

POSSESSED PLACES: A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE ON
DEMONIC ACTIVITY WITHIN THE HOME

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ABSTRACT

The Christian Church has given much attention to the topic of demon possession throughout its history. But there are some Christians who continue to face other forms of demonic activity, particularly within their homes. This essay is not an exhaustive handbook for addressing demonic poltergeist activity; rather, it attempts to orient afflicted Christians to biblical truths about the spiritual world. Prayerful action and thoughtful caution is needed when seeking to rid a home of poltergeist activity, yet the Christian finds unmatched comfort in the person of Jesus Christ, his work, and his power. The forgiveness God brings to each person through Jesus Christ in Word and sacrament provides relief for demonic activity. Though ridding a home of demonic activity may be a process (not necessarily a singular event) the eternal salvation and identity of each afflicted Christian has and will remain completely secure by the divine power and unbounded love of our triune Creator-God.

Keywords: Demons, Poltergeist, Demon Possession, Exorcism, Haunted

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INTRODUCTION

In the first week of April 1538, the German church reformer Martin Luther spent a handful of days near the city of Torgau in northeastern Germany, preaching in church services and visiting the local Lutheran clergy. While there, a pastor from a nearby town took the opportunity to visit with Luther, complaining about strange things happening in his house. The pastor spoke about “nocturnal tumults” and “the smashing of all the utensils.”¹ The family’s “[pots and dishes were]...hurled...close to his head, so that they broke in pieces.”² A casual observer to the conversation might have thought the pastor’s problems were part of a domestic dispute or the results of unruly children. However, the pastor pointed out a peculiar aspect: no one was throwing the utensils or smashing the pots. The utensils and pots were throwing *themselves* around. Objects moving by themselves was not the only issue. The pastor, his wife, and his children also heard “laughing ... [yet] saw nothing” and were unable to locate the source of the laughter. These strange phenomena aggravated and troubled the pastor and his family for over a year, so much they wanted to leave their home. No wonder he found Luther’s stay at Torgau a welcome opportunity to seek advice, or perhaps at the very least, an opportunity to have an understanding ear.

What can we make of the pastor’s account? What, exactly, was he experiencing? Was he in a sort of convenient denial, purposefully attributing an argument or his children’s unruly behavior to an “invisible” person? Was he just “seeing things?” Perhaps the the work of bringing his church members from the laxity of early-modern German Catholicism to Lutheranism was

¹ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *Luther’s Works: American Edition 54* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 279-80.

² Tappert, *Luther’s Works: AE 54*, 280.

too difficult a task, and his nerves got the better of him. Maybe was he looking to test Martin Luther with an extraordinary story, seeing Luther's time in Torgau as his one chance to jest one of the most famous theologians and writers of his time. On the other hand, if we take the man's earnestness into account, along with the witness of his family, perhaps these things in the pastor's house were really happening in a physically unexplainable way: pots *were* moving through the air on their own, utensils *were* rattling and smashing, seemingly moved by an unseen force. Laughter and voices *did* ring out through the house from time to time, without a person to blame.

Though our human reason will indeed hunt for natural, physical answers behind this pastor's story, the truth is many modern readers would consider the last option above: an unseen force was moving objects in the house and making noises and sounds. In fact, the modern reader has a label for this kind of problem: "Paranormal activity." A 2005 Gallup Poll found that three in four Americans believe in any one aspect of paranormal activity, with 37% of Americans believing in the possibility of haunted houses.³ Some popular opinions might connect the pastor's problems to "ghosts," commonly understood as the spirits of people who died and wish to reach out and reveal their presence to those of us in the physical world. Research supports this perspective. A 2009 Pew Research Center poll found that 18% of Americans believe in ghosts.⁴

³ David W. Moore, "Three in Four Americans Believe in Paranormal," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/16915/three-four-americans-believe-paranormal.aspx>, accessed December 13, 2018; Some examples of this paranormal activity include: telekinesis, telepathy, haunted houses, and ghosts.

⁴ Michael Lipka, "18% of Americans Say They've Seen a Ghost," <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/30/18-of-americans-say-theyve-seen-a-ghost/>, accessed December 13, 2018.

In fact, Americans' perspectives about these supernatural accounts are slowly pivoting away from a wholly science-based outlook into the "realm of spirituality."⁵ In recent years, more and more people have even sought to connect with these unexplained forces, "eagerly seeking a relationship with the paranormal" by quantitatively measuring "different kinds of energy" and looking to communicate with ghosts or the unknown things of their understanding of their spiritual realm.⁶ Television shows like *Ghost Hunters* or *Ghost Adventures*, using these techniques, have attracted millions of Americans to their TV screens in the past decade. Even Christians have taken this physical-spiritual pivot as an opportunity to take account of their own experiences. Robert Bennett points out that "the Church has begun to talk about these things again, and many pastors are surprised by what their church members are confessing to them. Stories of spirits, night terrors, and ghosts come pouring out of people's lips when they think it is safe to speak of such things."⁷ The belief, interest, and topic of the supernatural--specifically poltergeist activity--is readily apparent among our current generation.

But return again to Martin Luther's table at Torgau in 1538. An "unseen, paranormal force" at work in the pastor's house is hardly the end of his story, nor is it an accurate perspective of his experience. Perhaps you can discuss unexplainable or paranormal activity with a polite nod of your head and a concession to modern statistics. On the other hand, maybe you have followed the pastor wholeheartedly into this discussion of paranormal activity, believing

⁵ Robert H. Bennett, *Afraid: Demon Possession and Spiritual Warfare in America* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 11.

⁶ E. Allen Sorum, *2000 Demons--No Match for My Savior: Jesus' Infinite Power Over Evil* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2016), 4.

⁷ Bennett, *Afraid*, 11.

every word of his account. Perhaps you see that if people have belief in or experiences with paranormal activity now, then of course people would have had the same beliefs or problems hundreds of years ago.

But the pastor presses the details of his story, and this is where it departs from the “modern paranormal” perspective outlined above. In the pastor’s eyes, there was nothing unexplainable about the events in his home. Yes, the pastor unequivocally attributed all of the activity--the pots, the pans, the utensils, the laughter--to a spiritual cause, but he went beyond the buzzwords of “unseen forces,” “ghosts,” or “paranormal activity.” He attributed it all to the devil (Satan). He said that “Satan disturbed his peace,” and that “Satan annoyed him by laughing outloud [sic].”⁸ Martin Luther agreed, and to a modern reader’s perspective, a seemingly abstract discussion about unexplainable, paranormal activity now becomes a frank discussion about the realities of the spiritual realm around us and how these realities affect our physical experiences here on earth.

Of course, I have only addressed one perspective so far: a somewhat-skeptical, rationalistic modern perspective that considers the possibility of the paranormal or supernatural. Yet there are millions of people who have deep-seated spiritual assumptions when they are confronted with this topic of paranormal activity. When they think of the paranormal, they don’t think of the word or concept of a “ghost.” When they hear about strange things like the activity in the pastor’s house, they don’t feel a need to find answers from some television show. On the contrary, they are afraid. When confronted with a paranormal situation, there is a gravitas--a

⁸ Tappert, *Luther’s Works: AE 54*, 280.

theological weight, an understanding that a more sinister power is at work. Those assumptions underpin their worldviews and decisions.

That perspective is important for Christians to consider. What do we do with the Christian brother or sister from another culture more sensitive to these issues who is concerned about an evil Satanic influence in someone or some place, just like the pastor at Torgau? How can we respond to their concerns? These questions don't end when we step into our own WELS setting, either. What do we do when a relative or friend complains again about an unexplainable phenomena, or when grandma and grandpa again share a "real ghost story" from their past? Do we smile and nod? Do we even believe them at all? We must also consider those who believe they are being afflicted by Satanic, demonic activity but remain silent--unsure of what they are experiencing or too afraid to bring the problem to their pastor or Christian friend. Some Christians are fearful, convinced they are suffering from mental illness.⁹ We must ask ourselves: "Can we address their experiences and concerns in a spiritual way?" Is a spiritual, scriptural explanation for paranormal activity within a household a proper approach at all? Or does Satan's real, physical work in this world begin in Genesis Chapter Three with humanity's fall into sin and end after Jesus' death and resurrection? Though these questions are real and apply to many Lutherans, do we ever find ourselves sanitizing the role of Satan and his demons? Do we forget about the power and potential for the evil Scripture ascribes to them, confining them to a singular role of "whispering in our ears" during times of temptation?

⁹ Siegbert Becker, "The Unloosing of Satan: An Essay On The Occult," (Delivered at the Winnebago Teachers' Conference at St. Matthew Ev. Luth. School in Appleton, Wisconsin on February 13, 1981), <http://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/356/BeckerUnloosing.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, accessed September 3, 2018.

The truth is there are Christians with stories about physical demonic activity happening in their homes. Christians, even Lutherans, do see things and hear things they cannot explain; their houses are invaded by forces they cannot see. Of course, they don't want to talk about it with their neighbors and friends; they don't want to be objects of ridicule. At best, they think they are suffering from an overactive imagination; at worst, a mental illness of some kind. So the issue is: How can we balance Christian empathy and a proper understanding of scriptural truths about the spiritual realm while making fair and reasonable conclusions based on God's Word, people's claims, and our own observation? The aim of this essay is to underscore the potentiality of demonic activity in the home, what some may call "poltergeist activity," while emphasizing the continued and regular use of the means of grace (Scripture, the Lord's Supper, and Baptism) as a source of relief for those experiencing demonic activity within their homes.

PROVING THE EXISTENCE OF DEMONS

We cannot prove by our own observational experience that demons are real, yet belief in demons is necessary for a proper understanding and approach to the wider issue of demonic activity in our world. Maybe you are reading this essay right now with your own doubts or questions about God, Satan, evil, and demons. Although this essay cannot "argue you" into believing, there are reasons to consider the reality of demonic power actively operating in our world. Christian apologists and authors Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman Jr. give several reasons as to why believing in spiritual beings is rational.

They first point out that spiritual beings (angels and demons) are not “products of uncritical minds,” as some skeptics claim.¹⁰ Imagine your great-aunt Barbara tells you she saw an angel thirty years ago, or an old high school friend swears his house has “funny things” going on, what he would call ghost activity. He, knowing something about the Bible, has even gone so far as to claim that these problems are demonic in origin. What do you believe? According to Boa and Bowman, skeptics would say Great-Aunt Barbara and your friend are “(1) deluded by some hallucination, (2) duped by someone playing a trick, or (3) [Aunt Barbara and your friend are] deceiving you.”¹¹ Yet Boa and Bowman assert it is not reasonable to write off every unexplainable story in one of these ways. In fact, there are those who have critical, academic-oriented minds who do not deny the existence of angels. Boa and Bowman reference Mortimer J. Adler, the Chairman of the Board of Editors of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, as an example of an academic mind who accepted the possibility of spiritual beings. The existence of angels and demons is not something to disregard all together even though we may not completely understand every component. A complete rejection of the existence of spiritual beings based upon it seeming “un-academic” or “irrational” is not valid.

Boa and Bowman also argue that it is not irrational to believe in a mind without a physical body. The authors concede that human beings cannot understand how a mind works without a body, yet they offer this point to consider: “Our experience as minds is limited to the bodily world, making it difficult if not impossible to understand how a mind can function apart

¹⁰ Kenneth D. Boa and Robert Bowman Jr., *Sense and Nonsense About Angels and Demons* (Grand Rapids: MI, 2007), 19-20.

¹¹ Boa and Bowman, *Angels and Demons*, 19-20.

from that world. But that doesn't make the concept of a bodiless mind irrational. It is not irrational to admit the existence of things we can't fully understand."¹²

Boa and Bowman expand their apologetic argument to the existence of evil, and thus the existence of the devil and demons. They do this by first addressing what many may understand as the "devil-of-the-gaps" argument.¹³ According to this argument, people attribute things they do not understand (e.g. certain symptoms of mental illness) to the power of the devil or demons.

¹⁴ The "devil-of-the-gaps" argument claims the attribution of seemingly unknown problems to demons is superstitious. In other words, people of past ages didn't have the luxury of certain scientific principles as a basis of explanation, so they blamed demonic power for many problems. In response to the "devil-of-the-gaps" argument, Boa and Bowman state 1) "the fact that people have attributed too much to direct supernatural intervention does not disprove the supernatural: it just proves that the supernatural is less 'intrusive' than people thought," 2) scientists have been uncovering "evidence...for which a supernatural Creator is the best explanation," and 3) that the best evidence for the supernatural is that there is "purpose and meaning" in the world.¹⁵

Moreover, while scientifically-scrutinized cases of demonic possession can also count as evidence for the devil or evil, the overarching fact that humanity has a profound capability to carry out "perverse" evil is perhaps the most glaring evidence for the existence of evil power in

¹² Boa and Bowman, *Angels and Demons*, 21.

¹³ Boa and Bowman, *Angels and Demons*, 106; Boa and Bowman have taken the "God-of-the-gaps" argument against God and have applied it to the devil.

¹⁴ Boa and Bowman, *Angels and Demons*, 106; Supporters of this argument would probably say that all past cases of demonic possession were cases of mental illness, limiting the power of demonic forces in the world or denying the existence of demons altogether.

¹⁵ Boa and Bowman, *Angels and Demons*, 106.

the world.¹⁶ “There is a nagging sense that forces beyond what we can see are manipulating us, and sometimes human evil is simply too horrible to understand.”¹⁷

I have outlined several reasons as to why one could consider the real possibility of the supernatural, spiritual beings, the devil, and his demons on a rational basis. While the abject disbelief of anything supernatural is a view that pervades the minds of the “rational” Western world, addressing this skepticism may be the first step in developing any sensitivity to demonic influence in our world at all. In fact, considering the possibility of the supernatural or spiritual beings may provide a first step towards the understanding and relief of demon oppression itself.

A BIBLICAL DESCRIPTION OF DEMONS

Apologetic arguments can be helpful in establishing plausible principles, but the answers and information about angels and demons are matters of God-given faith. Siegbert Becker explains:

Yet the one option that is not open to a Bible-believing Christian is the conviction that all occult phenomena must be cases of fraud and deception. At the very least he will have to grant that there have been real cases of devil possession, at least in the days of Jesus' visible sojourn here on earth. A Christian can not, therefore, accept the absolute impossibility of occult events in principle as is done by the materialistic philosophy which has dominated our modern world for so long.¹⁸

God's Word speaks of demons, their power, and Jesus' power over them. We cannot throw out any scriptural evidence for the existence of demons while affirming the truth of the Bible elsewhere. In the Bible we find what God tells us about evil, Satan, and demons. The following

¹⁶ Boa and Bowman, *Angels and Demons*, 107.

¹⁷ Boa and Bowman, *Angels and Demons*, 107.

¹⁸ Siegbert Becker, *Wizards That Peep: A Journey Into the Occult* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010), x.

overview of demons--their creation, nature, rebellion, plurality, organization, and purposes--will answer questions for those who believe they are experiencing demonic activity in their home.

The Origin of Demons

The Bible tells us God is the creator of everything, “visible and invisible.”¹⁹ This includes all spiritual beings, angels as well as demons, who were both created as good spiritual beings.²⁰ (Because of their common origins, we will apply some attributes of the good angels to demons as well.) We do not know exactly when spiritual beings were created, but we can be sure that they were created within the six days of creation, as Exodus 20:11 says: “the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them” during those six days. While there are various Scriptural arguments regarding different times of creation for angels, we can safely assume the angels were created sometime during the six days of creation because, on the last day of his creation, God announced all things as “very good”--perfect.²¹ Perfection includes completeness. Nothing was missing from God’s creation, including the angels.

¹⁹ Col 1:6; Heb 3:4

²⁰ Ps 148:5

²¹ The time of the angels’ creation still remains a legitimate open question for biblical scholars. Some use Job 38:17 to argue for their creation on Day One, when light was created; some others suggest Day Four because the sun, moon, and stars were created on that day, seeing a close relationship between angels and the sun, moon, and stars (cf. Ps 148:1-3).

The Nature of Demons

As you observe God's creation, you see the qualitative nature of God's creation. A rock is hard. Most tree bark is rough. Mountains are high. These are simple examples, but what would we be able to say about God's created spiritual beings, angels and demons?

First, we learn from Scripture how angels and demons are personal beings. Angels are "conscious of who they are"²² and "they have personalities that experience emotions like joy and pleasure."²³ The accounts of angels fulfilling God's work in the world also show their personal nature. For example, the angel Gabriel announced to the virgin Mary that she would give birth to the Savior of the world. Two individual angels worked in tandem while they hurriedly escorted Lot's family from the wicked city of Sodom, to escape its destruction. Angels are clearly shown doing personal actions. In addition, the personal nature of angels is also exemplified in their individual names, i.e. Gabriel (a messenger angel in the book of Luke) and Michael, who is the leader of God's heavenly host of angels (referenced five times in Scripture; most often referenced as the "great prince" or "archangel"). This personal nature applies also to demons. Scripture speaks of their knowledge of certain concepts and particular facts.²⁴ They even show individual characteristics or preferences.²⁵ In one of his exorcisms, Jesus desired to hear the

²² Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 150; Luke 1:19

²³ Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine*, 150; A closer look at the qualities of angels gives us understanding of the spiritual qualities of demons, too; Lk 15:10; 1 Pe 1:12.

²⁴ James 2:19

²⁵ For example, the mute demon from Lk 11:14 (a characteristic), or in Mk 9:22 where that particular demon often threw a possessed boy into fire and water (a tendency or preference).

name of a demon, another feature attesting to their personal nature.²⁶ Scripture also speaks of demons on an individual level.²⁷ Clearly angels and demons are personal, individual beings.

The spiritual nature of angels and demons contribute to several other qualities. For instance, they do not take up space in a physical environment. The technical term for this is *illocal*, something that “is not subject to the limits of time and space in the same way that we are.”²⁸ On the contrary, humans take up place and space. As you sit in your chair reading this essay, you know that your body takes up space in your chair. The example of your hand filling up space in a glove also illustrates locality. Though they are illocal, Daniel 10:13-14 describes spiritual beings travelling from place to place, being confined to a single location at any one time.²⁹ David Hollaz comments:

The agility and speed of the angels is wonderful, so that without local movement ... they can change their whereabouts most quickly ... And although the movement of the angels is very rapid ... it is not instantaneous, because the space in which they move is extended and continuous, which no creature can cross in an instant.³⁰

Though Hollaz is applying logical deductions to Daniel 10:13-14, we must remember that no where does Scripture clearly lay out how exactly angels move around. One must also take into account the ability of angels--by their power or God’s power--to appear to people

²⁶ Mk 5:9

²⁷ Cf. Mt 9:33; 11:18; 17:18; Mk 7:26; Lk 4:33; 11:14

²⁸ Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine*, 150.

²⁹ This is unlike God; cf. Ps 139:9; Regarding spiritual beings’ confinement to a single location, Deutschlander does point out that angels are always “beholding the face of God in heaven,” even as they fulfill their duties to God (Mt 18:10). We cannot answer every question but must leave these fine details to the mind of God.

³⁰ David Hollaz, *Examens* (Cited from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Dogmatics Notes Vol. 1, B, 331); Satan, the evil angelic adversary, also mentions his “roaming throughout the earth” (Job 2:2).

instantaneously and in different places. Scripture does not speak about all these fine points in detail. God does not provide us with answers for every question.

How Did Demons Become Evil?

Until this point we have been considering both angels and demons. God created them both; they both have personal and spiritual natures, but there's a major difference between the two. Angels are confirmed in their holiness and work as servants of God,³¹ whereas demons are evil, continually work against God, and are destined for everlasting punishment.³² The Bible tells us that demons along with Satan rebelled against their Creator-God, and God cast them out of heaven.³³ As for the time of this rebellion, we can pinpoint that it was some time after the Creation but before humankind's fall into sin. We remember how Satan, taking the form of a serpent, was the one who tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, bringing about the Fall of humankind into sin.³⁴ Jesus, as the eternal Son of God, witnessed this rebellion. He even said: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."³⁵ Moreover, the evil angels are "confirmed" or

³¹ 1 Ti 5:21; Heb 2:16; 1:14

³² Mt 8:29; 25:41

³³ Cf. Jude 6; 2 Pe 2:4; Mt 25:41; Rev 12:7-9; The events in Revelation chapter twelve can be interpreted as historical fact. The events describe the situation leading to the present age of Satan roaming freely throughout the earth. Rev 12:12 is a strong indicator that the dragon's being hurled down (Satan being cast out) was the beginning of his evil work on earth, beginning with the temptation of Adam and Eve. In short, Revelation chapter twelve is the story of the rebellion of the evil angels. Cf. Siegbert Becker, *Revelation: Distant Triumph Song*.

³⁴ Rev 3:1; Jn 8:44; Rev 12:9

³⁵ Lk 10:18; Many theologians have considered various possibilities for the original sin Satan committed against God. Some say it was pride over and against the Creator.

“stuck” in their unbelief until their judgment and torture.³⁶ It is a future without hope of salvation, a deserved fate because of their rebellion against God.

The Number and Organization of Demons

The fallen angels like their good angel counterparts are many in number. The Apostle Paul speaks of the Christian’s battle against the plurality of evil, spiritual forces.³⁷ Likewise, when Scripture speaks of demons, it does so in the plural.³⁸

This plurality of demons also makes up an organized kingdom, with Satan as its leader.³⁹ In defending his exorcistic actions against the accusations of the Pharisees, Jesus pointed out the reality of Satan’s kingdom, including the demons he had cast out of people.⁴⁰ Yet God does not give us much specific information about the organizational nature of this kingdom of demons. Perhaps the best scriptural evidence for determining the qualities of Satan’s kingdom is Ephesians 6:12, where the Apostle Paul speaks of Christians’ struggle against spiritual forces of

³⁶ Jude 6; 2 Pe 2:4; Mt. 8:29

³⁷ Eph 6:12

³⁸ Jude 6; 2 Pe 2:4; Mk 5:9, 15; Lk 8:30; The demon within the man told Jesus its name was “Legion,” implying a legion of demons taking up residence within the man. The word “legion” was a term denoting a group of Roman 5,000 soldiers. Whether there were exactly 5,000 demons in this man nor not, we cannot say; but there were many possessing him.

³⁹ There is also biblical evidence for organization among the good angels. For example, Michael, the archangel, is described as one of the “chief princes” of God’s good angels. This may be an indicator that there are other angels beneath his influence. He is also mentioned as an “archangel” (1 Th 4:16; Jude 9). Revelation 12:7 also shows how this chief angel Michael has some sort of possessive influence over other angels, telling us how Michael and “his angels” fought against Satan during the willful rebellion of the evil angels. There are other names for angels (seraphim, cherubim), but they do not help us identify any sort of order.

⁴⁰ Mt 12:26; David Hollaz bases his argument for the organization of good angels upon the scriptural evidence that the evil angels make up an organized kingdom. Cf. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Dogmatics Notes Vol. 1, B.

evil (demons, the devil). He uses the terms “rulers,” “authorities,” and “powers.” However, none of these words are indicative of a high level of organization.⁴¹ And while there are many demons in some sort of organized kingdom, there is only one *devil*, that is, Satan. The biblical evidence of the devil as the head of this kingdom is clear. Satan is the “prince of this world,”⁴² the “god of this age,”⁴³ the “ruler of the kingdom of the air.”⁴⁴ The Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians speaks of the devil “and *his* angels.”

The Purpose of Demons

Because demons are confirmed in their unbelief, they are continually working against the will of God. They work tirelessly to tempt and harass Christians, as well as keeping unbelievers within the kingdom of Satan.⁴⁵ Satan may often make it his purpose to get Christians to forget about him altogether. Martin Luther explains in his Large Catechism:

[The devil] causes accidents and injury to our bodies. He crushes some and drives others to insanity; some he drowns in water, and many he hounds to suicide or other dreadful catastrophes. Therefore, there is nothing for us to do on earth but to pray without ceasing against this archenemy. For if God did not support us, we would not be safe from him for a single hour.⁴⁶

⁴¹We cannot say it is “highly-organized” or “loosely organized.” It is only organized. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis created a fictional, organized demonic world that included the “young” demon Wormwood and his elder (and wiser) demon-uncle Screwtape. This book can perhaps be useful for Christians in opening their eyes to the reality of unseen spiritual forces acting in our world, but it still is fiction.

⁴² John 12:31; 16:11

⁴³ 2 Co 4:4

⁴⁴ Eph 2:2

⁴⁵ Eph 2:2,3; 1 Pe 5:8

⁴⁶ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 455.

Luther wrote about the physical implications of the devil's work, and Allen Sorum adds:

[Demons] want to make us suffer, to give us pain, to fill us with fear, to enslave us, to make us filthy in every way they can. But what is the demons' main goal, their keenest desire? However wide their trail of destruction, however bitter the suffering they cause, and however deep the wounds, demons are not and cannot be satisfied until they take us away from our God.⁴⁷

We must also keep in mind the spiritual goals of the devil. He wants to spiritually devour Christians, to tear them away from their saving God.⁴⁸ He does this by spreading lies and by contorting and changing the words of Scripture, something about which the Apostle Paul strongly warned his protege Timothy.⁴⁹ "A good perspective on the devil and demons is to recognize the terrible lies they place upon our hearts."⁵⁰ These are the primary ways the devil works in this world: maintaining his spiritual rule over those who are not of the kingdom of God, and doing his best to contort the teaching of Jesus Christ as Savior.⁵¹ The Apostle Paul sent a warning to all Christians about the devil's schemes, one of which is the devil's desire to entangle and overcome people with sin. Most importantly, the devil aims to distort people's understanding of the forgiveness God has given to all through Jesus.⁵² The primary purpose of demons is not to scare Christians by "haunting" their houses. The primary purpose of the devil and his demons is to lead a Christian away from God.

⁴⁷ Sorum, *2000 Demons*, 103-04.

⁴⁸ 1 Pe 5:8

⁴⁹ 1 Ti 4:1-3

⁵⁰ Sorum, *2000 Demons*, 127.

⁵¹ Eph 2:2

⁵² 2 Co 2:11

HOW MIGHT WE EXPLAIN PERCEIVED DEMONIC ACTIVITY?⁵³

Annie grew up within a Christian denomination, but had not attended services for years.⁵⁴ Dealing with financial problems and out of a job, she was living life at high stress levels. Her apartment was not welcoming anymore, either. In fact, her apartment made her anxious. Home alone during the night, she would hear footsteps in her hallway. Her friends' blankets would occasionally be plucked and pulled away from their bodies when they would sleep on her living room sofa. She would also, on occasion, see shadows blocking her line of sight into the hallway. After some time and with much anxiety, Annie admitted to herself this was a "ghost" haunting her apartment. She spoke to a pastor about the issue. She wanted advice. Breaking into tears, she told the pastor that she wanted whatever was in her apartment to leave.

Marcus and Jayme, both Christians, had been married for almost two years when Jayme began to notice strange things happening in their apartment: Kitchen items would randomly be rearranged, office chairs moved, light switches flipped on and off by themselves. Jayme even found her stuffed bear sitting in the middle of her bedroom with her earrings in the bear's ears. Jayme herself has experienced strange things like this for years, and she even joked that a spirit was following her from her single life into her married life. Yet Marcus also noticed the strange activity. Over time, the activity became more pronounced. A strong odor of cigarette smoke wafted from the office closet--an odor that had not been there before. The odor would come and go, though there were no air vents in the closet connecting to another apartment. On one occasion, Marcus found his shaving brush and its stand placed upside-down on the bathroom countertop. He knew neither he nor Jayme had moved it. He calmly put everything back in its place and went back into his bedroom. Minutes later, however, he heard a noise in the bathroom and returned only to find his shaving brush and its stand sitting in the exact same position and place as before: perfectly standing on end, upside-down on the bathroom counter.

Annie's, Jayme's, and Marcus' experiences differ regarding time and place, but there is a common denominator: in each case someone believed an unseen force was influencing the physical environment in their home. Their cases are merely a few examples of the troubles people bring to their pastors or spiritual leaders. Some of those reporting strange activity are embarrassed; some are annoyed; others are concerned for their family's safety.

⁵³ The terms *demonic activity* and *poltergeist activity* will be used synonymously in the remainder of this essay.

⁵⁴ All names in this essay have been changed to maintain anonymity.

But we must also approach people's stories with caution. Digital photography, image editing software, and fictional, thrill-seeking narratives on television and the internet can be very manipulative tools, able to mold imaginations or inspire preset assumptions. Because of this "we surely ought to be on our guard against naive credulity" now more than ever.⁵⁵

However, the question still stands: can the devil or his demons really bother Christians in their physical environments, in their homes? Scripture states that demons are real and they are actively working against us. But can they influence our physical world? And if they can, to what extent can they do so?

Is Perceived Demonic Activity Actually Evidence of Ghosts?

One of the most common explanations for demonic activity is the concept of a "ghost." Many define "ghosts" as being the souls or spirits of people who have died. They are commonly believed to inhabit a place that is familiar to them, or the place where they died. Those who hold to this perspective find it beneficial to recognize ghosts' existence and to communicate with them, providing relief for the spirit and the person living in the affected house.⁵⁶

Yet Scripture tells us that ghosts, the disembodied souls of dead people, are not real. There is no in-between existence of people's souls after physical death and before the destinations of heaven or hell. All people are "destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."⁵⁷ The book of Ecclesiastes expands this thought: Upon the death of a human, "the

⁵⁵ Becker, *Wizards That Peep*, 94.

⁵⁶ This was the opinion of a medium who had been in contact with one of the interviewees. A medium is a person who claims to be in contact with spirits of the dead. God strictly forbids speaking to the dead in Deuteronomy 18.

⁵⁷ Heb 9:27

dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”⁵⁸ Robert Bennett observes that if demons can “impersonate” angels, then why not the dead?⁵⁹ Predating Bennett by several hundred years, pastor and theologian Friedrich Balduin also used this line of reasoning. In writing to seventeenth-century Lutherans worried about “specters” and “ghosts,” Balduin asserted: “Whatever examples are brought forth for the appearance of human spirits, they are mere mockeries from Satan.”⁶⁰ Scripture is clear on this point: if unexplainable activity is happening in a home, the force behind them cannot be the souls of dead people.

Is Perceived Demonic Activity Only a Psychological Problem?

If ghosts are not the cause of poltergeist activity, what about other causes from the natural world? Though it may be easy to quickly label unexplainable activity as demonic, one must seriously consider medical or psychological causes as well. The confluence of medicine, psychology, and spiritual things are not clearly defined, however. In some cases, demonic activity may be intertwined with or only partly explained by the medical or psychological realms.

Pastor Johnson serves a Lutheran congregation in a small, Midwestern town. One of his congregation members who worked at an assisted living facility for people with psychiatric disorders came to him with a problem. Over the course of time, she had been experiencing odd behavior from one of the patients. The patient sometimes spoke in a

⁵⁸ Ecclesiastes 12:7

⁵⁹ Bennett, *Afraid*, 197; Bennett cites 2 Co 11:14, which says: “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.”

⁶⁰ Friedrich Balduin, “Concerning Cases of Casuistry about Specters,” translated by Adam Bode, 8, <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/185/Balduin%20Casuistry%20Ghosts.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, accessed June 23, 2018.

gravelly voice and displayed erratic behavioral swings. At times, three or four people would be needed to keep her in place. She also suffered from bodily contortions and threw her body around. These problems worsened to such an extent that Pastor Johnson's member did not want to work there anymore, and she was also concerned for the patient's health and safety. Though all of the employees at the facility were experienced with symptoms of psychiatric disorders and the mentally-ill, they all agreed this situation could not be entirely explained by mental illness. On more than one occasion, they heard loud knocking and what sounded like furniture scraping across the floor from the patient's second-floor room. Staff members went upstairs to investigate, only to find no one in the room. The staff, according to Pastor Johnson's member, was "freaked out." They thought this problem could be spiritual in nature and beyond their experience. At the request of his congregation member and the other employees, Pastor Johnson visited the patient's room at the facility. It was messy--filled with clothes and garbage. The patient had some self-help books and a handful of notebooks filled with scribbles, some of which were the same words written over and over again. Pastor Johnson told them the behavior they were describing was not normal, but he could not confirm demonic activity or demonic possession of the patient. Less than a week after Pastor Johnson's visit, the patient was transferred away from the group home. The activity in the house ended after her departure.⁶¹

Pastor Johnson explains: "[Demonic activity] is not fake. It is real. If anyone suspects it, you [must] take it seriously and check into it."⁶² But he also exercises caution. He understands it is not his role to play the part of psychologist. He believes that if it seems like physical demonic influence is a possibility, it is important to evaluate the person in question. Schizophrenia and other mental disorders play a role in false (and legitimate) cases of demonic activity or demon possession. Was the patient truly experiencing demonic possession, or was her room really affected by demonic activity? We do not know. From a pastoral perspective, Pastor Johnson takes caution in not drawing conclusions too quickly, and he does not want to give anyone the impression they are experiencing demonic activity or even demon possession. That would be an

⁶¹ Interview conducted with Pastor Johnson by Michael Hollmann on October 9, 2018.

⁶² Johnson interview, October 9, 2018.

undue burden for anyone's mind. Fully aware of the possibility of demonic activity and demonic possession, he emphasizes the need to look for psychological help first.

Likewise, some professional opinions in the medical and psychological communities have embraced the subtle blurring of medical, psychological and spiritual lines. Gary Collins concluded the boundaries between observable and natural behaviors and the consideration of other "transcendent phenomena" are being broken in the psychological realm, and that Christian counselors must have a proper balance of God's Word as well as "empirical methodology."⁶³ Likewise, in a 2017 article about demonic possession and exorcism, CNN cited Dr. Mark Albanese, who "studied medicine at Cornell and has been practicing psychiatry for decades. In a letter to the *New Oxford Review*, a Catholic magazine, he defended belief in possession ... He also says there is a growing belief among health professionals that a patient's spiritual dimension should be accounted for in treatment, whether their provider agrees with those beliefs or not."⁶⁴ In fact, there are instances of psychiatric referrals being made to pastoral, spiritual counselors.⁶⁵ Medically and psychologically trained people are seen as assets in managing cases of demon possession or demonic activity.⁶⁶ Even Martin Luther in his sixteenth-century context understood that medical, physical, and spiritual considerations had to be made, realizing some situations had "spiritual causes while others had physical causes, and sometimes both may be encountered

⁶³ Gary Collins, "Psychological Observations on Demonism," in *Demon Possession: A Medical, Historical, Anthropological and Theological Symposium*, J. Warwick Montgomery, ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1976), 238.

⁶⁴ John Blake, "When Exorcists Need Help, They Call Him," Accessed 18 November 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/04/health/exorcism-doctor/index.html>.

⁶⁵ Bennett, *Afraid*, 153.

⁶⁶ Collins, "Psychological Observations on Demonism," 249.

simultaneously.”⁶⁷ Bennett adds: “Science and natural causes should not be our answer for every affliction. Physicians are gifts of God and workers of His healing, but many times there are spiritual causes behind physical problems. We would do well to remember this scriptural teaching when dealing with the sick and afflicted.”⁶⁸ In weighing the possibility of physical demonic activity, it is easy to come away with a “messy” impression of the confluence of the physical and spiritual worlds. This is not surprising, nor worrisome: “There is so much we don’t know about the spirit world. Scripture gives us glimpses here and there but that is it.”⁶⁹

There is a temptation to completely discount the spiritual and embrace a medical cause in cases of perceived demonic activity, but we cannot completely deny spiritual cause in these kinds of situations. “Leaving such cases in the hands of medicine alone” is not the best solution.

⁷⁰ Allen Sorum also notes the danger involved in discounting spiritual causes of physical affliction, whether in the home or in an individual:

To insist that the devil and his demons are never involved in the inner struggles of God’s people--all people--is not the best perspective. Why? If we deny that our various pains and heartaches and emotional struggles come from demons, we are thereby denying ourselves for tremendous opportunities for comfort and healing. If these things are coming from Satan, let us not hesitate to ask our powerful Lord Jesus to rescue us from Satan.⁷¹

It is important to consider medical and psychological causes when someone is concerned about demonic activity. However, to cut out spiritual causes completely is not wise because “there are

⁶⁷ Bennett, *Afraid*, 130; citing Martin Luther

⁶⁸ Bennett, *Afraid*, 131.

⁶⁹ Email correspondence with Professor John Schuetze (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary), June 24, 2018.

⁷⁰ Bennett, *Afraid*, 129.

⁷¹ Sorum, *2000 Demons*, 103-04.

clear indications in the Bible that the forces of the spirit world may be able to have a far more direct influence on human behavior and concrete physical events than we often suppose possible.”⁷²

Is Perceived Demonic Activity Simply ... Demonic?

In answering this question, I will consider several points: 1) What’s happening in people’s houses when they report possible demonic activity? 2) How much power over a physical environment does Scripture ascribe to Satan and his demons? 3) Do people’s descriptions of demonic activity fall within Satan’s range of power according to Scripture?

In answering the first question above, Siegbert Becker lays out an extensive list of what people commonly experience:

Strange and unexplained events take place as a result of haunting by a poltergeist. Unusual noises are heard for which there is no explanation. They are described as moanings, groanings, scratching, pounding, rapping, and even actual speech. Dishes rattle or even fly around the room...heavy furniture is moved without anyone being near it. Objects mysteriously appear or disappear. The temperature of a room may be mysteriously raised or lowered. Fires, for which there is no apparent cause, may be kindled, and sometimes floods of water appear from nowhere. Sometimes apparitions are seen...strong odors often manifest themselves.⁷³

Annie, Marcus, and Jayme all experienced some of this activity at one time or another. But can we attribute their instances of possible poltergeist activity to demonic power? Becker notes the close connection between reported poltergeist activity and legitimate cases of demon possession: “Many of these [poltergeist] phenomena are associated with spiritism and devil possession.” In doing so, he references Malachi Martin’s observations in the book *Hostage to the Devil*. Martin,

⁷² Becker, *Wizards That Peep*, x.

⁷³ Becker, *Wizards That Peep*, 94-95.

a notable Jesuit Catholic priest, described the activity within the rooms of demon-possessed people during an exorcism: “Objects fly about the room; wallpaper peels off the walls; furniture cracks; crockery breaks; there are strange rumblings, hisses, and other noises with no apparent source. Often the temperature in the room where the possessed happens to be will drop dramatically. Even more often an acrid and distinctive stench accompanies the person.” Claims of poltergeist activity do compare with what is seen as legitimate demonic activity. Based on observation alone, it is plausible that there are demonic elements behind reported poltergeist activity.

But what truly gives us confidence in attributing reported poltergeist activity to demonic power is Scripture. It gives ample evidence of demonic power controlling a physical environment, most notably in the account of Job. Job was a rich, pious man, but Satan sought to prove how Job’s faithfulness to God was a result of his physical blessings. Satan said: “But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.” In response to Satan’s taunt, God allowed him to control Job’s physical environment. Satan used his power to rain down fire from the sky, to bring about damaging gale-force winds, and to instill violence in people’s minds and hearts.⁷⁴ Not only this, but Satan also used his power to change and afflict Job’s physical body.⁷⁵

Other parts of Scripture also speak of Satan’s power over a physical environment. They use their powers to possess individuals, causing harm, distress, and physical deterioration.⁷⁶ They

⁷⁴ Job 1:13, 1:16, 1:18

⁷⁵ Job 2:7,8

⁷⁶ Cf. Mark chapter 5 and Mk 9:17-29

also can manipulate and ruin people's bodies.⁷⁷ These are all clear examples of demonic influence within a physical environment. According to our observation and Scripture, demons are capable of manipulating people in a physical way, as well as manipulating their physical environments.

A Balanced Perspective on Demonic Activity in the World

Though Scripture speaks to the power of demons in our physical world, some Christians may find it difficult to accept that power as a reality.⁷⁸ Allen Sorum acknowledges some Christians' hesitancy of believing in physical manifestations of demonic power. He asks questions for his readers' reflection: "What's my perspective on demons or the spirit world? How real or how malicious or how dangerous or how harmless do I actually think demons are, from one day to the next?"⁷⁹

These questions address the outright denial of physical demonic activity, providing the opportunity to acknowledge demonic activity and those who struggle against it. They also open an honest self-dialogue for Christian skeptics who might ignore the possibility of demonic activity within a home. It is unwise and, even dangerous, to quickly explain any troubling situation as demonically influenced,⁸⁰ but it is beneficial to avoid this first extreme: a complete denial of any demonic influence at all.

⁷⁷ Lk 13:10-17

⁷⁸ Sorum, *2000 Demons*, 12; He cites a recent Barna Poll reporting "only 25 percent of those who identify themselves as Christians are of the opinion that Satan is real and living being intent on hurting people."

⁷⁹ Sorum, *2000 Demons*, 12.

⁸⁰ Interview with Pastor Johnson by Michael D. Hollmann, October 9, 2018.

However, Christians may take the possibility of demonic activity to the opposite extreme. In the Western world, this was the dominating perspective of the early-modern period before the rise of Rationalism. Even early-modern doctors, who had developed a skeptical scientific eye, “all agreed that diabolical possession was possible and that the devil could attack humankind directly and physically.”⁸¹ But many people living in the world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were apt to take a perspective even more extreme, ascribing demonic power to every sort of problem.⁸² This perspective attributed unfortunate circumstances in daily life to demonic power. Merrill Unger, one of the preeminent scholars of demonology during the twentieth century, was particularly critical of this extremist perspective, calling it “the problem of the prevalence of superstition.”⁸³ People full of “fear and superstition” perceived any changes in their physical environments as actions from demons.⁸⁴ Unger did not believe that demons played a part in everyday occurrences, and he criticized Martin Luther for believing demons caused “fires, accidents, and other mishaps.”⁸⁵ Unger believed that the way Luther and others in his cultural context talked about demons was influenced by “rampant extravagance...a morbid and exaggerated activity to demons in such daily occurrences.”⁸⁶

⁸¹ Benjamin G. Kohl and H. C. Erik Midelfort, eds., *On Witchcraft: An Abridged Translation of Johann Weyer's De praestigiis daemonum*, (Asheville, NC: UNC Asheville Pegasus Press, 1998), xxiv.

⁸² Collins, “Psychological Observations on Demonism,” 242.

⁸³ Merrill F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology: A Study of the Spiritual Forces Behind the Present World Unrest* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1952), 4.

⁸⁴ Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, 3.

⁸⁵ Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, 3.

⁸⁶ Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, 4.

Considering both extremes, how can we develop a balanced perspective of evil demonic power in the world? In his book *3 Questions about Spiritual Warfare*, Clinton Arnold highlights the importance of a “balanced” perspective of evil influence. This is also useful in developing a proper perspective of demonic power. As Christians, and especially as Lutherans, we commonly identify the evil working against Christians as taking three forms: the devil, the world, and the sinful nature of every human (our sinful flesh).⁸⁷ The first faulty perspective Arnold identifies attributes most or all evil to our flesh and the world. In other words, Christians “give mere lip service to the idea that evil spirits may have anything to do with temptation and sin.”⁸⁸ Arnold also criticizes the notion that all evil and problems in the world come from Satan, when Christians “point to the work of evil spirits in practically every aspect of life.” Simply put, to fix any problem one must only “cast out...the unclean spirit.”⁸⁹ According to Arnold, there is a middling perspective of evil, balancing “the inner inclination to think and do evil (the flesh) and the external pressure to conform to ungodly social standards (the world)...and the supernaturally powerful beings who are hostile to God and his people (Satan and his demons).”⁹⁰ Satan, the world, and the humanity’s sinful nature are all equal in importance. Arnold does concede that at any given time “these three influences are not equal in what they are and in how they operate,” but that does not eliminate the necessity to always consider the full picture of evil, as well as the

⁸⁷ Eph 2:1-3 illustrates all of these enemies.

⁸⁸ Clinton E. Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 33.

⁸⁹ Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, 33.

⁹⁰ Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, 34.

effects of sin as we consider cases of demonic activity within a home.⁹¹ Attributing every unexplainable activity or affliction in life as evidence of a demonic spirit is not a tenable perspective.

Reliable anecdotal and observational evidence demonstrate that demons can influence our physical environment. More importantly, Scripture witnesses to these capabilities of demonic power. As we work to maintain a balanced perspective of evil working in the world, we must consider that Scriptural evidence: “The Bible reports that Satan was involved in the physical and mental and spiritual suffering of people in Bible days. Why would we think that Satan is not still trying to afflict Christians in this way today?”⁹²

CAUSES OF DEMONIC ACTIVITY

Terry and Maya are both lifelong WELS members. At the time of their experiences, they had several children and had already planted roots in their small Wisconsin community. Michelle, one of Terry and Maya’s daughters, had become very interested in stories of haunted houses, ghosts, and what she would describe as the “dark arts.” She never wanted to practice any witchcraft, but reading about these strange powers fascinated her. Time passed and her interest grew, along with her reading. During one Christmas season some strange things started to happen. The family began noticing tree ornaments sitting in the middle of the room, even though no one had removed them from the tree. Bells on certain pieces of Christmas decor would ring by themselves. As the months passed into a new year, the activity became more apparent. Michelle would often hear footsteps ascending the staircase in the upstairs hallway while she was in her bedroom at night. Once, Maya and Terry returned to their locked, empty house and found their dining room chairs turned upside down and placed on the table. Maya had also returned home to find her plates and teacups that usually lined a high shelf circling the room stacked on the dining room table. On another occasion, their son saw a vaguely-outlined, transparent figure in his bedroom, which disappeared when his father walked through it. The activity had been going on for about a year by this time, and Terry and Maya were convinced the activity was spiritual, even demonic, in nature. Looking back, Michelle also wondered if

⁹¹ Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, 34; Romans 8:19-23; Creation itself is under the bondage and weight of sin. This world is not in perfect harmony as it once was before humanity’s fall into sin.

⁹² Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, 34.

her reading and heightened interest in the occult had played a part in inviting demons into her family's home.

So far, I have considered the rational possibilities for demonic evil in our world. I have also considered biblical evidence for existence of demons and their ungodly purposes.

Additionally, I have recognized the real potential of demonic power in our physical world. At this point, we can begin to understand how Christians' reports of poltergeist phenomena within their homes warrants serious consideration (assuming medical and psychological considerations have been fully explored). Demonic activity within the home is possible, but why does it happen at all? How does a Christian troubled by demonic activity answer the questions of "Why this?" "Why me?"

One could divide the causes of demonic activity into two categories: 1) self-cause -- that is, an individual invites demonic influence or activity into their life (knowingly or unknowingly), or 2) unknown cause -- that is, an individual cannot determine a clear cause for experiencing demonic activity.

Demonic Activity as Self-Caused

There are a number of ways, or entry points, people may use to bring demonic activity into their lives. Perhaps the most obvious entry point is when someone consciously invites the devil to control their lives to obtain special power. Shamans, witch doctors, witches (those who practice black or white magic), fortune-tellers, spiritists, mediums, and Satanic worshippers may invite demonic powers into their lives to garner or develop some sort of influence in this life, either

knowingly or unknowingly.⁹³ Furthermore, Becker comments on the “literature of the occult” and how it “often speaks of the need to passivity on the part of those who want to be successful in the practice of the various occult arts, whether they be divination, magic, or spiritism.”⁹⁴ God condemns these practices of spiritism, necromancy (contacting the “dead”), and magic (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

On the other hand, there are times when people “unconsciously permit and even invite the devil to make use of their physical and mental faculties.”⁹⁵ Some examples of unconscious invitation would be the use of a Ouija board (an invitation for another power to influence someone’s hands or furniture in the room), divination (an invitation to influence objects), or fortune telling (an invitation to influence the mind). Though many people may see these activities as harmless entertainment, there is an element of trust in another spiritual power separate from God--an entry point, for trust in another power is tantamount to inviting influence into one’s life. An obsessive interest in occult topics may also be an entry point for physical manifestations of demonic activity. Did Michelle’s obsessive reading about spiritism and the dark arts cause her family’s problems? We cannot answer that question conclusively, but God’s commands to keep away from all occult practices are clear.⁹⁶ They are reason enough to detest those things as God himself does, filling our minds with noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable

⁹³ Becker, *Wizards that Peep*, 96; Also note the good sense of caution: “It is impossible to decide with certainty the question of whether we are dealing with evil spiritual powers that have intruded into our physical world or with a clever trickster.” Or, it could easily “be both,” xi.

⁹⁴ Becker, *Wizards that Peep*, 97.

⁹⁵ Becker, *Wizards that Peep*, 96.

⁹⁶ Deuteronomy 18:9-13

things instead.⁹⁷ Whether conscious or unconscious, invitations of demonic power or influence can become entry points for demonic power and poltergeist activity.

Another possible entry point for demonic activity is an unfettered, exaggerated sinful lifestyle. Experienced Lutheran pastors have pointed out the correlation between demonic activity and grossly (excessively) sinful lifestyles.⁹⁸ There is a close connection between Satan's objectives for us (unbelief) and his primary tools (temptation and sin). The Apostle John also notes this connection between Satan's kingdom and sinfulness: "The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning."⁹⁹ Provoking humans to sin is how Satan draws people away from God. And according to pastors who have dealt with demonic activity, it may also be a way he wins influence over an individual.

Demonic Activity With an Unknown Cause

But what about Christians who experience demonic activity in their homes but do not fall into the above categories? As far as anyone knows, they have not personally invited demonic power into their lives. They are not practicing the occult. Though they continually battle their sinful nature throughout their lives, they are not engaging in blatant or exaggerated sins coming from an unrepentant heart. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit is powerfully renewing their hearts, as God promises.¹⁰⁰ Why then did Terry and Maya, and Christians like them, face poltergeist problems?

⁹⁷ Php 4:8

⁹⁸ Interview with anonymous pastor by Michael D. Hollmann, November 18, 2018.

⁹⁹ 1 Jn 3:8

¹⁰⁰ Tit 3:5-6

Though God will keep Christians in his care and protection until he takes them out of this earth and into heaven,¹⁰¹ he does not promise to shield Christians from the evils of this world during their lives. The Christian life in this world is marked by burdens, difficulties, and temptations. Jesus called this the “cross” that every Christian will carry throughout their lives.¹⁰² In fact, God may choose to press this cross upon a certain Christian through the acts of Satan. For instance, Satan and his demons are able to tempt Christians.¹⁰³ They are able to lead Christians into false teachings.¹⁰⁴ They are able to instigate persecution against Christians, and they are certainly able to inflict physical harm on God’s people as well, as in the case of Job and even the Apostle Paul.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, there are no specific promises in Scripture protecting Christians from experiencing demonic activity within their homes.

Yet as God allows Satan and his demons to afflict Christians in this life on earth, he does so for their benefit. The burden of Satan and his demons, along with any cross imposed upon Christians, is just as *beneficial* as it is real.¹⁰⁶ Granted, it is true that a Christian confronted by demonic activity may never know the specific reason why God has imposed that burden. But we have a powerful reminder of God’s promises in the face of things unknown:

Every Christian knows well that his life is in God’s hand, that God has from eternity foreordained the course his life will take. Every Christian lives in the confidence that all

¹⁰¹ A Christian’s salvation is certain. Nothing will take God’s gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ from them; cf. Eph 1:3-6; 2 Th 2:13-15; Ro 8:28-30.

¹⁰² In Mk 8:34, Jesus specifically mentioned self-denial as a form of the Christian’s cross. Yet it comes in various, broader forms: persecution for holding to the Christian faith, division in our relationships, and crosses that God chooses to impose as well.

¹⁰³ 1 Th 3:5

¹⁰⁴ 1 Ti 4:1

¹⁰⁵ Rev 2:10; Job 2:6; 2 Co 12:7

¹⁰⁶ 2 Co 12:8-10

things which will be a factor in his life must work together for his good. But every child of God must also learn the lesson which once caused Job so much grief, and that is that even in his dealings with his own children God is a hidden God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways.¹⁰⁷

DELIVERANCE FROM DEMONIC ACTIVITY

Jesse and Amanda are both lifelong WELS members. Years ago, they moved into a new house. Their family was growing: They now had a seven-week-old baby along with a fourteen-month-old toddler. Shortly after their move into the home, Amanda began hearing peculiar noises during the night. She heard what sounded like muffled voices by her bedroom window. The voices occurred periodically, and Amanda did not think much of it. But as time passed, the voices moved and became louder, as if two men were talking in low, indistinguishable conversation, just down the hallway from one of their children's rooms. Amanda became frustrated and worried about the noises she was hearing. She began to question her own judgment: "Was she hearing real voices? Or were they just 'in her head?' Was she 'crazy?'" She was relieved, however, when Jesse admitted to hearing voices as well. He described them as "soft, unintelligible whispers coming from [one of their children's] rooms." A family relative also admitted hearing the voices from the same room--without prior knowledge of the situation. A few years passed, but these voices and sounds still manifested themselves on a semi-regular basis. Amanda was often "on edge" throughout the day as she watched the children and did her housework while Jesse was at work. Sometimes she would say prayers under her breath, afraid of what she might hear or see as she went from room to room. The problems continued. On one occasion, their three-year-old son reported their family cat told him to "get out" of his bedroom.¹⁰⁸ They didn't think he would fabricate a story that so clearly upset him. They wondered if their son also heard the voices. The situation reached a breaking point when Amanda, home alone with the children, heard a voice yelling at her so loudly it seemed to fill every room of the house. Only when she ran upstairs to check on her children in their bedroom did the voice stop. Amanda and Jesse were convinced demonic forces were troubling them and that the activity was centered in their youngest child's room.

Encountering demonic activity can be a confusing, terrifying ordeal. Amanda was not immune to those emotions. The voices she heard, the doubts about her sanity, and the fear of encountering something more than voices bothered her for months, even years. Just hearing

¹⁰⁷ John Schaller, "The Hidden God," *Our Great Heritage I*, Lyle Lange, ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), 448-49.

¹⁰⁸ According to Jesse and Amanda, most of the unexplainable activity centered in their son's bedroom.

about others' encounters with demonic activity may be enough to instill fear and doubt into a Christian's mind. We are not immune to fear or confusion in the face of these struggles. But how do Christians find deliverance from demonic activity?

What Not to Do When Confronted with Demonic Activity

(Marcus and Jayme, continued from page 20 ...) Believing that there perhaps was some spiritual or unseen force pranking them in their house, Marcus and Jayme brought in a spiritual leader from their Christian denomination to bless the house with prayer and Scripture reading. The activity subsided for a time but did not disappear completely. Looking elsewhere for answers, Jayme contacted a medium over Facebook. The medium told Jayme to communicate with the spirit and affirm its existence in the house. Jayme did so; she even tested the spirit to be sure of its existence. She spread out a single layer of quarters on the office table and asked the spirit to give her a sign of its presence, promptly leaving the room. She returned to the office table about a minute later, finding three piles of quarters, neatly stacked.

It is important to highlight several wrong approaches for dealing with demonic activity, especially with so many different ideas and opinions only keystrokes away on the internet. In general, we do not want to find comfort or security in anything apart from God himself. Several popular examples come to mind: Burning sage (an oft-used cleansing technique used in Native American spiritism),¹⁰⁹ sprinkling or pouring salt for protection,¹¹⁰ or connecting poltergeist activity to certain "haunted" objects are all examples placing trust in objects or unscriptural rituals. Hanging pieces of wood in the shape of a cross over a doorway does not curb demonic activity, either.¹¹¹ These are all examples of animism, "[ascribing] power to words or items that

¹⁰⁹ Steve Wood, "Paranormal Experts Can Help you Give Up the Ghost," <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/10/25/ghost-proof-home-halloween/3194693/>, accessed February 18, 2019.

¹¹⁰ Wood, "Give Up the Ghost."

¹¹¹ However, someone may hang a cross over their door because the cross reminds them of Jesus, their Savior. That is, in fact, a powerful working of the Holy Spirit. A Christian remembers biblical truths about their salvation and forgiveness upon seeing a cross.

God has not commanded.”¹¹² In other words, the curing power is found in the action, the words, or the protecting item. Some people may also superstitiously refrain from renovating an old home to prevent demonic activity.¹¹³ Most importantly, a Christian should not try to communicate with the demonic power. Although mediums advise communication, it is tantamount to talking with Satan.¹¹⁴ Rather, a Christian understands what demonic power is and where it originates. Deliverance from demonic activity is not simply a physical action. It is recognizing the spiritual nature of the troubling situation, and knowing where true spiritual solutions are found.

Focusing on Forgiveness and the Exorcistic Work of Christ

The most important spiritual truth for Christians experiencing demonic activity is the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the Christian’s possession that Satan wants to obscure through guilt about past sins or present temptations. God makes this forgiveness certain, assuring each Christian he “has rescued [them] from the dominion of darkness and brought [them] into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom [they] have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”¹¹⁵ The Christian is no longer in the dark dominion of Satan.

¹¹² Bennett, *Afraid*, 164.

¹¹³ Kelly Roncace, “Does Remodeling Stir Up Spirits?” https://www.nj.com/indulge/index.ssf/2013/12/paranormal_corner_does_remodeling_stirs_up_spirits.html, accessed December 13, 2018.

¹¹⁴ Angela Colley, “Have Ghostly Housemates? Maybe Your Home Needs A Spiritual Cleanse,” <https://www.realtor.com/advice/home-improvement/psychic-cleansing-for-homes/>, accessed 18 February 2019.

¹¹⁵ Col 1:13,14

Though he may be able to lash out in a Christian's physical environment, Satan no longer controls that Christian through guilt or fear. He does not control Christians at all.

God's gift of trust in our forgiveness and deliverance from the kingdom of darkness go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. When Christians face evil in their homes, they can face it with the full assurance of God's forgiveness and steadfast love. Scripture states this forgiveness from God is not just a potential forgiveness or a forgiveness for which one must work. Rather, forgiveness of sins is a gift for all people, received by faith.¹¹⁶ God also urges Christians to "draw near to [him] with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience."¹¹⁷ There is only room for God's love as he disciplines his Christian children through trials and assures them of victory:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹¹⁸

Though Christians will continue to feel fear or guilt throughout this imperfect life, Satan cannot condemn them any longer; his demons cannot bring any charges against them. This is the truth in which they live: forgiven and freed from Satan's kingdom of darkness. Forgiveness is the

¹¹⁶ 2 Co 5:19-21

¹¹⁷ Heb 10:22

¹¹⁸ Ro 8:32-38

antidote for Satan's attacks. It is the most precious and important spiritual truth in the face of demonic activity. The truth of forgiveness for the sinner permeates a Christian confidence in the face of demonic activity.

The exorcistic work of Jesus, emphasized in John's Gospel, is also a source of comfort. John describes Jesus as exorcising the devil from the world itself through his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection. Jesus said: "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."¹¹⁹ John also wrote: "[t]he reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." Jesus has "driven out" Satan and "destroyed" his power. He is greater than Satan or his demons who are "in the world."¹²⁰

Another Perspective on Forgiveness: The Power of Baptism

God not only tells Christians about their forgiveness through the work of Jesus Christ, but he also gives them visible signs bestowing this forgiveness, one of which is baptism. Baptism is a source of comfort and strength in the face of demonic activity. Why? First, baptism saves.¹²¹ Through baptism, a person is clothed with Christ's perfection, unassailable in the face of Satan and his demons.¹²² Christians are connected with Jesus' death and resurrection; their sins were nailed to his cross and their future resurrection is certain.¹²³ Baptism makes them children of

¹¹⁹ Jn 12:31

¹²⁰ 1 John 4:4

¹²¹ 1 Pe 3:21

¹²² Gal 3:27

¹²³ Ro 6:3,5

God, certain recipients of eternal life.¹²⁴ These truths about baptism “cannot be overstated” when dealing with demonic activity.¹²⁵ Sorum adds: “God’s seal--Baptism--is like a blazing shield that declares to Satan and his demons, ‘Here Is God’s Possession. Hands Off!’” How is that for an open door, freedom, identity, strength, and victory?”¹²⁶ Baptism is also a certain comfort for anyone who is confronted by demonic activity within their home.

So, how do you apply these truths of salvation to yourself or to other Christians who are facing demonic activity in their homes? The key is to interact with these truths: to read them, remember them, reflect upon them, even memorize them and place them on your heart in times of hopelessness. The Apostle Paul paints a picture of a Christian reading, remembering, and reflecting upon God’s promises of forgiveness and freedom. He tells you to “put on the armor of God:”

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Actions and Expectations in the Face of Demonic Activity

(Jesse and Amanda, continued from page 36 ...) As the demonic activity became more frequent, Jesse and Amanda prioritized the reading of Scripture together as a couple and as a family. Prayer also became a part of their routine. Concerned about more aggressive

¹²⁴ Gal 3:26,27; Titus 3:7

¹²⁵ Bennett, *Afraid*, 12.

¹²⁶ Sorum, *2000 Demons*, 91.

activity in the future, the family decided to perform an exorcism. Jesse went into the room in which the activity was most apparent, prayed, and read Scripture. He denounced the demons and ordered them to leave in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesse repeated this in every room throughout the house. The voices and mumbling stopped soon afterwards. Since that time the activity has not returned to their house.

(Terry and Maya, continued from page 31 . . .) Terry went from room to room, praying out loud and commanding the demonic presence to leave in the name of Jesus, declaring the family in the house belonged to Christ and was under Jesus' protection. The activity diminished, but it did not end. Looking elsewhere for help, Terry and Maya called their local pastor to come and bless the house. He went from room to room, praying and reading Scripture. Throughout their whole ordeal, Terry and Maya's family continued to regularly attend worship at their local WELS congregation. It is important to note that since the most recent house blessing, there has been no activity in the house. Despite this progress, Maya continued to experience issues at her place of work in town. Alone on her late-night shifts, she saw apparitions of people appearing and disappearing, and her hair was occasionally pulled by something she could not see. Over time, this activity at work subsided. Through all of this, Maya continued to regularly attend worship. She was also actively sharing the importance of Jesus, his work, and his love within her family.

If demonic oppression in the home has been identified, the first step for the family is to all the more vigorously connect themselves to God's promises.¹²⁷ Practically speaking, it is important for the family to stay connected to their local Christian congregation, where they hear the powerful words of God on a weekly basis. They will also encounter forgiveness in a tangible way in Holy Communion. Jesus places the proof of our forgiveness (his body and blood) in our hands and mouths in, with, and under the bread and wine. That is a promise from which Satan must cower and flee, for Jesus--our friend and our Shepherd--is supreme over all powers, as Paul tells us in Colossians chapter one:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the

¹²⁷ Interview with anonymous pastor by Michael D. Hollmann, November 18, 2018; this WELS pastor has dealt with cases of demonic oppression and advises that "immersion in Scripture" over a period of time will provide relief to those affected by demonic activity.

body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Although these spiritual truths are applicable for Christians right now, they may not always experience visible progress as they apply them to their experiences of demonic activity. This is because deliverance, or relief, usually is a process, not a singular event.¹²⁸ It is a process of immersing the family in God's promises and actively resisting Satan.¹²⁹ Jesse and Amanda experienced a quick turnaround after their first house blessing. On the other hand, Terry and Maya continued to experience some problems even after their first house blessing, and they had been faithfully connected to God's means of grace. The Apostle Paul also experienced this kind of protracted struggle. He wrote:

I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.¹³⁰

Deliverance from demonic activity may indeed be a drawn-out process, but it is the beneficial process of connecting yourself to God's powerful, life-giving and strengthening words. *That* is the emphasis here. Deliverance does not rest in our sincerity or how "hard" we may try to make

¹²⁸ Note Annie's story above (p. 19). At the time, the pastor listening to her gave her a set of Bible passages to read at home. While the pastor had the right motivation in mind, he did not recognize how her path to healing and deliverance from this demonic activity would be a process. Following up with biblical instruction and prayer would have been a better alternative than expecting a one-time fix by reading Scripture aloud once or twice, as if simply the act of reading would help a situation.

¹²⁹ On the efficacious nature of God's Word, cf. Is 55:10-13; on resisting the devil, cf. Jas 4:7.

¹³⁰ 1 Co 12:7-10; We do not know what the "messenger from Satan" actually was. Some scholars have interpreted it as a debilitating health condition; others have taken it as a demonic presence that was harassing Paul. Those are two among many interpretations.

the situation right through our conduct or decisions. God's power and promises gives him complete superiority over demonic activity.

Even in unexplained suffering, God's salvation for us through Jesus Christ and his undying commitment to keep us in his kingdom is what matters. Jesse, Amanda, Terry, and Maya all knew and believed this, even though they experienced different results. This message of God's abiding grace through suffering is especially important for Christians troubled by demonic activity. Bennett explains: "Satan's release and surrender only come according to the Lord's timetable.... This is important to understand so that when you struggle with the devil, yet fail to receive instant relief, you don't fall into greater despair."¹³¹ Our heavenly Father stands at our side, in full control, through the entire process of deliverance from demonic activity.

CONCLUSION

Demonic oppression in the home is difficult to grasp and explain--especially within our Western context. Yet is important to recognize the concerns and struggles of other Christians who are undergoing tremendous pressures and fears in the face of demonic activity. In fact, Christians' concerns, worries, or doubts about demonic oppression--even within Lutheranism--are nothing new. Martin Luther occasionally advised troubled Christians about poltergeist activity, explained its demonic elements, and gave advice on how to confront it with God's power, not their own.¹³² Lutheran pastor Friedrich Balduin also responded to apparent misconceptions as to what

¹³¹ Bennett, *Afraid*, 212.

¹³² Though Luther had a penchant for giving wonderful comfort from Scripture (and so often did so on the topic of the devil and his demons!), he occasionally used emotionally-charged, over-the-top advice. Yet we dare not discount his ironclad appeals to God's power and his salvation through Jesus as the reasons for confidence against the devil.

poltergeist activity was, and how to address it.¹³³ He pointed to God's love and control over our lives, his control over Satan, our forgiveness of sins through Jesus.

Most important to remember is the fact that these instances of demonic activity within a home are only a small facet of the larger spiritual struggle Christians undergo. In this life on earth, the devil will continue to pursue Christians, making them targets of his temptations and lies, but it is we who have assurance of complete forgiveness through Jesus Christ. This brings the devil to his knees, causes him to flee, and reminds us of God's powerful promises to each one of us. Luther paints the picture well: it is a helpless enemy against God's Word and God's special people:

Such spooking of the spirits you should freely and joyfully throw into the wind and not be afraid of them. In this way they will also leave you be in peace. And if it is that you ever have a polter- or a miner-ghost in your house, then don't have much discussion with it, but know that it is not a good ghost and it doesn't come from God. Take only faith to heart. If God allows it to vex you, just like pious Job, then be prepared and suffer it willingly. But if it is his own playing, then scorn him with strong faith and merely think about God's Word anew, for it will never [take away] God's Word [from] you. Of this have no doubt!¹³⁴

The more clearly we see the evils that are able to afflict us, the more strongly our Savior shines through as we return to his Word for our assurance of forgiveness, victory, and life.

¹³³ Balduin, a Lutheran theologian from the early seventeenth century, wrote a treatise proving poltergeist activity as demonic in origin.

¹³⁴ Tappert, *Luther's Works: AE 54*, 280.

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