

Are Exorcisms Miraculous?

Posted on 10/15/2009 by Dr. Jack Cottrell

THE FOLLOWING QUESTION comes in response to my note, “Why Demonic Works in a Christian Context?” In this note I affirm the cessationist view of miraculous spiritual gifts, i.e., the Holy Spirit is not giving miraculous gifts to Christians today. The suggestion below is that modern-day exorcisms are evidence that miraculous gifts from the Spirit are still present, since exorcisms are “supernatural by nature.”

HERE IS THE QUESTION: “What of those that currently cast out demons, especially in third world countries where missionaries speak of current infestations and subsequent exorcisms? Any exorcism is supernatural by nature and must a gift of God using Matthew 12:22-37 as precedent.”

MY REPLY: I am very much aware of present-day “exorcisms,” which occur not only in third world countries but in every area of the world. My good friend Grayson Ensign (now deceased) had a powerful and extremely beneficial deliverance ministry that began in Cincinnati; long before he died he told me that he had helped deliver over 300 people from demonic spirits. (By the way, I teach a seminary course called “Demonology.”)

The above question seems to assume that since all deliverance events are “supernatural,” those who “cast out demons” must have a spiritual gift from the Holy Spirit, and a MIRACUOUS gift at that. Thus miraculous spiritual gifts must still be present. The fallacy of the argument is the assumption that casting out demons is in the category of miraculous gifts. First, let us note that “supernatural” is not the same as “miraculous.” All miracles are supernatural, but not all supernatural events are miraculous. Herein lies the difference between miracles as such, and another work of God called special divine providence (sdp, as distinct from general providence). [See my book, “God the Ruler,” for a discussion of all these works of God.] An example of the latter is answer to prayer. When we pray for God to do something in our world, and when he answers that prayer, his intervention is always

supernatural but seldom miraculous. I.e., it is a work of sdp. The main difference is that in miracles, natural law is violated; in sdp it is not. We see this distinction in God's healing of the sick. Jesus healed miraculously. Today we pray for the sick to be healed (James 5:13ff.), and God heals them providentially, in answer to our intercessory prayer.

This same distinction applies to casting out demons. This can be either miraculous, as in the case of Jesus in Matt. 12:22ff. and elsewhere; or it can be a providential answer to intercessory prayer, as in the case of the Jewish exorcists (Matt. 12:27; Acts 19:13). This is how all responsible modern-day deliverance ministers understand their work. Brother Grayson Ensign was a cessationist, and yet had a very needed deliverance ministry. One should read the works of Neil T. Anderson, especially "The Bondage Breaker," to understand deliverance as God's providential answer to intercessory prayer.

Those in deliverance ministry insist that what they do does not require any special gift from the Holy Spirit; any mature Christian can do it. Robert Peterson, a missionary to Borneo who wrote "Are Demons for Real?" [emphatically, yes], says, "It [is] essential . . . to realize that all Christians of whatever race or position in the Church have equal rights before God and that God is not limited in His choice of believers to do battle with the foe. The Scriptures make it plain that the work of exorcising demons is not a special gift God has imparted to select believers, but that demons must obey any victorious Christian so long as the conditions are met. Exorcism depends on our position in Christ and not a particular gift" (p. 79).

Note also that in the four lists of spiritual gifts in the NT (Rom. 12:1ff.; Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:7-11, 28-30), exorcism is never mentioned.

Thus the reality of modern-day demonization, and of modern-day "exorcisms," does not contradict the cessationist view of Spiritual gifts.