

Hermeneutics 101: Thinking Clearly about Demons and Deliverance

by
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Not entirely unlike St. Paul, whose spirit was provoked within him when he saw the city of Athens full of idols (Acts 17), my own spirit was provoked within me recently when I saw an internet article full of bad arguments regarding the important topic of spiritual warfare. The bad arguments were in favor of Christians needing deliverance from indwelling demons, and this deliverance was seen as the key to enjoying true “freedom” in Christ. The very title of the article was “Freedom Ministry.”¹ This title is ironic, since nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that there is no bondage greater than that of a Christian who thinks he is inhabited by demons and in need of so-called “deliverance” to get them out. I am not going to deal with all of the bad arguments in that article, but I will deal with enough of them to raise serious doubts in the mind of any thinking Christian that people who teach such things are reliable guides, spiritually or otherwise.

Dichotomy vs. Trichotomy

The first bad argument, and it is foundational to all deliverance ministry, is that human beings are “tripartite.” That is, human beings consist of *three* basic parts or elements: body, soul, and spirit. In theology this view is known as “trichotomy.” The proof text for this view is (always and only) 1 Thess 5:23 where Paul uses these three terms in his prayer for the Thessalonian believer’s ongoing progress in holiness (sanctification). From this proof text it follows, so the argument goes, that Christians can have demons dwelling in their bodies and souls.² Why is this tripartite view necessary and foundational to all deliverance ministry? I can only guess that it is because it creates space inside of Christians for demons to dwell, space that is separate from and compartmentalized away from their spirit in which the Holy Spirit dwells. Since demons are allegedly influencing Christians from the inside out, and since unholy demons cannot dwell in the exact same space or place as the Holy Spirit, there must be other spaces or places within

¹http://gatewaypeople.com/sites/all/files/pdf/position_papers/Freedom%20Ministry.pdf It is not my intention to single them out unfairly or pick on them. What they write is available to anyone on the web and is simply representative of what many sincere Christians think the Bible teaches on this topic. For similar articles with similar bad arguments see: <http://ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/ministry-leadership/counseling/12232-deliver-us-from-deliverance-ministry> or <http://charismamag.com/cms/spiritlivedliving/081208.php>

²The soul on this mistaken view is often thought to contain or consist of *mind, emotion, and will*. This is not a good definition because it assumes that the soul contains these things but the spirit or heart do not. Actually, *mind, emotion, and will* is not the traditional definition of the soul at all! Rather, it is the long-standing and traditional definition of what it is to be a *person* (a definition that can be quite helpful in demonstrating, for example, that the Holy Spirit is a divine Person rather than just an impersonal force or energy).

Christians like the body and soul for the demons to dwell.³

What shall we make of this? Should a doctrine this important be based on a single proof text? Common sense would say, 'Probably not.' And common sense would be right. What if someone believes that human beings are made up of *four* parts and cites Jesus' statement in Mark 12:30 to prove it. Does that prove that human beings are made up of four parts: heart and soul and mind and strength? Jesus said it, I believe it, and that settles it? Or what if someone believes that human beings are made up of only *two* parts and cites Jesus' statement in Matt 10:28 to prove it. Does that prove that human beings are made up of only two parts: body and soul? Did Jesus contradict himself? Did he accidentally leave out something important? Or what if someone instead cites Paul in 2 Cor 7:1 to prove that human beings are made up of only two parts: flesh and spirit?⁴ Is Paul contradicting Jesus whose two parts were not flesh and spirit but body and soul? Is Paul the one now who has left out something important? Is he contradicting what he himself said in 1 Thess 5:23 about people being made up of three parts: body (not flesh!), soul, and spirit? Clearly we need more than proof texts. What we need is to look at all of the Bible verses that describe what a human being is, and then look carefully at all of the terms that are used. Are some of the terms synonyms or interchangeable with one another? Are they simply different ways of talking about the same thing or of looking at the same thing from different angles? In fact, a careful word study of each occurrence of the relevant terms will show precisely this, as also will a careful reading of the appropriate entries in any good Bible dictionary or lexicon.

Take, for example, the entries for "soul" and "spirit" in the classic and widely available *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. The word "soul" refers, among other things, to **the immaterial, invisible part of man; the disembodied man; the seat of the sentient element in man by which he perceives, reflects, feels [=emotions], desires; the seat of will and purpose; the equivalent of the personal pronoun, used for emphasis and effect; and the inward man, the seat of the new life**. The word "spirit" in that same dictionary refers, among other things, to **the immaterial, invisible part of man; the disembodied man; the seat of the sentient element in man by which he perceives, reflects, feels [=emotions], desires; the seat of will and purpose; the equivalent of the personal pronoun, used for emphasis and effect; and the inward man, the seat of the new life**. Sound familiar? But that is not all. For when one looks at the entry for "heart" one finds the same thing happening all over again. To read the definition of "heart" in Vine's dictionary one would think one was reading the definition of

³Technically speaking this reasoning is already quite flawed if for no other reason than that the Holy Spirit does not dwell in the believer's *spirit* but in the believer's *body*: the believer's *body* is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). If demons really are inside Christians, and if this compartmentalized thinking is correct, then the demons could not actually be in the believer's *body* but only in the believer's soul and spirit!

⁴These same two parts are called "dust" and "spirit" in Ecclesiastes 12:7. Surely in such contexts the terms "body" (Matt 10:28) and "flesh" (2 Cor 7:1) and "dust" (Ecc 12:7) are all essentially synonymous and are referring to the exact same thing, not to three separate and distinguishable material "parts" of the human being. This seems completely obvious and unobjectionable. Yet the same thing is true of the terms "soul" and "spirit" and also of the terms "heart" and "mind" which are not only synonymous and interchangeable with each other but also with the terms soul and spirit.

“soul” or “spirit” or, if that weren’t confusing enough, the word “mind.”⁵ But it is really not all that confusing once one realizes that every language—including Greek and Hebrew—contains synonyms. Every language contains different words for referring to the same thing. The terms in this case do not all overlap perfectly in every particular (e.g., the word “soul” very often means “life,” a meaning that the word “spirit” does not have); nevertheless, they are for all practical purposes indistinguishable and interchangeable in contexts where they singly or together are referring to the non-material part of the human being that survives death and that is the essence of the human person.

Because of this there are examples in Scripture of the terms “soul” and “spirit” being found in synonymous parallelism with each other. This kind of parallelism was a common feature of Hebrew poetry and thinking whereby the same thought would be expressed twice in side-by-side lines or statements. This kind of parallelism is found throughout the Old Testament: in virtually every Psalm and in virtually every other Proverb. It is so simple that one example is enough to show how it works. Take Psalm 105:23. In this verse there are two lines:

“Israel also came to Egypt;
thus Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham.”

Both lines obviously say the same thing since Israel is Jacob, and Egypt is the land of Ham (where Noah’s second son settled). With this Hebrew idea in mind, it is quite clear that the terms soul and spirit are equally synonymous and interchangeable in such passages as Job 7:11 (“I will speak in the anguish of my *spirit*; I will complain in the bitterness of my *soul*”) and Isa 26:9 (“my *soul* longs for Thee; my *spirit* within me seeks Thee diligently”). See also Mary’s words in Luke 1:46-47 (“My *soul* exalts the Lord, and my *spirit* has rejoiced in God my Savior”) which are a reflection of Hannah’s words in 1 Sam 2:1, where Hannah, however, does not use either the word soul or spirit but only the word *heart*.⁶ Thus, because they are essentially synonymous and refer to the same thing, the soul and the spirit and the heart and the mind cannot be clearly

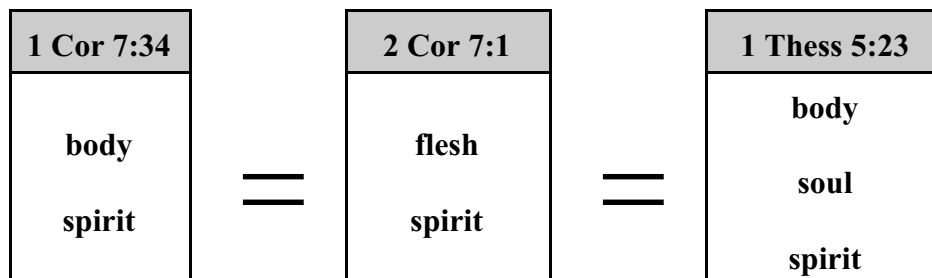
⁵In both Hebrew and Greek, as any lexicon will quickly show, it is the “heart” of a person that *thinks*, that has thoughts and intentions (see Heb 4:12; Matt 9:4; 15:19; Luke 1:51; 2:35; 9:47), and that is what we today would most likely call the soul or spirit or mind. The best known Hebrew lexicon (BDB), for example, defines the word heart as referring to **the inner man, including the mind and will**; while Vine’s well known Greek dictionary defines the heart as **the location of man’s entire mental and moral activity, both the rational and the emotional elements; the seat of moral nature and spiritual life; and the seat of the emotions, desires, affections, perceptions, thoughts, understanding, reasoning powers, imagination, conscience, intentions, purpose, will, and faith**. Does this sound a lot like it is describing the human soul or spirit? It should!

The fact that *mind, emotion, and will* can be found in the soul and in the spirit and in the heart reveals that the tripartite definition of the word soul is quite misleading (see n.2 above). How, on the tripartite view, can the soul and the spirit and the heart all be accurately described as the seat of the emotions? How many such seats can there be? Is this like the children’s game in which the emotions sit in whatever seat is closest when the music stops? Thankfully, there are better explanations!

⁶The same kind of parallelism as is found in Scripture between the words soul and spirit can also be found between the words heart and soul (e.g., Prov 2:10), between the words heart and spirit (e.g., Exod 35:21; Deut 2:30; Psalm 51:10, 17; 143:4; Isa 57:15), and between the words heart and mind (e.g., Heb 10:16). Again, the reason why this works—the only reason!—is because the terms are essentially synonymous and refer to the same non-material thing.

distinguished or separated or compartmentalized—certainly not in such a way as to allow demons into one but not another.⁷

The result when all is said and done is that *there is no solid biblical evidence for the popular tripartite view* but only for the view rightly held by most commentators and scholars and those who know the original languages. This view is called “dichotomy” in theology and it is the view that human beings have a material/bodily aspect and a nonmaterial/spiritual aspect, which latter aspect can be referred to alternately as soul or spirit or heart or mind—or *any combination of these terms*. Note, for example, that the reference to holiness (sanctification) in **1 Cor 7:34** is completely synonymous with the reference to holiness (sanctification) in **2 Cor 7:1** and that both of these texts are completely synonymous with the reference to holiness (sanctification) in **1 Thess 5:23**, the original proof text cited above. The first text speaks only of **body** and **spirit**; the second text only of **flesh** and **spirit**; the third text of **body** and **soul** and **spirit**. But the first two texts have left *nothing* out. There is *nothing* whatsoever missing from 1 Cor 7:34 or 2 Cor 7:1. All three verses have *exactly the same meaning*: that godly believers would be fully and completely holy (sanctified) in every aspect of their material and non-material being.



This means that the exact same truth can be expressed with two terms, with three terms, or with four terms: that is, with any number of synonymous and/or interchangeable terms that are often deliberately piled up on top of each other or placed in synonymous parallelism with each other for emphasis and dramatic effect.

A closer look at **Mark 12:30** in its context (**Mark 12:28-34**) will definitely show this to be the case and will, perhaps, be instructive to those who, like the more noble-minded Bereans of Acts 17:11, take the Bible seriously and who desire the full counsel of God rather than mere proof texts. Note carefully what happens in this remarkable account:

1. Jesus is asked by a scribe to identify the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses and He answers by saying that it is to “love the Lord your God with all your **heart**, and with all your **soul**, and with all your **mind**, and with all your **strength**.”

⁷By way of analogy, and setting aside completely one’s own political affiliation or feelings about the spiritual state of the current person in that esteemed office, imagine someone arguing that there could be demons inside of the **President of the United States** but not in the **Commander-in-Chief**; or that there could be demons inside of the **Commander-in-Chief** but not in the **husband of the First Lady**. Such an argument—one hesitates to dignify it by even calling it that—belongs in “cloud cuckoo land” or on the “funny farm.” The terms in question all have the same referent. They are just viewing him from different angles.

2. This well known commandment is found in Deuteronomy 6:5 which says to “love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your **strength**.” Notice that Jesus has changed the original commandment slightly by adding an extra synonym for heart or soul, the word “**mind**,” that was not in the OT. But the meaning is still exactly the same: you are to love God with all that you are and with everything that you are.
3. Immediately after Jesus gives this answer the scribe affirms the excellence of Jesus’ answer. Then the scribe repeats Jesus’ answer back to him: “Right, Teacher, you have truly stated ... to love God with all the **heart** and with all the **understanding** and with all the **strength**.” Interestingly, the scribe’s answer rewords Jesus’ answer (which had itself reworded Deut 6:5!) by substituting a synonym for the word that Jesus had added and by dropping the word “soul” altogether. Was this an acceptable restatement of the commandment? Did the scribe get it right? Apparently Jesus thought so since we are told that He “saw that the scribe had answered intelligently.” Thus the three different statements are *exactly equal in meaning*.

Moses		Jesus		Scribe
heart		heart		heart
soul	=	soul	=	understanding
strength		mind		strength
		strength		

If the tripartite view were correct, it would seem odd that *neither* Deut 6:5 *nor* the two restatements of it in Mark 12 by Jesus and the scribe mention the human **spirit**. Are we not, then, to love God with our spirits? Of course we are! But this can only happen if **soul** or **heart** or **mind**—or, *better yet, all three*—are synonyms for the word **spirit**. If the tripartite view is correct, then Jesus and the scribe, no less than Moses in Deut 6:5, have left out the most important part of what it is to be human: the **spirit**! And the scribe has left out the *two* most important parts of what it is to be human: the **soul** and the **spirit** both! How, then, can he possibly (on the tripartite view) have answered “intelligently”? There is a bad answer in here somewhere; but it is not the answer given by the scribe, much less by Moses or Jesus. It is the answer given by the tripartite view which, thanks to its one proof text, turns all of these other verses into complete and utter nonsense.⁸

⁸For further information about and problems with the tripartite (trichotomy) view see the excellent CRI Journal article by Brian Onken titled “The Dangers of the ‘Trinity’ in Man.” You can find a link to it on my personal web page: www.xtianity.com/TFC

Demon Possession vs. Demonization

The second bad argument, an argument that is again foundational to all deliverance ministry, is that the Greek term *daimonizomai* does not mean “demon possessed” but only “demonized”; and that this “demonization” refers only to influence (often via inhabitation) but not to possession or ownership. As I tell my first year Greek students, ‘A little Greek is a dangerous thing.’ And as I tell my second year Greek students, ‘A little more Greek is even more dangerous!’ Those promoting deliverance ministry who learn that the Greek word for demon possession is *daimonizomai* (which sounds in English like “demonized”) show contempt for the contexts in which this term is used in the Gospels and for the Greek dictionaries and lexicons that quite uniformly and correctly translate this Greek word as “demon *possessed*.” The word indicates *both* inhabitation *and* ownership or possession. To “have a demon” inside of you is to be “demon possessed.”⁹ And since Satan cannot “own” any Christian it immediately follows by definition (from the Greek) that no Christian can be *daimonizomai*. Perhaps that explains why *no Christian in the New Testament ever has a demon cast out of them*. Can Satan and the demons influence Christians? Of course they can—in the same way Satan influenced Adam and Eve in the Garden and Christ in the wilderness. They influence by means of deception and temptation and they can do this without inhabiting people. Can Satan and the demons own Christians, as would be clearly indicated by their dwelling inside of Christians? Absolutely not! Christians are *owned* by the Lord and *inhabited* only by the Holy Spirit. For this reason we can successfully resist the attacks of Satan and the demons—which are all *external*—because greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world, i.e., *not in us* (1 John 4:4)! Since I and others have dealt with this particular error regarding the Greek word *daimonizomai* in detail elsewhere I will not belabor the point further here except to make the following closely related biblical observation regarding kingdom theology.¹⁰

Why is it so important to insist that Christians cannot have demons inside of them? Isn’t it all just semantics, since everyone agrees that Christians can be “influenced” by Satan and demons? Does it really make any difference if the influence is internal or external or somewhere in between? Does it really matter? It matters a great deal and for the following important reason. The expulsion of demons from a person through the name and/or ministry of Christ never takes place in isolation from the transference of that person from Satan’s kingdom to God’s kingdom. Transference from Satan’s kingdom to God’s kingdom automatically includes deliverance from

⁹There are two main ways in Greek to express the same thought: “to have a demon” (*daimonion echein*) and to be “demon possessed” (*daimonizomai*). The former phrase occurs 13 times in the NT, the latter 9 times, and both equally and interchangeably indicate ownership or possession by the demon and, ultimately, by Satan. That the two phrases are synonymous can be seen by comparing Matt 8:28 with Luke 8:27 (both in reference to the Garasene demoniac) or by comparing John 10:21 with John 10:20 (both in reference to Jesus). The important thing in every case is the *location* of the demon (inside of the person) and the *solution* (casting the demon out of the person). As with real estate, *location* turns out to be everything!

¹⁰See my articles “Doctrines of Demons” and “Does the Greek Word DAIMONIZOMAI Mean ‘Demonized’?” as well as Elliot Miller’s “Deliver Us From Deliverance Ministry” and the CRI article “Can A Christian be ‘Demonized’?” Links to all of these may again be found at <http://faculty.tfc.edu/juncker>

inhabiting demons; and deliverance from inhabiting demons is always evidence that a person has transferred from Satan's kingdom to God's. *There is never one* (transference of kingdoms) *without the other* (deliverance from demons). *And that is why no Christian in the NT ever has a demon cast out of them.*¹¹ That is why Paul can say that Jesus has "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col 1:13). That is why Paul can say that we have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). And where exactly is Christ? He is "seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places, *far above* all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:20-21). We are seated with Christ *far above* Satan and *all* the demonic hosts of hell. Our position and their position is *not* the same. We are not together in the same place. They are not in us, and they are not seated up there in the heavenly places with us. All Satan can do now is lie to us and tempt us *from the outside*.¹² These are all *external* attacks. He cannot indwell us or possess those who are no longer in his kingdom and who are indwelt and possessed (= owned) by Someone infinitely greater. Praise God!

This is not only the theology behind Paul's teaching about believers being transferred from Satan's kingdom to God's, it is also the theology behind Jesus' teaching about Satan's kingdom in Matt 12:22-29. What does Jesus teach? He teaches that His exorcisms are proof that He has bound the "strong man" (who in context is Satan) and that He is plundering Satan's "house."¹³ In Jesus' teaching Satan's house is plainly identified as Satan's kingdom. And Jesus can cast demons out of demon possessed people, that is, out of people formerly owned and possessed by Satan, because He has first dealt decisively with their commander-in-chief. Jesus has "bound" him. This deliverance of demons from what was once Satan's property—this exorcism or expulsion of demons from people—is equated by Jesus to "plundering" Satan's house (kingdom) and "carrying off" Satan's property by removing it from Satan's house (kingdom). Jesus casts demons out of people who were once owned (possessed) by Satan and demons; and as he does so he removes the people from Satan's kingdom and transfers them to His own kingdom. Jesus equates his exorcisms with carrying what once belonged to Satan out of Satan's house (kingdom). What Jesus takes out of Satan's kingdom is people. The people were Satan's property. He owned them. And what leaves those people as Jesus takes them out of Satan's kingdom and transfers them to His own kingdom is demons. *There is never one* (transference of kingdoms) *without the other* (deliverance from demons). *And that is why no Christian in the NT ever has a demon cast out of them.* Clearly, Jesus and Paul were both teaching the same thing, and they have made it easy to know exactly where you stand. To find out where you stand is as

¹¹ The horrific situation described by Jesus in Matt 12:43-45 is no exception to this truth. A demon temporarily evicted from his home inside a person will return with seven other demons *if and only if it returns and finds its former house empty*. The whole point of Pentecost (and verses like John 14:16-20, 23) is that *the believer's "house" is not empty* but is the temple of the Holy Spirit. What Jesus is describing applies specifically and only to the evil and adulterous generation that He is addressing (Matt 12:39, 45), not to God's own children and temple!

¹² See my article titled "Satan's M.O. (*modus operandi*)."

¹³ The only "strong man" ever mentioned in Scripture is Satan. The use of this term to describe territorial spirits or ruling demons inside of Christians and others that *we* are supposed to bind and cast out is completely unbiblical. See the articles that I have posted related to the errors of "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare" at <http://faculty.tfc.edu/juncker>

easy as asking and answering the following simple questions: Are you a Christian or are you not? Are the demons outside of you or are they inside of you? Are you seated far above *all the hosts of hell* or are some of them seated inside of you? Are you outside of Satan's kingdom or are you inside of it?

What I am describing here is basic biblical and kingdom theology. Frankly, if someone does not understand such a basic kingdom truth as this, they really ought not to be saying anything about the kingdom or its life or its advancement, much less anything at all about spiritual warfare. Read through Matt 12:22-29 if you are in any doubt. The text could not be clearer. If you are a child of God then you belong to Him, you are now in His kingdom, you are seated with Christ far above *all* demons, and you do not and cannot have demons inside of you that need to be cast out. To deny this is to deny the clear teaching of Scripture. Is this important? Does it make a difference? Does it matter? Indeed it matters greatly. For if you get the diagnosis wrong up front, you are liable to go in for the wrong cure or end up taking someone else's medicine with potentially disastrous results. For the Christian, the NT diagnosis is *never* indwelling demons that need to be cast out in Jesus' name. That is a diagnosis for non-Christians! That is spiritual malpractice of the worst possible kind! For the Christian the diagnosis is *sometimes* demonic influence via external temptation or deception; however, the Christian's problems are *most often* diagnosed in Scripture as the flesh (meaning, in this context, the sinful nature). Sadly, the flesh cannot be cast out. Would that it were so easy! And anyone who does not know the difference between a demon and a deed of the flesh is a blind guide no sane person should follow. What must be done when the flesh is involved are difficult things like denying ourselves and crucifying our sinful desires and behaviors. This, not deliverance, is how the Christian makes progress in the Christian life: progress in obedience and holiness and sanctification and Christ-likeness. Does the *location* of the demons make any difference? Indeed, it makes all the difference in the world, both this one and the next.

Opportunity vs. Place

The third bad argument relates to the location of demons and involves the Greek word *topos* in Eph 4:26-27, "Be angry, but do not sin; neither let the sun set on your anger, nor give the devil a *topos*." The word *topos* has two basic meanings, one literal and one figurative or metaphorical. The literal meaning is "place" or "space." The figurative or metaphorical meaning is "opportunity." Because the literal meaning fits deliverance ministry theology, which holds that there are locations inside of Christians where demons can dwell, those who advocate that theology are quick to adopt this meaning. But is this the best meaning? Is this, in context, what Paul is trying to warn the Ephesians about? Does letting the sun set on your anger literally open up a space or place inside of your body or soul where *Satan* can enter and dwell? That is a radical thought! But deliverance ministry teaching does not stop there. It expands the text beyond what Paul says to include all kinds of sins (though the text only mentions one) and all kinds of demons (though the text only mentions Satan). In reality, however, Paul does not actually say *where* the space or place is. That it is literally inside our bodies or souls must be read into the text. Isn't it at least possible that the space or place isn't inside of the believer at all? Could it not be within our churches? Or within our Christian fellowships? And what about the figurative or metaphorical

meaning of the word? Could that meaning fit the context better? After all, Paul does not speak about deliverance from inhabitation by Satan. If Paul describes how Satan can enter born again, Spirit-filled Christians, it seems odd that he doesn't describe how to get Satan back out: not here in Ephesians; and not anywhere in any of his other letters.¹⁴ Then again, if Satan and demons cannot be found inside of believers, the total silence of the NT on this problem and its deliverance ministry solution isn't odd at all—it is exactly what we would expect!

The main focus of Ephesians chapter 4 is unity in the body of Christ and harmony in the fellowship of believers: how Christians may live life together corporately in a way that honors Christ. In this context, Paul does not intend to say, nor does he actually say, that anger gives Satan access into the angry believer's body or soul to inhabit it (thereby requiring an exorcism to get him out). What Paul says is that anger that is not dealt with quickly gives Satan an "opportunity" to wreak havoc in the Christian community by destroying the unity and harmony that Christ desires and that Paul has been describing. These are two very different problems. If we are facing the first problem, with *topos* understood literally, then what we need is deliverance ministry to identify and name and bind and rebuke and expel Satan (and/or demons). But none of these things are mentioned with reference to Christians anywhere in Ephesians. If the second problem is what we are facing, with *topos* understood figuratively, then what we need is to manage our anger by resolving our conflicts quickly and by being kind and forgiving toward those who have wronged us. And this—not the former—is exactly what the text says to do (see Eph 4:26, 32)! What Paul says to do fits the second problem perfectly, but not the first problem. That is because Paul is not dealing with the first problem: he is not dealing with the inhabitation of Christians by Satan (and/or demons). He is not dealing with this in Ephesians 4 or in Ephesians 6 or anywhere in any of his letters. For a doctrine as serious as the inhabitation of Christians by Satan we would need some serious Scripture proof. What we are given instead is wishful thinking about a Greek word that all the best commentaries and dictionaries say has the figurative or metaphorical meaning in Eph 4:27 because that is the meaning that best fits the context. So until better exegetical evidence is forthcoming, we may safely reject the deliverance ministry interpretation of *topos* in Ephesians. There is no place for it!¹⁵

Physical Affliction vs. Indwelling Demon

The fourth bad argument is that Paul's "thorn in the flesh," also referred to as "a messenger of Satan" (2 Cor 12:7), was an indwelling demon and that this verse is the clearest example in the Bible of a born again believer having a demon inside of them. Let's assume, for a moment, that

¹⁴ The only clear instance in Scripture of Satan entering anyone is Judas, and I point out below why any appeal to his case is problematic (e.g., he was *not* a believer and he was *never* delivered!). Yet deliverance ministry would effectively put every Christian who delays in resolving anger (or any other sin!) in the same position as Judas, the unbelieving, non-Christian betrayer of Jesus who Scripture calls the "son of perdition" (an expression elsewhere used only of the Antichrist in 2 Thess 2:3). Is that really what they want?

¹⁵ For further information on the word *topos* with copious citations from the commentaries and dictionaries see my article "A 'Place' or an 'Opportunity' for the Devil? The Meaning of *TOPOS* in Eph 4:27" at <http://faculty.tfc.edu/juncker>

this thorn/messenger in Paul's *flesh* was an indwelling demon. From this it would not follow that Christians could have demons in their *bodies* unless the words "body" and "flesh" were synonymous. But that leads to the rather awkward possibility that *other* key terms that shall remain nameless may also be synonymous, and so those in deliverance ministry should think twice before going that route. From this it also would not follow that Christians could have demons in their *souls*, but only that Christians can have them in their *flesh*. If we are going to stick to the text at hand, there is no warrant for broadening the meaning beyond what is actually stated. And what is actually stated is *flesh*. Period.

Also, and this is much more problematic, if this thorn/messenger was actually a demon, *it was never cast out! Paul was never delivered!* How this verse supports "deliverance" ministry completely escapes me. On the contrary, it proves the exact opposite: that demons inside of Christians cannot be cast out. Not very encouraging. Maybe Judas, who Satan entered (John 13:27), would have made for a better example of Christians having demons inside of them. Then again, maybe not. And for two reasons: Judas was *never* delivered either; and Judas was *never* saved in the first place.¹⁶ Thus Judas is a terrible example of a *Christian* who has a demon for the simple reason that he wasn't a Christian. In fact, as noted above, there is not a single example anywhere in the New Testament of a Christian having a demon inside of them or of a Christian having a demon cast out of them. Surely this must be significant if deliverance is virtually (as it is claimed) the key to sanctification and victorious Christian living. Judas is, by the same token, an equally terrible example of a *Christian* who falls away and loses his salvation. But I digress. Back to Paul and his thorn.

If one assumes that the thorn/messenger is an indwelling demon then one does not get very far (demons are limited to our *flesh*) or one runs into total discouragement (demons cannot be cast out!). What hope is there for you and me to get demons out of *us* if Paul the great apostle could not get a demon out of *him*? If we ask this question, there is no clear answer. But, then again, one thing is crystal clear in this passage: Paul does not undergo any attempt at deliverance or exorcism. No demon is named or rebuked or commanded or bound or cast out. Perhaps it wasn't a demon after all. Perhaps, as almost all of the commentaries agree, it was a physical ailment that Paul in highly figurative and metaphorical terms refers to as a "thorn" (not a literal thorn!) and a "messenger" of Satan (not a literal fallen angel or demon!). If we go this route, what do we find? Does the text make sense? Does it make *better* sense? I think that it does. Note the following observations:

1. Paul's thorn in the flesh is universally understood by the commentaries as a metaphor for Paul's physical weakness or sickness. In fact, Paul specifically mentions this ailment in context in 2 Cor 12:5, 9, that is, in the verses before and after verse 7, the verse in question.
2. According to the monumental 10 volume Kittel theological dictionary (*TDNT* 7.411), the

¹⁶The Gospel of John is clear that Judas never believed and never was cleansed of his sin (i.e., saved and forgiven). See John 6:63-71, esp. v. 64; 12:4-6; 13:10-11; 15:3; 17:12. It was with Judas and those like him in mind that Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" and "Depart from me, I *never* knew you"! (Matt 7:21-23).

messenger from Satan is also "plainly meant in a figurative sense." That is, a literal fallen angel or demon is not in view.

3. The thorn was graciously *given to Paul by God*. The verb "given" is passive and is what is called a "divine passive" or "theological passive," meaning that God is the understood subject of the verb.¹⁷ It was thus God and God alone who gave Paul this thorn. Surely this grammatical observation is important and must factor in to any interpretation of the verse.
4. The thorn (because given by God) was given for a purely good and beneficial purpose: that Paul would be humble and trust more fully in God's grace and strength. This is not something Satan or a demon would ever want or do!
5. Because it was so painful, Paul prayed *to God* for its removal. Why does he pray to God? Because he knows that it came *from God* and can only be removed *by God*. This is very different from the way Paul handled the demon in the demon possessed slave girl in Acts 16. It is also very different from the way demons were handled in the gospels, i.e., by being directly addressed and commanded and rebuked and expelled.
6. Paul does not bind it or rebuke it or command it or in any other way attempt to cast it out of himself, nor does anyone else come alongside of him to do this with him or for him. This is surely significant since this is exactly what Paul could and should have done if it were actually a demon inside of him. This strongly suggests that there was no such demon.
7. Because Paul's *body* was the temple of the Holy Spirit it is unlikely theologically that the messenger could have been a demon. A demon is an unclean and *unholy* spirit; and God would not want or allow such a thing to remain in the body (=temple of the *Holy Spirit*!) of one of his saints (lit. "*holy ones*"!). Remember, it is not just that there was a thorn in Paul's flesh. This thorn, whatever it was, stayed where it was because God wanted it to stay there to promote Paul's holiness (sanctification). It was never removed! This is not the way indwelling demons are treated anywhere else in Scripture, a point lost on those who hastily appeal to this passage because *on the surface* it seems (initially) to support their aberrant view.

If the thorn/messenger is in any way to be connected to Satan or a demon, then the absolute *most* one could say biblically is that the affliction may have come to Paul in much the same way that Job's physical trials came to him. They came from Satan, yes, but very indirectly and in a way that we are not exactly told, though it was all clearly guided and superintended by God. And because God had a definite purpose in Job's afflictions, it would not have been helpful or successful for Job to have rebuked Satan or demons or attempted a deliverance session with his three comforters to cure himself. The same could be said of Rev 2:10 where we read that Satan is going to throw some of the believers in prison and kill them. He is not personally going to appear and do this! He is going to do this through the agency of deceived and persecuting human beings. Thus, once again, it would have been useless for the believers at Smyrna to have rebuked or bound Satan or demons since their imprisonment and martyrdom were being allowed by God for the specific purpose of their testing (cf. 1 Pet 1:7). These things were planned and allowed by God for their good and for His greater glory.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Murray J. Harris, *2 Corinthians* (Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 10; Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1976), 396.

Is it conceivable that God could graciously give *you* such a “thorn”? Indeed it is. And if He does, the last thing on earth that you need is deliverance ministry. You would then, in effect, be doing spiritual warfare *against God’s perfect will for your life!* You would then, in effect, be *rebuking God!* What you need is not deliverance ministry but faith and patience and all of the other precious gifts and fruits of the Spirit that often grow best in times of hardship and suffering. This is what Paul learned from his thorn and thanked God for it; and this is what you, too, can learn if you submit to God rather than to self-professed experts in deliverance and so-called ‘freedom’ that is actually bondage.

Telling the Truth¹⁸ vs. Tool of Satan

There are many bad arguments in favor of deliverance ministry. We have taken a closer look at four of them. These arguments are not bad because I don’t personally happen to like them or because I think the world view they promote is creepy and animistic (although I do, in fact, happen to think this). The arguments are bad solely because they are unscriptural. They all have this in common: they violate the contexts of the Scriptures to make them say something they were never meant to say. We have seen this hermeneutic before. It is the hermeneutic of the Deceiver himself who can quote Scripture with the best of them (Matt 4:6). But Jesus flatly rejected this hermeneutic—and so should we. How did Jesus reject it? He simply opposed the lie with the truth. He simply opposed the verses taken out of context with verses taken in context. It is as simple as that. It is as profound as that. We can’t make the Scriptures say whatever we want them to say. To do so is not to learn from them and submit to them, rather it is to twist them and distort them to our own destruction (2 Pet 3:16) or to the spiritual ruin of those we may even be trying to help.

Clearly someone is grievously mistaken about this topic. Someone is giving bad arguments and doing bad interpretation. Someone, yes, is being used as a tool of Satan. And there are only two options as to who this is. Either *I* am the one taking Scripture out of context to make it teach what *I* want—thereby keeping demon infested Christians in their terrible bondage and denying them the freedom that is their birthright; or *they* are the ones taking Scripture out of context to make it teach what *they* want—thereby denying the finished work of Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, blaming demons for deeds of the flesh, derailing the biblical pattern for sanctification, and creating an unhealthy obsession with Satan and demons through the twisting of many Scriptures. The stakes are high.

I don’t for a moment doubt the salvation or sincerity of those in deliverance ministry. But sincerity is no guarantee of truth. Take a Jehovah’s Witness, for example, who is totally sincere and totally convinced in his own mind that Jesus is not God. He can even rattle off a list of proof texts to “prove” his theology (John 14:28; Col 1:15; Rev 3:14; etc.). But this proves nothing. Likewise, a deliverance ministry proponent is totally sincere and totally convinced in his own mind that Christians (especially critics of deliverance ministry!) can have demons inside of them that can be cast out in Jesus’ name. And he, too, can rattle off a list of proof texts to “prove” his

¹⁸Gal 4:16.

theology (2 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:27; 1 Thess 5:23; etc.). But, again, this proves nothing—except how easy it is to take Scriptures out of context! But if we really love God’s Word we will not want to take it out of context. We will want to know what God actually meant by the words that He so wonderfully inspired.

Search the Scriptures like the Bereans did in Acts 17, the very passage of Scripture that I began this essay with so long ago. Read them and reread them carefully with both options in mind. If you do this, I believe that you will find the truth and that the truth will set you free from the bondage and the bad arguments of deliverance ministry. I have no delusions of grandeur in thinking that anything that I have said will actually change anyone’s mind. That will take a miracle on God’s part; and great humility on the part of some readers who may need to repent for teaching false doctrine or for having allowed themselves to be deceived by false teachers who tickled their ears (2 Tim 4:3) and led their minds astray from the simplicity and purity of their devotion to Christ (2 Cor 12:3). Could that reader be you? If so, may God have mercy on you just as He once had mercy on me: for I was once that reader myself! But that is another story for another day.

Let him who has ears hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.