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Overthrowing the Kingdom of Darkness The History and Hysterics of Bob Larson

by **G. Richard Fisher**

In the quest called the search for the historical Jesus, Richard Bauckham observes:

“Among current historical Jesuses on offer there is the Jesus of Dominic Crossan, the Jesus of Marcus Borg, the Jesus of N.T. (Tom) Wright, the Jesus of Dale Allison, the Jesus of Gerd Theissen, and many others.”¹

The strangest mythological Jesus of all is the Jesus of Bob Larson. His “Jesus” is a wild, woolly, and frenetic Jesus, the Jewish exorcist. Larson claims to be just like Him. If ever there was a distortion of the Savior, this is it. Paul warns that some will come preaching “another Jesus” (2 Corinthians 11:4). Larson is one who is doing just that. To take a small component of Jesus’ ministry and impose it on every part of Christian experience is a distortion that launches many into functional heresies.

WILL THE REAL BOB PLEASE STAND UP?

Bob Larson has a way of reinvent-

ing himself. He launched himself in 1972 with his book, *The Day Music Died*. For a time, Larson became what appeared to be an evangelical apologist refuting cults and New Age philosophies. Larson next tried his



hand at fiction writing with the book *Dead Air*. It was a gory and over-the-top presentation of the highly debatable topic of satanic ritual abuse. This went sour when Larson’s secretary turned vice president turned ghost writer, Lori Boespflug, revealed that she had not only written most of *Dead Air*, but parts of Larson’s second novel, *Abaddon*. Litigation followed, but eventually settled out of court.

The evils of rock music, cults, the New Age, and satanic ritual abuse were in the past all presented by Larson as the most urgent issues — until he abandoned each for another, more lucrative, subject.

Sometime following *Dead Air* (c. late 1990s), Larson became a
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raucous, in-your-face, knock 'em down, drag 'em out exorcist. Larson's television broadcasts and live meetings could be described as "Jerry Springer meets the devil."

Fordham sociologist Michael Cuneo has documented in his book *American Exorcism* that there is a subculture (of troubled and confused people) drawn to exorcists. The clientele certainly is there, and so is the money.

It seems that Larson is not beyond hoaxing others. Information was given on one of Larson's radio broadcasts in which he let a report stand that seemed to indicate his home was burned down by an arsonist because of his opposition to Satanism. Lori Boespflug exposed the lie, saying, "That incident was a hoax."²

Larson also changed wives in a very public divorce. First Timothy 3:1 says of elders (and by extension leaders) that they are to "be blameless [and] the husband of one wife." Deacons are held to the same standard. James tells us that leaders and teachers will be held to the highest standard, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). Larson identifies every sin and human weakness with the tag of "demon," but he will probably never speak against "the demon of divorce."

If Larson were living in any other era, he would be called an occult practitioner. The spectacles he puts on are more in line with the paganism of ancient Babylon, Greece, and Rome.³ The Jews of Christ's time had pagan exorcisms and lengthy rituals, as seen in Acts 19:13-16.⁴

Larson's side show is a throwback to the primal scream therapy of the late 1960s. Ole Anthony of the Trinity Foundation labels Larson as a "pitch man" and "a bad carney."⁵ It is nothing to see people writhing on the floor at a Larson meeting, or Larson jamming a Bible into someone's stomach, or just whacking them alongside

the head with a Bible. It is calculated craziness.

One Larson critic, who monitored him during the 1990s, recently told PFO:

"1992-1998 saw a marked decline in his ministry, the radio shows, and his meager foray into television on TBN and on obscure satellite channels. Last I heard, he had some church in Scottsdale and was taking his exorcism show on the road at various small churches and rented rooms at the odd Holiday Inn. I actually attended one of these sometime around 1999, and no more than 40 people showed up in a rented hotel room that had seats for 150."⁶

WHY — WHY — WHY?

We often hear the statement, "you cannot judge another person's motives." But the Bible is clear that we often can see and know another person's motives.

Romans 13 says that governing authorities are in the ideal sense there for our peace and safety. They are there to punish evil. In courtrooms, attorneys present information to juries as to the guilt and motives of those being prosecuted. If a man took out a \$2 million insurance policy on his wife and then three weeks later she was murdered, and he was clearly linked to her murder and clearly guilty, the motive would not be a mystery.

David feigned insanity (1 Samuel 21:13-14) out of fear and Elijah fled and fell into depression out of the same motive (1 Kings 19).

The Apostle Paul was clear and to the point as he addressed wrong motives for preaching, "Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some from also goodwill. The former preach Christ from selfish ambition" (Philippians 1:15-16).

Paul clearly rebuked Peter and revealed his motive for courting Jews over Gentiles. Paul said that Peter "separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision" (Galatians

2:12). The fear of man is a motive that drives many. The Apostle Peter clearly states that we can be in ministry "for dishonest gain" (1 Peter 5:2). Greed can be a motive even in ministry.

The Apostle John reveals that a man named Diotrephes loved to have "preeminence" (3 John 9). Pride and the desire to control drove Diotrephes. John wrote of his motive. This shows clearly that the Bible is not against naming motives if those motives are persistent and clear.

Jude says plainly that some false teachers are greedy and do what they do for profit (vv. 11, 16). The motives were obvious.

Larson's motives are not a great mystery. *World* magazine reported that:

"While the 1990 tax records show the ministry paid Larson \$131,879 and allowed him an expense account of \$35,750, Larson certified to the court under oath that his income in 1990 was \$403,310."⁷

A decade later, the television news magazine *Inside Edition* disclosed "according to tax records he receives almost \$300,000 a year in salary and benefits from his ministry and TV company."⁸ Even more recently, Charity Navigator, an online organization which monitors and evaluates charities, revealed Larson received compensation of \$142,242 in 2004.⁹ Charity Navigator gives Bob Larson Ministries an "Overall Rating" of "0 Stars" out of a possible four stars. In an updated broadcast of its original investigation, *Inside Edition* confirmed the 2004 salary figure and added that Larson also received "\$186,000 for travel, \$24,000 for meals and \$28,000 in benefits."¹⁰ Larson told the news magazine, "None of those amounts which you've indicated is a paid salary to me."¹¹

Some might think that was a bit excessive. On Larson's own web site,¹² he has a video available of an exorcism room at the Vatican. He charges the hefty price of \$120. That is clearly excessive for a videotape. It is

quite obvious that Larson is all about selling and sensationalism. Also on his web site and in his public meetings, Larson is constantly asking for checks or credit cards, so that people can be a “partner.” However, in most partnerships the profits are divided equally. Larson also is soliciting donations for his \$1.2 million prayer center. His motive is no great conundrum.

Paul says that real Christian leaders do not peddle the Word of God (2 Corinthians 2:17). Although we may not always be able to discern with certainty a person’s motive, some motives are too obvious to miss. *The Geneva Study Bible* adds a note to 2 Corinthians 2:17:

“Paul’s goal was not personal benefit or financial reward, but the glory of God. ... All Paul’s ministry was carried out in the sight of God, providing him a strong motive for keeping his conscience clear.”¹³

Larson is a blatant materialist. He appeals for “stocks, bonds, jewelry, a fund” and even “property” to be given to him so that he can fight the devil.¹⁴ In its 2000 investigative news report, *Inside Edition* documented his two homes in gated communities; one in Vail, Colo., and another in Scottsdale, Ariz. The Vail residence is valued in excess of \$1 million.

Larson says he lives in an exclusive gated community because he receives death threats. Yet, in every one of his public meetings Larson is wide open, vulnerable, and exposed to anyone who wants to do him harm. His public lifestyle leaves him vulnerable at every level, if, in fact, the death threats were real.

Larson’s weekly television broadcast, *Bob Larson presents Spiritual Freedom*, is a repetitive and incessant infomercial for all his products. The program promotes Larson as “the world’s foremost authority on the occult, demons, and the supernatural.” During a recent broadcast, Larson aired footage of a New Zealander named Shane.¹⁵ At one point during Shane’s purported exorcism, he vomits up the ancestral demons from 12

preceding generations. At least that is how Larson explains it. Shane could have just been sick to his stomach from the intensity of the session. Larson puts the sign of the cross in oil on Shane’s forehead. Jesus left those he delivered from demons nameless and anonymous. Larson parades them in front of a camera then sells their performance. One wonders about the legalities of this unless they sign a waiver or release.

Viewers can receive a copy on DVD of Shane and others for only \$30 or any “gift” above that. Larson is quick to say that the \$30 does not cover the cost of the video, but you can “give \$300, \$3,000 or \$30,000.” On the *Bob Larson presents Spiritual Freedom* from the following week, there is the offer of a DVD on “How To Do Deliverance” for a mere \$69.¹⁶ The sales pitches are relentless.

LARSON’S LEAGUE WITH ROME

Even more troubling is Larson’s love affair with Rome and his networking with error and confusion. On Larson’s web site and in his presentations, he claims that he is just doing what Jesus did. He plays off the acronym DWJD — *Doing What Jesus Did* — and he expects people to believe it. He tells of meeting and interviewing the Vatican’s head exorcist Gabriele Amorth. Larson isn’t doing what Jesus did.

Jesus never touched a demon-possessed person. He did not have to. Jesus did not spend all kinds of time in elaborate rituals, incantations, screaming, wrestling, head-banging, manhandling, anointing with oil, or using other religious paraphernalia. Jesus never smacked a person with an Old Testament scroll. He did not have to. Jesus could muzzle demons with a word — and often did so. His encounters with demons were brief and powerful with immediate and unmistakable results. He was always masterfully in charge.

In Mark 1:25, “Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be quiet, and come out of him!’” This shows the ease and brevity with which Jesus handled evil

spirits. Again in Mark 9:25, Jesus said, “I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!” It is nothing for a Larson follower to make three or four return trips with a claim of returning demons. With Jesus that was not possible. *Inside Edition* revealed during its report on Larson that they had documented a woman who had been exorcised “three times” by Larson.¹⁷ Larson sees no problem with this — even with it being distant from “doing what Jesus did.”

NOT WJD

What Larson does is totally unlike *what Jesus did*. We could say that Jesus took control and commanded demons with decorum. Jesus was totally and absolutely in charge. Three things marked Jesus’ encounters with demons: 1) a sanctified calm, 2) an incredible confidence, and 3) an absolute and authoritative word of command. We might say Jesus was brief and to the point. There was nothing messy and protracted.

William Alexander puts it so well:

“Jesus set aside the practical dualism of Jewish demonology. In the assurance that He was the Stronger One Who was able to conquer Satan, the strong one, and to spoil his goods, Jesus was able to aid effectively the demons whom He met, and to command evil spirits with a voice of authority.”¹⁸

Larson further elaborates on his web site about his Vatican trip (mentioned above) where he interacted with the Roman Catholic exorcist, Father Gabriele Amorth. Larson extols the *Rituale Romanum*, which is the Roman Catholic rite of exorcism. Larson speaks with reverence of the crucifix used in the exorcisms by Amorth. Jesus, however, never used religious paraphernalia to dismiss demons. Larson talks of the straps he saw in the Vatican exorcism room used to restrain people, should they get violent during an exorcism. Jesus never used straps or tied anyone down.

What Larson saw was more a chamber of horrors. Even the most violent

demoniac ever encountered by Jesus did not have to be strapped down, manhandled, and held at bay with religious accessories. The Gadarene demoniac had been chained down by those who did not know what else to do. Jesus in the calmest of manners simply permitted the demons to go into swine (Luke 8:32). It was the pigs that acted violently (v. 33). That is what Jesus did. His deliverances were instantaneous and permanent.

The encounters Jesus had with demons and demoniacs were not a model and pattern for the Church. He commanded and cast out demons to *show who He was*. He did it to demonstrate *His* authority.

Jesus even used the demons in a unique and singular way to confess who He was. The demons acknowledged, "You are — the Holy One of God!" (Mark 1:24, Luke 4:34). Again, "he cried out with a loud voice and said, 'What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?'" (Mark 5:7, Luke 8:28, Matthew 8:29). Mark 3:11 records, "And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, 'You are the Son of God.'"

We could no more copy Jesus in demonic encounters — and the Bible never says we should — than we could change water to wine, multiply food, raise the dead, transfigure, walk on water, or rise from the Mount of Olives to heaven. All of these dynamic exploits were to demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah and, in fact, the all-powerful Deity. Even the apostles who carried the direct authority and power of Jesus on those few occasions of demonic encounter simply spoke that instantaneous word of command (Acts 16:18) as Jesus did. They truly emulated their Master.

Jesus never performed an exorcism and was not an exorcist. Modern exorcisms are marked by rituals, noise, incantations, formulas, long amounts of time, liturgies — and in Larson's case, fund-raising. Spitting, vomiting, cursing, fainting, and pandemonium can be elements along with incense, holy water, and crucifixes. Sometimes they are interspersed

with candle lighting. Hours of antics can pass with a claim being made of returning demons. The Roman Catholic exorcisms that Larson identifies with are ritual-laden and unbiblical. One Roman Catholic publication includes:

"Elements of the rite include the Litany of Saints; recitation of the Our Father, one or more creeds, and other prayers; specific prayers of exorcism; the reading of Gospel passages and use of the Sign of the Cross."¹⁹

Frederick Leahy compares the biblical act of casting out demons with its modern day counterpart:

"Christ did not practise exorcism in the modern sense of the word. He bade the demons depart and never return, commands they had no choice but to obey."²⁰

JUST WHAT IS GOING ON?

Certainly Satan has some hand in the chaos and misinformation that mark Larson's demonstrations. Satan may be acting differently than we think. A stage magician's craft relies upon misdirection. The smoke and mirrors of Larson's meetings are just a distraction that keeps people from any idea about the new birth or the biblical principles of New Testament sanctification. The repetitive sameness of the Larson campaigns leaves people with little or no balanced Bible input. It is Larson's shell game and followers will never find the truth. It is reductionism, leaving ignorant people with about 99% of the Bible unknown and untaught.

Larson's whole show is a re-creation of medieval mythology and ethnic folklore. Jesus refused to acknowledge superstition and cryptic formulas. The Jews believed demons dwelt in crumbs, so Jesus had the apostles gather up the leftover bread to enjoy it. The Jews believed demons dwelt on unwashed hands, so Jesus did not insist on ceremonial hand washing. The Jews believed that demons prowled in desert places, so that is right where Jesus goes to enjoy communion with the heavenly Father.

They believed that demons infested Samaria, so Jesus boldly went there.²¹

One thing that never seems to get picked up by Larson's followers, and seems to be missed or ignored, is the assumption that the demons Larson claims to be speaking to always tell him the truth! Larson is always reporting what this or that demon said in his exorcisms. No one ever picks up on the fact that the very nature of demons is that of lies and deception. Satan is, after all, called the father of lies (John 8:44). The Larson Traveling Circus is so old that it is new and fits right in with the mystical and superstitious nature of America's contemporary eclectic spirituality. His theater is certainly based on faulty theology.

Leahy again captures the tone of the New Testament:

"We are not asked to diagnose cases of supposed possession. It is much wiser and safer in such situations to rely prayerfully in faith upon the proclamation of the Word of God, witnessing to and praying for the sufferer. ... Nothing less than the 'new birth' will meet the need of the demoniac or any other sinner. When this takes place the demon has been dispossessed. The only guarantee against possession is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, that is, to be 'born again'."²²

"Professional" wrestling is a good analogy: Everyone in the arena knows why they are there. They know how it all goes, and that every one of them is part of the show. Everyone is personally involved in the spectacle and goes along with all the chaos. Everyone gets caught up in the bizarre and unreal.

Imagine being in a Larson meeting and becoming not only part of the show, but one of its stars. You may become the central actor in a cosmic drama between good and evil in the universe. This is stagecraft and theater at its best. You can tip the scale in favor of the God of heaven. That would be hard to resist, for some especially if their life is normally humdrum and routine.

Much of Larson's routine and spectacle feed off of ignorance and the need to be seen. Much of the commotion is generated by followers who know what is expected. Some are just confused, needy, desperate, and untaught. Everyone can get into the act and become a part of the main attraction in the greatest show in the universe. It is hard to resist.

Larson's demanding and forceful personality is the catalyst for incredible peer pressure and the group dynamics that set off the fireworks. On occasion, Larson has been hoaxed himself by some who pretended to be afflicted with demons. In a reverse of the theatrical, Larson unknowingly went along with *their* show.²³ The tables were turned on him and it clearly demonstrates that Larson cannot distinguish a real demon from a pretend one. If Larson can be fooled by jokesters, why should anyone take him seriously when he pretends to have insight into the unseen world? Just as ludicrous is Larson's pretense of commanding angels as he does his exorcisms.

IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE?

Larson's medical diagnoses make his show extremely dangerous. It is disturbing to see Larson talk to people in almost baby talk, supposedly regressing them to their childhood. Of course, his diagnosis is always demons and so habituating sins are often glossed over. Sinful habits are renamed as "demons," though the demon of materialism is never found.

Some years ago, a self-proclaimed exorcist (named Don Rogers) traveled through New England servicing some of the extremist Charismatic churches. He would do his routine and cast out the "demons" of cigarettes and anger, the "demons" of lust, bitterness and gluttony, and so forth. The problem, however, was that it did not take long for the exorcised "demons" to return. Biblical sanctification is not a quick fix. Quick fixes never last.

Furthermore, as Larson pontificates on the diagnosis without objective proof, untreated physical problems

may continue to go untreated. This does not bother Larson because he will be in another city a few days later and no one is the wiser. What remains true is that *we interpret what we see based on what we believe* — whether it is true or not. Absolutely everything in the Larson show is tagged with the name "demon."

So much of this socio-psychological manipulation has been recognized for centuries, both in and out of religious circles. Years ago it was called mesmerism. Our task is to always just present the Gospel, no matter what the circumstances:

"Similar distinctions between the real and the spurious have to be made in considering alleged demon-possession. Even in the evil physical phenomena witnessed in primitive societies, and associated by the people with Satan worship, the probability of occasional, or even frequent, cases of self-induced symptoms of possession has to be recognized. The Christian worker who is faced with the physical phenomena associated with demonism, must bear in mind the possibility (a) of involuntary imitation, (b) of deliberate, self-induced imitation; both conditions being perpetuated by the occurrence, from time to time, of actual demon-possession. It may frequently be impossible to diagnose with any certainty in which of these conditions a person is to be classed, and this only serves to emphasize that the servant of Christ is not asked to diagnose alleged cases of possession, but to confront the demonic, whether it may express itself directly or indirectly, with the Word of the Risen Saviour and earnest prayer in His holy name."²⁴

Further:

"It should be remembered, in observing religious phenomena, that the possible operation of the power of mass hysteria, or, as it used to be called, the principle of sympathy, makes it exceedingly difficult *at the time*, to distinguish

between the spiritual and purely psychological. The impulse of mass hysteria can be almost irresistible, as is witnessed by the behaviour of crowds in situations of riot and hysterical emotion."²⁵

Larson's incantations, cryptic formulas, and yelling of repetitive words are essentially "vain repetitions." Jesus forbade magic formulas. Larson's teaching that demons come out through the orifices of the body²⁶ is not only disgusting, but in line with ancient Egyptian paganism that associated a demon with various organs and parts of the body. Jude warned against those false teachers that "speak evil of dignitaries" and "speak evil of whatever they do not know" (vv. 8, 10). He further warns against reviling accusations in opposition to the demonic (v. 9).

The ethnic demonism of the Jews during the time of Christ included many railing accusations against demons:

"The Jewish adjuration addressed to the demon of epilepsy is a fine sample of 'a railing accusation': O thou demon thou art hidden, thou son of foulness, thou son of abomination, thou son of uncleanness, be thou cursed, crushed, anathematized."²⁷

Ephesians 6:10-18 is the clearest of all passages and is a mandate of spiritual warfare and freedom for the Church. When dealing with "principalities and powers," a wrestling match is not suggested. Chanting, screaming, roughing others up, and pretending to command and control Satan and his demons are not in the text. Our coping mechanism is the disciplines and virtues described in these passages. Truth, righteousness, the Gospel, faith, the Word of God, and prayer are clearly delineated. There is nothing about exorcisms here. No doubt because neither Jesus nor the apostles ever did what Larson is doing.

HOW FIRM OUR FOUNDATION

Larson seems narcissistic because most of the attention goes to him.

There is also an obsessive focus on Satan and demons. Our focus is to be Christ (Colossians 3:1-2, Hebrews 12:2). Richard Mayhue reminds us of our great resources in Christ for true spiritual warfare:

"...our Lord Jesus Christ has not left us defenseless. Let me show you the arsenal that is at our command. The Saviour's victory at Calvary (John 12:31, Rev. 12:11). The promise of overcoming (1 John 5:4-5; Rev. 21:7). The intercessory ministry of Christ (John 17:15, 20). The knowledge of Satan's tactics (2 Cor. 2:11). The believer's spiritual armor (Eph. 6:10-17). The Holy Spirit's indwelling power (1 John 4:4). The believer's prayers (Matt. 6:13; Eph. 6:18-20; Mark 9:29). The instructions for defeating Satan (James 4:7-8). The sure knowledge that Satan has been rendered powerless with regard to death (Heb. 2:14). The encouragement of ultimate victory (Rev. 20:1-10)."²⁸

The Bible is clear that a Christian cannot be possessed by demons. The Christian is the temple of God's Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is greater and more powerful than any and all demons and cannot be dispossessed (1 John 2:14, 4:4, 5:18).

Therefore, Christians are not to focus on or obsess about demons or the demonic. Believers are to take the apostles' example, realizing that Christ and His grace are stronger than demons, and we simply present the Gospel to all. As Paul instructed, the Gospel is "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). The demonized, whether real or imagined, are no exception.

Endnotes:

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24. *Satan Cast Out*, op. cit., pp. 180-181.
25. Ibid., pg. 181, italics in original.
26. G. Richard Fisher, "Demonic Operation - The Deliverance Game of Modern Day Exorcists," *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 4, pg. 22.
27. *Demonic Possession in the New Testament*, op. cit., pg. 132-133.
28. Richard Mayhue, *Unmasking Satan*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2001, pg. 156. 

EDITORIALS

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Three months later, Roberts said God reminded him with these words: "I want you to get this going in one year or I will call you home. I've got to do something to get the attention of my people. If I have to call you home, I'm going to do it."

As the months passed, donations to Roberts' cause did not match what he had asked for. In nine months, less than half of the \$8 million had been raised. On Jan. 4, 1987, Roberts confessed on television that unless he came up with \$4.5 million, his days were numbered.

"If we don't turn it around by March, God's going to call me home. Please help extend my life. Please help me open the nations. Please help me turn the medical school around. We're well on our way. We lack \$4.5 million between now and March. Help us," Roberts pleaded.

While many were appalled at the idea that God would hold Roberts hostage, Roberts said it was not unscriptural. "If the partners of [the Apostle] Paul had not come to him with the money, his life would not have been extended. It's in the Bible. It's happened all over again," Roberts told his viewing audience.

"You know, God is actually obligated to meet our needs when we give of our seed faith," Roberts' wife Evelyn said. It was a win-win situation. You give, Oral lives, and God is *obligated* to meet your needs. It can't get much better than that.

Roberts closed out the broadcast that day by praying:

"Father, I've delivered my soul today. I can do no more by myself, than what I am doing. Please help me. Give me new partners; cause my regular partners to pick up this burden. Extend my life, let me live beyond March. Let me finish my work on earth. *Give me 20 more years.*"