

The Magician's Mistake

By David Feddes

The man and woman had big decisions to make. The two of them happened to be sitting near me in an airport, so I couldn't help getting in on what they were doing and saying. The man was holding a small chain. At the end of the chain dangled a crystal. The woman said, "Ask it if we should move in together." They both peered at the crystal for a moment. "It says yes."

"Ask if we should buy a house." Again, the answer was yes.

"Ask it if we should buy before September." "No."

"How about after September?" "Yes."

"Before December?" "Yes."

"Let's try that last one again. Ask it if we should buy before December." They gazed at the crystal: "It says no."

"No? How can it say no? It said yes a minute ago." They both sat in puzzled silence. Then she said, "I guess we shouldn't have asked it the second time. It doesn't work if you don't have faith in it. We should simply believe the first answer it gave."

They both seemed satisfied that this explained why the crystal had said yes and then no to the very same question. They were confident that they were being supernaturally guided to move in together and to buy a house between September and December.

Maybe this little drama sounds odd to you. Or maybe you think that it makes good sense and that the only problem with using a crystal to make decisions is that there are still some people who don't do it. In any case, it's a fact people want to tap into hidden powers to help them make their decisions and reach their goals.

When Hillary Clinton was still in the American White House as First Lady, she made headlines for imagining conversations with dead people she admired, such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi. Mrs. Clinton was guided in this process by Jean Houston, a major figure in the personal growth movement, who uses myth and imagination to unleash hidden spiritual powers. At the time Hillary Clinton was working on her book about how it takes a village to raise a child. Jean Houston thought it might help to conduct some imaginary conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt, and so she directed Mrs. Clinton in the process of using her imagination to find out what a dead person would say. The late night comedians made wisecracks about giving new meaning to the word "ghostwriter." Some people were surprised that an intelligent, powerful Yale graduate would be open to such guidance. But why should they be surprised? Hillary Clinton isn't alone. Millions of people are doing similar things.

In fact, Mrs. Clinton is not the only First Lady to seek guidance from unusual sources. Her White House predecessor, Nancy Reagan, consulted horoscopes in the process of determining President Reagan's schedule. Like many people, Mrs. Reagan thought the stars offered important clues to the movements of unseen powers.

If you thought educated, powerful people were beyond such things, you haven't been paying attention. The more prominent your position, the more prestigious your university, the greater your chance of tapping into alternative spirituality. There is no religious idea so unusual that it won't appeal to someone in a high-powered corporation or university.

I remember strolling around the campus of Harvard University and visiting a bookstore just outside the entrance to Harvard. The store was filled with books on all sorts of alternative spiritualities and New Age thought. I couldn't find a single book that presented the historic Christian faith, but I could find books on just about anything else.

Some New Age materials have become runaway bestsellers. Marianne Williamson's *A Return to Love* and James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*, along with the tapes and seminars of people like Deepak Chopra and Tony Robbins, have sold in the millions and have made millionaires of those who produce them. TV megastar Oprah Winfrey blends some Christian ideas with her own brew of folk religion and spiritism.

A great many people want to maximize their potential by drawing on the powers and guidance of the spirit realm. This is true in North and South America, in Europe and Asia, and in many parts of Africa. What's your reaction to all this? Is it good? Is it bad? Is it silly but basically harmless? Is it a matter of you finding what works for you, and other people finding what works for them? Your answer to these questions may depend largely on another question: Is God a powerful person or an impersonal power?

If God is some kind of supernatural force or energy, you'd be wise to maximize your potential by tapping into that energy through crystals or horoscopes or visualization or contact with the dead or whatever else works for you. However, if God is a person, then the important thing is to know him for who he is and to have a healthy relationship with him, to listen to him, to love and worship and obey him. Relating to God as an all-powerful Person is very different from drawing energy from a vague impersonal power.

Simon the Sorcerer

The Bible book of Acts shows that when Jesus' disciples spread the news about this personal Savior, there was a sharp contrast with other notions of spiritual power. In Acts 8 the Bible tells of a man named Simon who practiced sorcery in the city of Samaria. "He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low gave him their attention and exclaimed, 'This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.' They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic." But then a Christian named Philip showed up. The men and women of Samaria believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and they were baptized. Simon himself believed and was baptized.

Simon the sorcerer knew he had met up with a Power greater than his magical occult powers, but he still didn't know the true difference. Simon followed Philip around, amazed at his miracles and hoping to learn new tricks. When Peter and John, the top Christian leaders, came to town, they impressed Simon even more than Philip had. When they arrived, they prayed for the people that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

This spiritual outpouring really impressed Simon, and he thought, "Wow! I'd like to be able to do that." He figured Peter and John somehow had the magic touch, that they had the ability to control and dispense divine power, and he wanted that for himself. In fact, he was willing to pay big money for it. He offered the apostles money and said, "Give me also this ability."

And how did Peter respond? He answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." (Acts 8:9-24)

Triple Blunder

What was the magician's mistake? Simon the Sorcerer's biggest mistake was that he treated the Lord as an impersonal power rather than as an all-powerful Person. In treating God as a power to be used instead of a Person to be loved, Simon entangled himself in three big blunders: he thought God could be controlled, he thought God could be bought, and he thought God could be blended with other brands of spirituality. He was wrong on all three counts.

The first part of the magician's mistake was that he equated miracle with magic, but there's a huge difference between magic and miracles. Magic is trying to harness unseen energies to achieve your own goals. Miracle is a personal God answering the personal prayers of his people in marvelous way to show his glory and goodness. Simon thought Peter and John had some secret technique for controlling supernatural power. But the fact is that Peter and John had no such power in themselves but prayed to God and depended entirely on how he chose to answer. The miracles and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the people were the answer of a personal God to their prayers, not the success of some technique they had mastered for harnessing and distributing a divine force. Still today people want to tap in to supernatural power by using charms, amulets, icons, relics, crystals, and other items, or they try to use special words to get what they want: curses that will harm their enemies, love charms to make someone lust for them, or mantras and magic formulas to make them prosper. But such things go against God's way. Magic is as different from miracle as darkness is from light.

The second part of the magician's mistake was that Simon thought God could be bought. But the Holy Spirit is a Person, not a thing. If God were an impersonal power, maybe this divine energy could be sold the way utility companies sell electricity. But God is not an impersonal power; God is an all-powerful person. He's not for sale, and it is a monstrous insult to try to pay for the Holy Spirit the way you would pay an electric bill or the way you might pay for the rights to a patented bit of sorcery. Simon offered money to get the Holy Spirit for himself, but God is not a saleable commodity. God is personal. Not only is he personal, he's also holy, and that means he's not the sort of person who can be bribed or bought off, the way the gods of some religions supposedly favor those who give them gifts and bribes.

The third part of the magician's mistake was that Simon thought the new Christian way could simply be added to his old way and blended with it. Simon the Sorcerer saw some advantages in accepting Christ, but he didn't want to let go of his old religious and magical practices. However, the God revealed in Jesus can't be blended with other spiritual and occult notions. When the people of Samaria heard about Jesus, did they combine their new faith in Jesus with their old faith in Simon? No, when they started believing in Jesus, they stopped believing in Simon. Simon himself tried to follow Jesus and get the Holy Spirit without giving up his old ideas and practices, but the two spiritualities couldn't be blended.

Sorcery, Salesmanship, Syncretism

What does all of this have to do with us today? Well, if we're honest, we'll have to admit that much spirituality today has more in common with Simon the sorcerer than with the true disciples of Jesus Christ. More and more of us are making the magician's mistake and acting as though the Lord is an impersonal power rather than an all-powerful Person.

Simon wasn't so interested in getting to know the character of God or the Person of Jesus Christ; he just wanted to tap into a new Source of energy that would maximize his powers and make him even greater than before. Simon was more interested in using divine power to expand

his own potential and profitability than in loving a personal Father in heaven. We do much the same thing when our top priority is not in loving a personal God for who he is, but in finding techniques that will give us access to supernatural energies so that we can maximize our own powers.

And what's the result? As with Simon, there are three outcomes that are completely at odds with true religion: sorcery, salesmanship, and syncretism. First, sorcery: instead of praying to a personal God and depending humbly on how he chooses to answer, we rely on the sorcery of stargazing, crystals, mantras, visualization, mind control, shamanism, and other techniques that will supposedly bring supernatural power under our control. Second, salesmanship: instead of worshiping God with reverence and awe and loving him with all our heart, we treat him as one more consumer product to be bought and sold and marketed and distributed. Third, syncretism: instead of loving the living, personal God with an undivided heart, we resort to syncretism and try to blend some Christian ideas with other brands of spirituality. Sorcery, salesmanship, and syncretism—those are three products of the magician's mistake, of pursuing supernatural power without full commitment to the personal God.

Dealing With Syncretism

Let me say a bit more about the third item, syncretism. If you're not familiar with the word, it's spelled S-Y-N-C-R-E-T-I-S-M. Syncretism refers to blending parts of different religions together. Syncretism occurs when you take an idea or two from Christianity, a technique from Buddhism, a ceremony from earth worship, a myth from Greek legend or Jungian psychology, add a dash of contact with dead spirits or astrology or the powers of a crystal, and mix it all together to produce a religion that seems to work best for you.

Now, that might work if God were an impersonal power or energy that could be found in a variety of forms. But God is personal. He's not a thing or an ingredient that can be mixed together with a whole variety of supernatural ingredients. He's not some blend of spiritual energies drawn from various sources, and he's not some thing we create out of our own imagination. Since God is personal, syncretism is out.

This is hard to accept. Even where people are part of a church and claim to believe in Jesus, they may still count on other powers and spirits for help and guidance. They want Jesus to help with some things—especially their eternal destiny—and they want the Bible's wisdom on certain matters, but they also look to other sources of supernatural help besides Jesus and for other sources of supernatural guidance besides the Bible.

In Nigeria I've seen shrines which are supposed to honor God and Jesus—and those same shrines also included other gods and goddesses. I've been in villages where people say they believe in Jesus but still turn to a *boka*, a medicine man of the traditional folk religion, when they get sick. Some try to use magic spells to bring health and prosperity or to put a curse on an enemy. Such people may want Jesus and call themselves Christians, but they also want to be able to go to Simon the Sorcerer just in case he might be able to conjure up some power with his spells and magic tricks. They may believe in the Holy Spirit of God, but they may also try to get in touch with the spirit of a tree or a mountain or a particular region, or they may appeal to a god who specializes in crops or another god who specializes in supporting a particular cause, or they may appeal to dead ancestors and heroes from the past.

Such folk traditions and tribal religions go against God's Word in the Bible, but that has not prevented major churches from absorbing such things into their own teaching and practices. Veneration of dead saints parallels worshiping ancestors and dead heroes from the past. The idea

that different spirits control different geographical regions or parts of life has entered church life in the form of belief in patron saints. Instead of looking directly to the Lord for all things, people turn to their patron saint who supposedly specializes in what they want. The real saints in heaven would never want us to pray to them or trust in them to do something for us; they would tell us to pray to God in Jesus' name and to count on the Holy Spirit. Mary herself, the blessed mother of Jesus, would be horrified to be made an object of prayer or to be adored as a goddess who may sometimes treat us more kindly than Jesus would. We must beware lest veneration of saints and Mary become just another form of spiritism and goddess worship.

The Jealous God

When the personal God confronts us, we have to choose. We can't simply blend him with any superstitions and spiritualities and occult powers that we find appealing. In the Bible God says, "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5). This doesn't mean God is jealous in some irrational, nasty way. It means God is jealous in much the same sense as a loving husband who is furious if his wife has romantic affairs with other men. The Lord is absolutely unwilling to let his people have religious affairs with other gods and spiritual powers and ideas. He says, "Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14).

If you have a living, personal faith in the living, personal God, you will realize that he is a jealous God, that he refuses to stand by while you dabble with other spiritualities. When you truly know Jesus, you leave sorcery and occult techniques behind. When the people of Samaria got to know Jesus, Simon the sorcerer was out of business, and Simon himself had to face the evil in his own heart and repent and ask God's forgiveness and undergo a complete change.

The book of Acts tells of other occasions where the good news of Jesus came to town. In each case, sorcery was driven back, spirituality was no longer a matter of techniques that could be bought and sold, and people completely rejected their old ways in favor of knowing God as their Father and Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord, and the Holy Spirit as their loving friend within.

In Acts 16 we read of a slave girl who was a fortune teller and had a spirit that gave her unusual powers to predict the future. Her owners made lots of money charging people to hear this slave girl tell their futures. But then the apostle Paul came, preaching the good news of Jesus and telling people how to be saved. On the authority of Jesus, Paul forced the spirit to leave the girl. That was good for the girl, but it infuriated the men who had made so much money from her mysterious powers, and they caused big trouble for Paul and his friend Silas. The pattern is clear: sorcery driven back, salesmanship ruined, and syncretism rendered impossible. There was no way to blend fortune telling with a relationship to Jesus Christ.

Acts 19 tells of what happened in Ephesus when the good news of Jesus came to town. There were some men in the city who didn't have a personal faith in Jesus but had heard that there was great power in the name of Jesus, and so they tried to use the name of Jesus as a magic formula to drive an evil spirit out of a man. This backfired terribly. The man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

Many people in Ephesus heard about this. They realized that Jesus is a person and that his name is not just another magic word in an occult arsenal that can be used by people who don't really know him or trust him. The Bible says, "They were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly

confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.” Now, a drachma was a day’s wage, so that was fifty thousand days’ wages—up in smoke! What a bonfire!

How about you? Do you need to start an expensive bonfire? Is there something in your life that needs to go up in smoke? Are there books and videos and music albums and occult computer games that belong in the flames? What about horoscopes, crystals, amulets, tea leaves, witchcraft, ESP, seances, mantras, auras, shamanism, Ouija boards, tarot cards, and all the other garbage that is at best foolish hocus pocus and at worst dabbling in the demonic? You may already have paid good money for some of this, but get rid of it anyway!

Stop making the magician’s mistake. Forget about tapping into some impersonal power; instead, turn to an all-powerful Person. Turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. What Peter said to Simon, I say to you, “Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord.” Sorcery, salesmanship, and syncretism might work if God were an impersonal power, but God is a living, personal Being whom you must love and trust and obey.

Earlier I told of a man and woman gazing at a crystal for guidance. They were asking the crystal whether they should live together and when to buy a house. If they had looked to a personal God for guidance and listened to what God says in the Bible, they wouldn’t have needed even to ask whether they should move in together. God clearly says in the Bible that he doesn’t want a man and woman to share a home and a bed if they’re not married. The crystal, however, had no moral judgments to offer.

That’s one reason the magical approach to spirituality is so appealing. You get to feel that a supernatural force is with you without any sense of accountability to a personal God. You depend on your own interpretation of the twinkle of a crystal or of what you imagine a dead person might say to you, and you don’t have to hear the words of the living, personal, holy God. You don’t have to deal with the fact that he gives clear moral direction for your life and is terribly offended when you disobey his will.

But you can’t get rid of this jealous and holy God without also cutting yourself off from his love and his saving power in Jesus. So, again, I urge you: don’t make the magician’s mistake. Don’t try to depersonalize God. Don’t look for ways to harness the supernatural to serve your own ends. Instead, repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Throw all your ungodly spiritual techniques on the bonfire. Put this stuff in the garbage, where it belongs. Then yield yourself to the personal God who cannot be manipulated or controlled. Give your entire self to the loving God who gave his entire self for you, through the Lord Jesus Christ.

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