeting when a lady with an unusually swollen foot came asking for prayers to heal her swollen right foot, which had persisted for months. I simply prayed to God for her healing and believed that God had heard our prayers and that she would be healed; however, as she left my presence that night there was no physical change, her right foot was still swollen. To the glory of God, by the next day, this same lady attended the meeting with no more swelling in her right foot.

The Conundrum of Disease vs. Demonic Cases

Cases of demonic possession share certain characteristic symptoms or features similar to certain mental illnesses such as sudden vomiting, dizziness, sensing a sudden change in room temperature, or experiencing a significant or complete alteration of the individual’s appearance. Rodger K. Bufford presented research findings on some of the similarities

between mental disease and demonic possession as shown in the chart below (1988:105, 107, 121).

Comparison of Demonic Influence and Mental Disorders	
Demonic Influence	Parallels in Mental Disorders
Supernatural knowledge	Hallucinations, delusions of psychotic disorders; God told me.
Supernatural Strength	Unusual strength displayed in bipolar disorder, other psychotic conditions such as catatonic.
Going about naked	Evident in most psychological disorders such as schizophrenia and schizotypal disorders.
Unable to hear, speak, or be blind	Associated with convulsion and other hysterical disorders.
Seizures	Common with epilepsy and other chronic brain disorders like intoxication, trauma, cerebral arteriosclerosis, syphilis, and intracranial neoplasms.
Use of a "different" voice; presence of distinct personality	Displayed in cases of dissociative disorders such as multiple personality disorder.
Bizarre behavior	Common in psychoses.
Force, violent behavior	Common in most psychotic cases such as paranoid, intermittent explosive disorder, anti-social personality, and crude aggressive behaviors.
Claims of demonic influence	Observed in multiple personality disorder.
Involvement in occult practices	This can be observed in many disorders (not to be used as a diagnostic standard).
Forceful, violent behavior	Observed in many psychotic conditions like bipolar disorders, paranoid, and intermittent explosive disorder.
Loss of personal control	Common to most psychotic conditions
Invasive	Associated with psychotic conditions

The chart clearly shows the challenges involved in distinguishing between demonic possession and disease (especially mental disease). This situation creates daunting challenges for scientists and Bible scholars in determining how to help the victims. Yet, every case needs to be properly diagnosed and treated.

Despite the doubts and arguments of some scientists against the phenomena of demonic possession, C. P. Bankart observed that “demonology continues to be a favored explanation for bizarre behavior even in modern, postindustrial, postfeminist, politically correct North America” (1997:34). On the one hand, while some scientists deny demonic possession, they are sometimes confronted with cases that defy all medical standards and interventions and thus are compelled to admit that there might be some influence beyond the realm of scientific investigations and diagnosis.

The New Testament does acknowledge both disease and demonic cases. When Jesus commissioned the Twelve, Matthew reports that he “gave them authority to *drive out impure spirits* and to *heal every disease and sickness*” (Matt 10:1, emphasis mine). Their ministry was twofold: casting out demons and healing all kinds of diseases. Furthermore, in Matthew 10:8, Jesus again makes a distinction between healing the sick and driving out demons. Thus, Jesus was cognizant of the difference between disease and demonic cases. Another instance where Jesus highlighted the difference between disease and demonic situations was in response to the Pharisees who tried to discourage him from preaching in Jerusalem by reminding him of Herod’s plan to kill him. Jesus told them to “go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on *driving out demons* and *healing people* today and tomorrow” (Luke 13:32, emphasis mine). Nevertheless, divine aid, wisdom, and spiritual gifting are needed to discern the difference.

Some Helpful Principles in Discerning the Condition

1. Know the truth. Isaiah 8:20 declares: “To the law and to the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no truth in them.” The Word of God is central in understanding and discerning the condition (disease or demonic). It is the inspired, infallible norm for evaluation of all knowledge and reality (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20, 21).

2. It is important to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14). Spiritual insight that is consequent on a close relationship with God is needed in discerning the condition. The Spirit of God discerns the presence and manifestations of the demonic influences and reveals the same to those who maintain an intimate relationship with God. In fact, time and again in Scripture, it has been shown that the demons recognize the Spirit of God and vice versa (Acts 19:15; Matt 8:28-29).

3. Demons manifest themselves when they encounter the power and presence of God. They recognize the Lordship of Jesus Christ (Matt 8:29); they may beg or cry out for mercy as in Matthew 8:28-32, or shout and torment their victim as in Mark 1:23-26.

4. People under demonic influences are resistant to prayer because the demons in them forbid them to call on the name and presence of God.

5. Sickesses may result from natural causes but can also be inflicted by the devil and his demonic agencies. This is where the spirit of discernment, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, is critical (1 Cor 12:10). The Holy Spirit is able to guide us so that we will not mistake a demonic case for sickness.

6. Listen to the victim. Active listening is another critical factor in discerning the condition (whether disease or demonic). Often, by simply listening, one is able to understand some details about the case. Jesus was always an active listener, which is part of the reason he always ministered to the real needs in people's lives. In fact, even when a demon speaks through a possessed person, it takes a spiritually minded and good listener to discern if the demon is speaking or if the person could just be confused because of a mental disorder.

7. Demonic cases are usually resistant or unresponsive to medical diagnosis and therapy.

Conclusion

It has been seen that the dividing line between diseases and demonic possession is thin. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether a case is pathological or demonic, but while the dividing line is thin, diseases and demonic cases are real, and each case (whether disease or demonic) can be discerned and appropriately dealt with. Nevertheless, the guidelines provided above are critical for appropriately discerning and addressing cases of disease or demonic possession.

There is overwhelming evidence in the New Testament that many of the diseases or illnesses that mental health professionals today classify as mental illness were believed to be and treated as demonic cases. In fact, one can hardly find any clear case of mental disease/illness in the New Testament that was not associated with demonic influences. Thus, pastors and Bible scholars have an important role to play in cases involving mental or demonic activity, while always using the spiritual gift of discernment.

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