

On Exorcism and Exorcists: An Evangelical View

We should respect the power of the Devil and his demons, but never fear them. We do not need a rite of exorcism, only the name of Jesus. We are not given a priesthood of exorcists — for every believer is armed with the full promise of the Gospel, united with Christ by faith, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

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A flurry of media attention was directed in recent days to a meeting on exorcism organized by Roman Catholic bishops. The meeting, held in Baltimore, drew fifty bishops and sixty priests who learned how to discern if an individual is truly possessed by a demon and how to conduct an exorcism when needed.

Rachel Zoll of The Associated Press reported that the program of the meeting was intended to “outline the scriptural basis of evil, instruct clergy on evaluating whether a person is truly possessed, and review the prayers and rituals that comprise an exorcism.”

Major media reported two different angles on the story, with some, such as Zoll, outlining the lack of enthusiasm among American Catholics for the rite and others, such as Laurie Goodstein of *The New York Times*, explaining that the handful of priests now qualified to be exorcists are “overwhelmed with requests from people who fear they are possessed by the Devil.”



Goodstein did report a significant hesitation on the part of many American Catholics and cynicism about exorcism on the part of many priests. Still, there is a growing demand among grassroots Catholics.

“Not everyone who thinks they need an exorcism actually does need one,” explained Bishop Thomas J. Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, the main force behind calling the event. “It’s only used in those cases where the Devil is involved in an extraordinary sort of way in terms of actually being in possession of the person.”

R. Scott Appleby, a professor of American Catholic history at the University of Notre Dame, told Goodstein that the effort is, in effect, a way of the church stressing its hierarchical spiritual power, since only priests and members of the hierarchy can perform the rite. “It’s a strategy for saying: ‘We are not the Federal Reserve, and we are not the World Council of Churches. We deal with angels and demons.’”



Bishop Paprocki said: “But it’s rare, it’s extraordinary, so the use of exorcism is also rare and extraordinary But we have to be prepared.”

So, why is there no evangelical rite of exorcism? We “deal with angels and demons,” too, right? The media attention to the Catholic meeting raises this issue anew.

Evangelical Christians do believe in the existence, malevolence, and power of the Devil and demons. About these things, the New Testament is abundantly clear. We must resist any effort to “demythologize” the New Testament in order to deny the existence of these evil forces and beings. At the same time, we must recognize quickly that the Devil and

demons are not accorded the powers often ascribed to them in popular piety. The Devil is indeed a threat, as Peter made clear when he warned: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” [1 Peter 5:8]

The New Testament is also clear that very real cases of demonic possession were encountered by Jesus and his followers. Jesus liberated afflicted individuals as he commanded the demons to flee, and they obeyed him. Likewise, the Apostle Paul performed exorcisms as he confronted the powers of evil and darkness in his ministry.

A closer look at the crucial passages involved reveals no rite of exorcism, however, just the name of Jesus and the proclamation of the Gospel. Likewise, there is no notion of a priestly ministry of ordained exorcists in the New Testament.

The weapons of our warfare are spiritual, and the powers that the forces of darkness most fear are the name of Jesus, the authority of the Bible, and the power of his Gospel.

Evangelicals do not need a rite of exorcism, because to adopt such an invention would be to surrender the high ground of the Gospel. We are engaged in spiritual warfare every minute of every day, whether we recognize it or not. There is nothing the demons fear or hate more than evangelism and missions, where the Gospel pushes back with supernatural power against their possessions, rendering them impotent and powerless. Every time a believer shares the Gospel and declares the name of Jesus, the demons and the Devil lose their power.

Furthermore, there is absolutely no New Testament evidence that a believer in Christ can be possessed by demons. Tormented and tempted? Sure. But never possessed. Once we are united with Christ by faith and given the gift of the indwelling Spirit, there is no way a demon can possess us. As the Apostle John reminds us, “Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” [1 John 4:4]

So, we should respect the power of the Devil and his demons, but never fear them. We do not need a rite of exorcism, only the name of Jesus. We are not given a priesthood of exorcists — for *every* believer is armed with the full promise of the Gospel, united with Christ by faith, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Let the final word come from the Apostle Paul:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. [Ephesians 6:10-20]

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Laurie Goodstein, “[For Catholics, Interest in Exorcism is Revived](#),” *The New York Times*, Saturday, November 13, 2010.

Rachel Zoll, “[Catholic Bishops Face Shortage of Exorcists](#),” *USA Today*, Saturday, November 13, 2010. Filed by The Associated Press.

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