



Case Study: Major Mental Illness, Spiritual Oppression, and Deliverance

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As a Christian psychiatrist who includes prayer for emotional healing and prayer to break spiritual oppression in my practice, I am often asked: “Can emotional wounds and/or demonic oppression really cause major mental illness?” or “Can emotional healing and/or deliverance really heal major mental illness?”¹ I am not aware of any empirical research regarding resolution of major mental illness with prayer for emotional healing and/or deliverance prayer. In the absence of systematic research, carefully documented case studies are the next best source of data addressing this question. The following case study indicates that spiritual oppression can dramatically exacerbate major mental illness (recurrent, severe major depression), and that deliverance prayer can result in dramatic and lasting improvement.

A middle aged couple came to Agnes Sanford for prayer². The wife, Charlotte, had experienced frequent depression and frequent intense suicidal impulses for the past 34 years (from the age of 13 to her age of 47 at the time she received prayer from Agnes). She had made many suicide attempts, and described subjectively an intense, oppressive force/presence which seemed to push her to attempt suicide. Even in her teen years she felt this force/presence to be separate from herself, and in her own mind had always called it “the beast.”

Her husband, Jim, was a psychiatrist, and had pursued every possible appropriate treatment. She met the diagnostic criteria for recurrent, severe major depression, and had received *many* hours of psychotherapy, had completed thorough trials of many different antidepressant medications, had received electro-shock therapy, and had spent a total of *four years* in psychiatric hospitals. Her depression and suicidal impulses persisted in spite of every treatment. The doctors providing her care finally concluded that her depression was untreatable. They had told Jim that he should commit her to a long term psychiatric institution, file for divorce, and find another wife to help him raise his four children. Jim brought her to Agnes for prayer, specifically requesting prayer for deliverance from spiritual oppression. Agnes felt that the problem was indeed caused by spiritual oppression. However, at the time Charlotte came to Agnes for prayer she reported that she had already had prayer for deliverance from spiritual oppression, but that nothing had happened. In fact, she asked that Agnes not pray for deliverance from spiritual oppression because she felt she could not take the disappointment from another failed prayer.

Agnes prayed aloud for a skin condition, but then also prayed silently for deliverance from spiritual oppression. Several days later, Charlotte was sitting by a lake and suddenly realized that this was the first time in over 30 years that she had been near deep water but had not had an intense impulse to throw herself into it. She described later that at this moment she also realized that “the beast” was gone.

¹ See “Theophostic-based Therapy/Ministry, Mental Illness, and Medication” on the “Documents” page of www.kclehman.com for additional discussion of these questions.

² This story is described briefly in Agnes Sanford’s book, *Sealed Orders* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International) 1972, pages 158-159.

We have a lot of follow-up information for this particular case, since the “Charlotte” in this story is the maternal grandmother of my wife, Charlotte. Although Grandma Charlotte continued to struggle with mild depression, she remained free of suicidal impulses for the remaining 30 years of her life. She was never again admitted to a psychiatric hospital, and never again required antidepressant medication. She was able to work with Grandpa on the mission field for many years, and then continued in other ministries after returning to the States. Grandma and Grandpa Stringham attended our current church and lived next door to my parents for the last years of their lives. Many members of our church and of our family benefitted from Grandma Charlotte’s gentle love, her wisdom, and her compassion. She provided mentoring and spiritual direction for many of the women in our church. To this day (now 25 years after her death in 1985), members of our church comment spontaneously about how much she meant to them and about how much they miss her: “She was my spiritual mother” or “I was struggling with something really tough today and was wishing I could talk to your grandmother about it.” A number of those she ministered to have told us “Your grandmother was the most compassionate person I have ever known.”

Discussion regarding deliverance prayer outside of emotional healing ministry: Our experience is that unresolved psychological and spiritual issues usually provide an anchor and/or access for demonic spirits that are persistently oppressing a person, and that resolving these associated mind/spirit issues is usually a necessary preparation for smooth and lasting deliverance. Therefore, our usual recommendation is that people receive deliverance prayer in the context of emotional healing ministry. It is significant to note that Agnes did *not* address other psychological or spiritual issues as a part of this deliverance prayer. This deliverance prayer was *not* in the immediate context of emotional healing ministry, and was *not* clearly connected to resolving a psychological trauma or some other mind/spirit issue. As mentioned in “Mind and Brain: Separate but Integrated,” this is one of the few situations we are aware of where we have not been able to perceive clear connections between unresolved mind/spirit issues and the demonic oppression that seemed to be causing the clinical picture of major mental illness, and one of the few cases where a person was able to maintain the dramatic improvement from deliverance ministry for years, even though the deliverance did not appear to be reinforced by resolving associated mind/spirit issues.

This case study would seem to contradict our usual experience and recommendation. One possible explanation is that Lord had prepared the way for this deliverance through the many years of psychotherapy and personal discipleship that had been a part of Grandma’s personal journey. The tools she used may not have been as effective as those available today, but over many years, they accomplished substantial healing and maturing. This slow but substantial healing and maturing may have prepared the way so that Agnes’ prayer was able to accomplish deliverance, and may have prepared the way so that the demonic spirit(s) were not able to return. This possible explanation would be consistent with our usual teaching with respect to connections between emotional healing and deliverance, but just much less clear due to Grandma’s journey being long and slow, and due to the deliverance prayer occurring in a context separate from her psychotherapy and personal Christian discipleship.

Even if we are right about the connections between Grandma’s deliverance and her long journey of emotional and spiritual healing and maturing, this case study reminds us that some times we don’t have a full picture of what the Lord has been doing to prepare a person for a particular intervention. We need to be humble regarding rigid declarations, such as “one should *never* do deliverance prayer except in the context of emotional healing ministry.”

Discussion regarding lingering depression: Charlotte (my wife) and I also think that Grandma's lingering mild depression was caused by underlying wounds and lies that were not resolved with the tools available during her healing journey. Our guess is that her depression could have resolved completely if she had been able to resolve these lingering wounds and lies (unfortunately, the Immanuel Approach, including our intermediate and advanced principles and tools, had not yet been developed before Grandma Charlotte died in 1985).