

Position Statement: DA080

## NEIL ANDERSON AND FREEDOM IN CHRIST MINISTRIES: A GENERAL CRITIQUE

This is a reprint of the introductory portion of a series of articles that first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 21, number 1 (1998). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal*, go to [www.equip.org](http://www.equip.org) or call 1800 2-JOURNAL.

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### THE PROBLEMS AT A GLANCE

Through his influential ministry, *Freedom in Christ*, Neil T. Anderson brings his so-called captive-freeing message on sanctification and spiritual warfare to Christians worldwide. Although some of his teachings are helpful, many others would be more aptly described as bondage making than as bondage breaking. These are some of the troubling teachings that will be documented in this series:

- Christians no longer possess a sin nature.
- The believer's correct understanding of his or her identity in Christ is the critical issue in Christian sanctification. Christians continue to sin not so much for moral reasons as perceptual: they view themselves as sinners rather than as saints.
- Christians can be and often are *demonized* (indwelt and controlled by demons).
- In order to have victory over the devil, Christians must learn to address him directly, and to do so out loud (since he can't read their minds) — even in public places. By the same token, Christians should be careful about what they say to God out loud, since Satan is listening and could use that information against them.
- Every time one commits certain kinds of sin (e.g., sexual), Satan may gain entrance into one's life. A general repentance of that sin may bring forgiveness, but it will not break any Satanic stronghold. In order to get Satan out of one's life, *every* instance of that sin must be identified and vocally renounced.
- The need to identify and renounce past sins to be free of them is not limited to one's own life but extends back to one's ancestors, which makes adopted children especially vulnerable to demonic strongholds. Anderson assures us, however, that "even an adopted child can become a new creation in Christ."
- Satanic ritual abuse and multiple personality disorder are common problems caused by a vast satanic conspiracy. Anderson claims to have first-hand knowledge that our churches have been infiltrated: "There are breeders out there. We've encountered people who are doctors and lawyers and pastors who are Satanists."
- Satan is so enraged by Anderson's ministry that he has launched fantastic physical attacks against him, such as biting Anderson on the hand and scrawling a message on his bathroom mirror.
- Although in the Bible curses are strictly the prerogative of God, Anderson attributes real power to satanic curses and teaches they must be canceled through formulaic prayers.
- Among many additional unbiblical, sensational, and fear-instilling ideas found in his books, he teaches that (1) evil spirits often attach themselves to the spaces and furnishings of a home, (2) parents should warn their children that the monsters they fear in their rooms at night are not only real but are demons that must be rebuked in the name of Jesus, and (3) the medieval belief in spirits that have sexual relations with humans (incubi and succubi) is not only valid but an experience common enough to be included in the first of his seven "steps of freedom" as a possible past sin to be renounced.

By the authority I have in Jesus Christ, I now command every familiar spirit and every enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ that is *in* or around me to leave my presence. (emphasis added)<sup>1</sup>

Can a Christian have a demon? In 1993 I coauthored an article for the *Christian Research Journal* that hoped to answer this question once and for all in the negative.<sup>2</sup> It set forth a positive case for the protection of Christians from demonic invasion and answered several of the best arguments for the demonization of Christians advanced by such deliverance teachers as C. Fred Dickason, Jack Deere, and Mark Bubeck.

The article did *not* address the teachings of Neil T. Anderson, whose ministry — called Freedom in Christ — had been launched only a few years before. While sharing some common assumptions with other deliverance teachers, Anderson took a unique approach to dealing with demons that would have made it difficult to include him in that article. As in the prayer reproduced above (taken from one of his seven “steps to freedom”), Anderson teaches that Christians can have demons, but he also stresses that demonized believers have the authority and responsibility to resist the devil personally rather than relying on other Christians to cast the demons out of them. If Freedom in Christ continued to grow, we recognized that one day we would need to devote an entire article or more to Anderson’s teachings and approach.

That day has come — with a vengeance. Anderson has become one of evangelicalism’s most popular and influential teachers on spiritual warfare. His many books sell briskly in Christian book stores, and at some time in the past few years your local Christian community has likely hosted at least one of his conferences.

While equipping Christians to have victory over the devil is a central goal of Anderson’s teaching, it is far from the only goal. The focus of his ministry is discipleship and pastoral counseling.<sup>3</sup> He succinctly sums up the emphases of his message in the following statement: “Exposing the lie [of Satan] and understanding the battle [with Satan] for the mind is to win half the battle. The other half is having a true knowledge of God and knowing who you are as a child of God.”<sup>4</sup>

In many ways Neil Anderson is a respectable personality and teacher. Formerly the chairman of the Practical Theology department at Talbot School of Theology, he holds doctorates in ministry and education and served as a church pastor for 15 years prior to joining the Talbot faculty. His books — including his foundational works, *Victory over the Darkness* and *The Bondage Breaker* — contain much sound theology, spiritual insight, and practical wisdom. In some respects they have no doubt benefited many who have read them. Nonetheless, as we shall see in this and the two subsequent installments of this series, they also are riddled with seriously flawed assumptions that can lead uncritical Christians into various kinds of bondage — an ironic effect for a ministry whose purpose is to set Christians free.

Anderson’s interest in helping Christians find freedom in Christ was stimulated as he encountered spiritually troubled students at Talbot. In well-attended classes on spiritual conflict resolution he explored the subjects of spiritual warfare and the believer’s identity in Christ. Having developed his ideas and approach in that academic setting, Anderson founded Freedom in Christ Ministries in 1989 to reach a wider public with his message.

## FREEDOM IN CHRIST MINISTRIES

The mission of Freedom in Christ is “to boldly and strategically resource leaders world-wide to establish the Church free in Christ. Since its inception, Freedom in Christ Ministries has had the privilege of seeing thousands of changed lives around the world. Priority is given to resourcing pastors, church leaders, missionaries, and those in parachurch ministry in all parts of the world so they may be able to teach others. Churches, mission groups, ministries, Bible colleges, and entire denominations have been equipped and encouraged.”<sup>5</sup>

Freedom in Christ has made especially deep inroads into Campus Crusade for Christ and the Conservative Baptists, but their conferences are hosted by churches across the evangelical spectrum, including both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal. In 1998 conferences are being held throughout North and South America as well as in several locations in Asia and Europe.

On their web site, 19 staff members are pictured for their international office, and there are regional offices and resource centers throughout the U.S. and in Canada, Australia, England, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific that distribute Anderson's books, study guides, and audio and videotaped conferences. There are also people pictured who head "Youth Ministries," "Young Adult Ministries," and "Recovery Ministries."

Anderson is at the head of what he calls "a captive-freeing movement of God which is beginning to grow in the church."<sup>6</sup> He is clearly intent on institutionalizing his distinctive approach to sanctification (growth in holiness) and spiritual warfare into the life of the evangelical church at large — with all the accompanying resource materials, including his books and study guides.<sup>7</sup> To the extent his mission succeeds he will also bring serious polarization and division, since many of his teachings are unconventional and controversial within evangelical circles.

### THE NATURE OF THE CONTROVERSY

Controversial components in Anderson's message include not only his teaching that Christians can have demons but also his belief that Christians should speak to the devil, that they must specifically identify and renounce past sins in order to be free of them, that they do not possess a sin nature, that correct self-perception is the key to sanctified living, and that satanic ritual abuse and multiple personality disorder are common problems caused by a vast satanic conspiracy. Also subject to criticism are his methods for finding scriptural, historical, and contemporary support for his claims. This three-part series will address these concerns and will consider both the negative practical consequences of his ministry and positive alternative approaches to dealing with spiritual conflicts.

Anderson is bound to provoke controversy wherever he goes because he combines in one person numerous conflicting elements in today's Christianity. He has one foot planted firmly in conservative Protestant theology, with the other just as firmly planted in the sensationalism, speculation, and subjectivism that have come to characterize significant sectors of the evangelical church. In the same church, therefore, some members likely will be attracted to his message while others probably will be repelled by it.

This mixture of multifarious contemporary Christian components also helps explain Anderson's appeal: there is something in his message for almost everyone. Furthermore, he has charted virtually the entire spiritual life, making it intellectually apprehendable and laying out practical steps to victory over a wide range of psychospiritual problems. This appeals to pastors as well as to struggling Christians, for they don't have to sit there feeling helpless when confronted with a difficult counseling situation — they can lead the counselee through the steps to freedom. Add to this the fact that Anderson appears to be balanced: recognizing the reality and role of the supernatural in today's world without abdicating personal responsibility for one's actions; recognizing the truths uncovered by modern psychology without abdicating a biblical frame of reference.

Those mainstream evangelicals who resonate with these and other aspects of his message tend to overlook, rationalize, or minimize the elements that conflict with their traditional views. Thus many Christian leaders have endorsed his message without fully understanding its controversial dimensions.

Anderson himself is a master at perpetuating this uncritical attitude. Not only do the many good things he has to say tend to create the impression that he is a reliable teacher, but he also preempts criticism by frequently speaking against the very excesses that might be linked to him. For example, since he warns his readers to avoid fear of, or preoccupation with, demons,<sup>8</sup> it is easy to assume he must not be a promoter of that very error. It is not enough to warn against an excess in one place, however, if in another place one's teachings naturally lead to that excess, and in this case his do.<sup>9</sup> Although Anderson persuasively projects *the image* of a responsible, balanced teacher, he often does not deliver on the *substance* of the same.

I do not mean to suggest that Anderson deliberately lulls his audience into a state of passive acceptance and then slips in his controversial teachings. The root problem with his teaching appears rather to be logical inconsistency. In other words, it seems that, to his credit, he has a sense for what balanced theology should look like and sincerely tries to stay within those parameters, thus inspiring confidence in his hearers. Unfortunately, he then proceeds to engage in logical fallacies, such as equivocation and question-begging,<sup>10</sup> that cause him to contradict his professions of balance in ways that neither he nor many of his audience apparently recognize. Anderson thus provides an object lesson that even when a teacher introduces a subject by saying all the right things, it remains important to keep one's critical faculties in gear.

The problems with Anderson's message and method are not merely extraneous but fundamental; they are not isolated but show up frequently in each of his books. His message is essentially comprised of his teachings on sanctification (as originally set forth in *Victory over the Darkness*) and spiritual warfare (as originally set forth in *The Bondage Breaker*). The two theologies are logically related and interdependent. Flawed assumptions lie at the heart of both.

— by Elliot Miller

## NOTES

1. Dr. Neil Anderson, *Walking in the Light* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), 178–79.
2. This is primarily a spiritual exercise of faith and obedience rather than a psychological reconditioning process, as Anderson portrays sanctification (see accompanying article).
3. Nonetheless, in the true believer the new nature ultimately prevails over the old (e.g., 1 John 3:9; 5:18; Phil. 1:6).
4. Neil T. Anderson, *Helping Others Find Freedom in Christ* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 72.
5. Anderson argues that Paul “was referring to his nature before his conversion to Christ.” (Neil T. Anderson, *Victory over the Darkness: Realizing the Power of Your Identity in Christ* [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990], 72; emphasis in original.) Paul's exact words, however, were “I am (Greek: *eimi*, present tense) the chief of sinners.” No doubt Paul's preconversion sins qualified him to be *chief* among sinners, but it was his ongoing possession of a sin nature that qualified him to be *presently* ranked in that category.
6. *Victory*, 82–83.
7. Dr. Neil Anderson, *Released from Bondage* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 123–24.
8. See, e.g., *Victory*, 167.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Neil T. Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1990), 227–28.

For further information on Dr. Neil Anderson and Freedom in Christ Ministries, we recommend these important articles, which also are reprinted from the *Christian Research Journal*:

“*The Bondage Maker: Examining the Message and Method of Neil T. Anderson*” (a four-part series) by Elliot Miller (DA081, DA082, DA083), and Bob and Gretchen Passantino (DA084)

“*Deliverance Ministry in Historical Perspective*,” by David Powlison (DA085)

“*Can a Christian Be Demonized?*” by Elliot Miller and Brent Grimsley (DD075), and

“*The Hard Facts about Satanic Ritual Abuse*” by Bob and Gretchen Passantino (DO040).

To order any of these articles, please call our Resource Center toll-free at (888)7000-CRI or use the contact information listed below.