

Should a Christian Do Magic?

Is it right for a Christian to use sleight of hand and illusion—aren't these instruments dishonest and deceptive? Doesn't the Bible forbid magic, fortune-telling and ventriloquism?

A Problem of Vocabulary

First, let's get our terms defined. When the Bible (especially certain translations) uses the term "magic" (e.g. Revelation 22:15, Isaiah 47:12, NIV, Acts 19:19, NASB) or "magician" (Genesis 41:8, KJV) or "witch" (Exodus 22:18 KJV) or "sorcery" (Leviticus 19:26, NIV, Deuteronomy 18:11, NIV) or "ventriloquism" (e.g. Isaiah 8:19, the King James Version says "wizards that peep"), it is clearly dealing with a person's involvement in the supernatural, usually with the collaboration of evil spirits. The context of the Bible prohibitions makes it clear that God does not want people to dabble in games with the devil. Today's manifestations of these forbidden activities are such things as ouija boards, tarot cards, the occult and horoscopes. The Christian has no business playing with these, since they open the door to demonic influence.

Let it be emphasized that *no true Christian magician or ventriloquist is in any way involved in the use of supernatural powers.*

There may be confusion due to the fact that certain words have two meanings. "Magic" has the meaning of witchcraft or sorcery, but the word also means sleight of hand and illusion, the surprising, fascinating and entertaining performance. Obviously the Bible is talking about the first of these meanings and not the second.

Etymologically, the word "ventriloquism" means "belly-talking." As used in the Old Testament, the word refers to fortune telling by means of reading the entrails of slain animals, or demon possession, wherein an evil spirit spoke through a human mouthpiece. Modern ventriloquists create the *illusion* that their voices come from another source, using this to entertain. Spectators unable to explain this skill misnamed the illusion "belly-talking." Again, the Biblical prohibition has reference to one meaning of this word, but does not prohibit the animation of puppets as is done in the modern entertainment medium. The first thing we must be sure of when dealing with Biblical prohibitions is that we understand what the Bible *is in fact saying*, so that we do not misapply the truth because of a confusion in vocabulary.

Confusion with the Supernatural

One could raise the objection that it is wrong for the Christian to do any performance that could so easily be misinterpreted as sinful by someone who doesn't know. Doesn't the Bible warn us to "avoid all appearance of evil"? (I Thessalonians 5:22, KJV)

Couldn't innocent parlor magic or ventriloquism be easily confused with forbidden activity?

In fact, a better translation of I Thessalonians 5:22 is "avoid every *form* of evil" (NASB) or "avoid every *kind* of evil" (NIV). In dealing with right and wrong, one must always be careful of appearances, but it is not the *appearance* that makes something right or wrong. The emphasis on appearance is *the essence of hypocrisy!* If the issue were that Christians are to refrain from doing anything that looks like sin or could be misinterpreted by someone who does not know, then we would *never* be able to do anything with confidence. According to this thinking, Jesus was correctly rebuked for eating with publicans, for forgiving prostitutes and for touching lepers. Certainly these actions confused many people, but the Son of God knew His mission and performed His ministry in spite of possible objections.

The Gospel magician could easily be confused with the secular entertainer, or worse, with the occultist, just as the Christian singer could be associated with the acid-dropping Satanist, or the radio preacher could be identified with the immoral talk-show host. Or we could insist that it is wrong for the Christian to read any magazine or paperback book, because immoral people publish sinful books and magazines. Do we believe that because of the sin of some broadcasters, there is no value in the ministry of broadcasting? Part of the issue is whether a godly performer should stop a ministry he knows to be right, just because someone else might misjudge his motives or his methods.

Some Christians assume that anything they cannot themselves understand and explain *must* be supernatural. Hence they see negative effects as being produced by demons, and every positive event must be a miracle of God. There is great room, however, for neutral items which can be used either for good or for evil.

Ministry by means of "Deception"?

Another objection is that it is not right for the Christian to use trickery in presenting the truth. No matter how you slice it, magic involves deceit (illusion). Of course some "Gospel magicians" try to get around this objection by never actually saying their hand is empty when it isn't, but they say, "my hand looks empty." This skirts the issue, since the intent is for the audience to believe that the hand was empty (or that the bunny materialized from thin air, or that the red scarf actually turned white, etc.) The deceit was there, regardless of whether the performer told a lie with his words or with his actions.

Here we must deal with the nature of truth. At any given time, a presentation of truth only represents a portion of reality. I carry a photograph of my wife that everyone claims is a very candid likeness, yet it deceives in certain ways. For one thing, my wife is not black and white and gray; for another, she is more than two inches tall and is not

flat. But the image abstracted by this photograph captures her expression and personality very honestly. It is an honest—though partial—representation of the truth. The issue is whether the Gospel magician conveys the impression that he is doing supernatural things, or whether he honestly acknowledges that what he is doing is trickery.

Something to bear in mind is the nature of drama. We are not “deceived” by the actor who is playing a part, and in fact we say that he played his part well. In drama we suspend what we know to be true rationally and enter into imagination and “believe” the story. But when it’s over, we don’t actually believe that we saw the real person being portrayed. Howard Thurston, a famous magician of a century ago, said “A magician is actually an actor playing the part of a magician.”

After all is said and done, most people acknowledge that magical entertainers do not actually have supernatural powers. If the total presentation is an accurate representation of Biblical truth, the audience will be impressed with the message, and not dazzled at the thought that a person has been doing actual superhuman feats.

A Biblical Basis for Gospel Magic

It is fine to say that doing Gospel magic is not *wrong*, but *is it right*? Is there a Biblical justification for using magic to present Scriptural or spiritual truths?

The first part of the argument comes from Jesus’ own use of parables—visual aids. Matthew 13:34 indicates that in Jesus’ teaching, He *always* used object lessons. Sleight of hand and illusion provide a way of presenting some very powerful spiritual messages in a visual way. When a dirty handkerchief—representing sin—is transformed into an egg, it makes a very striking illustration of the change God makes in a person’s life when he trusts Christ. Magic tricks have power to gain and maintain attention.

The second part of a Biblical basis for Gospel magic is God’s own use of the spectacular as an attention-getting device. He could have dealt with people without using the miraculous, but with Moses He chose to use a bush that burned without being consumed; with Balaam He used a talking donkey; with Joshua He used a destructive trumpet blast to bring down the walls of Jericho, and with Belshazzar He wrote on the wall with a giant hand. Many of the prophets used spectacular attention-getting devices, such as shaving their head, wearing a disintegrating garment, making a model of Jerusalem. And what a sight Jonah must have been, bleached from the digestive juices of the great sea monster, as he paraded through Nineveh proclaiming the judgment of God.

But perhaps most spectacular of all are the descriptions of the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus. It could have happened without a lot of fanfare, but

Christ's death was accompanied by darkness and earthquake. The resurrection was accompanied by a blast of light that left the guards stunned and dazed.

There are some very impressive effects of "magic" that illustrate principles from the Scripture. When sleight of hand and illusion are harnessed for the purpose of explaining Gospel principles, they can be very powerful from a psychological and educational point of view.

Performance Leads to Pride

A serious objection is that when people are amazed and admire the performer, this leads to pride on his part. This is certainly a possibility, and the Christian performer (no matter what art form) must guard against pride. This is true of the Christian singer, actor, magician, ventriloquist—and even preacher! Let us condemn pride in any form and in every presentation, but the possibility of pride should not deter from exercising a skill that can point people to God's truth and lead them to Christ.

Conclusion

To wind up this brief treatment, let me make several practical suggestions about your own attitude towards "Gospel magic;"

- Enjoy "magic" presentations. Don't worry about being fooled. You don't need to understand how every trick is done in order for it to be all right.
- Pray for the Christian magician. He wants to present Gospel truths in an effective way, without violating what is proper. It is easy to give in to the sins of pride and presumption. He needs your understanding and support. Praise God that He has given this performer opportunities to present a message at places where a preacher would never be able to speak.
- Seek God's mind. Be sympathetic and ask God to help you understand what attitude is right to have towards forms of ministry that you do not wholeheartedly understand or endorse. Realize that the same skill may not be best for everyone, but God can bless it and use it for His glory.
- If you continue to have reservations, work them out. Talk to your local Christian magician. He will be happy to discuss them with you!
- Thanks for being open to consider some new ideas. I hope they have helped you to gain a new perspective. Read Acts 10:9-20 and rejoice that God opens the hearts and minds of His children who are ready to receive His messages.

"Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks [and honor and glory] through Him to God the Father." Colossians 3:17

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