

A Theology for Using Gospel Magic



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Is there a Biblical basis for using magic tricks in evangelism? **Yes!** *If* we understand that magic tricks are a kind of *visual aid*. More conventional visual aids in evangelism tends to include story telling, drama, pictures and objects. Alongside these latter visual aids I would include magic tricks as being a legitimate means of illustration.

One of the main concerns held by Christians against those who do magic tricks, is that throughout the Bible, the activity of magic is consistently condemned. It is important then to look at the Biblical understanding of magic and contrast it with the kind of magic to which we are referring to in the rest of this booklet

Throughout the Bible, magic is described as the activity of sorcerers, magicians or wise men who use their knowledge as a means of trying to influence people and events. The magic they used was ritualistic and usually set within a cultic context.

Old Testament

K.A. Kitchen¹ introduces us to the vocabulary of magic used throughout the Old Testament. It is significant that the earliest books in the Bible uses the Hebrew term *hrtm* which is derived from the Egyptian term for magician. It is significant because some of our earliest pictures of magic tricks derive from the ancient Egyptians. The same Egyptian word can also be used for 'priest' thus emphasising the strong link between magic and religion. In the book of Genesis this is the name given to those wise men and advisers in the court of Pharaoh and who were asked by Pharaoh to interpret his dream. It was Joseph who made nonsense of their efforts by seeking this knowledge from God. (Gen. 41) In the book of Exodus it was the same group of people who opposed to Moses when he appealed to Pharaoh to let his people go. (Ex. 7) These magicians were able to duplicate Moses feats of turning his staff into a serpent, turning water into blood and in producing frogs. (Exodus 7:11, 7:22, 8:7). The account of this does not tell us if Pharaohs' magicians were able to accomplish this feat by supernatural occultic means or by devious trickery.

The other words used in the Old Testament referring to magic are tied with the practice and use of charms,(eg Deut. 18:11, Is 47:9) divination (Deut. 18:10, Ezk 21:21), the use of herbs, and snake charming (Psalms 58:5; Ec. 10:11; Jer. 8:17)

¹ K.A. Kitchen. Magic. Found in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. (Leicester: I.V.P. 1994) p931

In the Book of Daniel, the word *Kasdim* (Chaldean) refers to a class of people who had the role of magicians in the Babylonian court. Again we can infer their role from the stories told in Daniel. They were to advise the king, predict the future, and interpret dreams.

New Testament.

In the New Testament the word *magos* is used to describe the magi of Matthew's Gospel. Like '*Kasdim*', the word Magi came to be used to describe a racial group in Media who were especially renowned for their knowledge in astronomy and astrology. (Hence the Magi following the Star.) The word *magos* is also used to describe those practising sorcery and magic in the book of Acts. It is from the Greek language from which is derived our own English word 'magic'.

Archaeological surveys of ancient magic practices in the ancient Biblical world, describe activities which are often set in the context of a highly structured religious environment which is patronised by the ruling classes. Through the casting of spells, wearing of charms, and divination of the future, magic was seen as the main way to control the elements of both the supernatural and the natural world. The pagan gods were

supposedly pacified through magic rituals and thus control was believed to have been exerted over the elements of the seas and winds and other natural forces.²

The Bible's attitude towards these magic practices is outright condemnation. It is seen as a rival to true religion that undermines the sovereignty of God. The Bible explicitly forbids magic in Leviticus 19:26. Isaiah warns the people of Israel that despite their magic practices God will bring about his will. (Is. 47:9) It is because of the wide spread use of magic in Israel which brings God's judgement. Even the Kings and Queens practiced magic. For example Jezebel (2 Kings. 9:22) and Manesseh (2 Kings, 21:6)

The New Testament equally condemns the practice of magic and most explicitly so in the book of Revelations where those who practice magic and deceive others are condemned in judgement along with idol worshippers and the sexually immoral. (Rev. 9:21, 18:23, 21:8, 22:15.) In the book of Acts, there are various encounters with magicians and sorcerers and they are all overturned and rebuked by the work of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8 and 13.)

In view of this short summary of the Bible's teaching on the subject of magic we see there is a concern for any involvement in practices which involves magic or sorcery.

² For an illustrated insight into the magic world of the Egyptians see the work of F. Lexa. *La Magie dans l'Egypte Antique*. 3 Vols. (Paris:1925.)

There certainly is no Biblical precedent where Christians can be involved with magic in good conscience. So how can we advocate the use of magic with evangelism?

The answer to the above question refers to the nature of magic tricks described in this booklet. The problem for us, is that the word 'magic' is an ambiguous term which is loaded with lots of negative connotations linked with witchcraft, 'black and white magic', the occult, voodoo, and so on. All of these things come under the type of magic, which, is rejected by scripture as unacceptable to those who seek to please God.

So how can we justify using magic in Christian ministry. We need to demonstrate that the kind of magic that we do have *nothing to do* with the magic described in the Bible. The magic we do is not about appealing to pagan gods in order to influence people or events and we do not require people to believe that we hold supernatural powers. It is a form of entertainment in which people share the understanding that although they do not understand how the entertainer is accomplishing his/her feats they know it is by natural means as opposed to supernatural powers. Unfortunately, modern magicians often use occultic paraphernalia as a background 'dressing' for their act and this does mislead Christians into believing that their magic tricks are linked with the forbidden occult.

The word 'magic' is also widely used to refer to the trickery used by skilful entertainers to create illusions and stunts in which they apparently defy the natural laws of physics in their feats. It is this aspect of the word 'magic' which we are now going to define in the next section.

A Definition of Magic.

What do we mean by the word 'magic'? Henry Hay³ defines magic as the “art or game – of entertaining by tempting a particular audience to accept, temporarily, minor infractions of natural law.” And he suggests that these are mainly accomplished by manipulating the interest and perceptions of the audience. Through the use of mechanical apparatus, sleight-of-hand, misdirection, (making the audience look ‘the other way!’) and psychological associations, the entertainer is able to draw the audience into a world of make-believe where the impossible appears to happen.

A brief history of magic as an entertainment form.

Quite when magic became distinct from religion as a form of entertainment is not known. What we do know is that it goes back a long way into human history. Edwin Dawes⁴ suggests that the techniques of deception used by the Egyptian priests of pagan religions laid the foundations for a form of entertainment. He gives a fascinating account of some of the earliest records of magical performances found on tomb walls which described gruesome decapitation tricks. An ancient Egyptian magician called

³ H. Hay. *The Amateur Magician's Handbook*. (London. Signet Books.1983.)P 2.

⁴ E. A.Dawes. *The Great Illusionists*.(London. Chartwell Books Inc.1979)

Dedi was able to cut off the heads of chicken, geese and other livestock and restore them back to life. Milbourne Christopher⁵ also indicates that the Chinese had acrobats, jugglers and magicians in their courts during the same era as the Egyptians. Later on, during the time of Christ we have evidence that there were entertainers who specialised in conjuring tricks as a form of entertainment. John Fisher⁶ quotes the first century Latin philosopher, Seneca, who compared the politicians rhetoric of the day as being the verbal equivalent of the sleight-of-hand used by the conjurers he sees in the market place. Obviously, some things never change!

During the Middle Ages, troupes of 'jongleurs' toured the great European markets and entertained the crowds with a wide variety of performing skills including magic tricks. Some were so good that they were giving performances before Royalty. Isaac Fawkes in 1720 records a visit of Royalty to see his show in the Haymarket.

During the Victorian and Edwardian era, the Music halls regularly featured acts by magicians. The gentry amused themselves by hosting 'Parlour shows' in which entertainers were invited to give performances before a select audience in the drawing rooms of the wealthy. Robert Houdin, Maskelyne and Devant, Kellar, Chung Ling Soo and Harry Houdini all blazed trails as headline acts through the 1800's up to the 1920's. With the advent of television and movies, magical entertainers were able to reach a far wider audience with their skills than ever before. In Britain, David Nixon, and Paul

⁵ M. Christopher. *The Illustrated History of Magic*. (London:Robert Hale & Co.1973)

⁶ J. Fisher J. *Paul Daniels and the Story of Magic*. (London: Jonathan Cape.1987)

Daniels popularised magic tricks through their own television shows. Today, magic is still a regular feature of television with several of the children's programmes presenters using magic as a way of connecting with their young audiences. One of these young presenters is Dominic Wood, who went on to present the children's series 'Animal Magic', combining magic tricks with educational video clips about nature.

Today we can witness many forms of magic tricks, which are categorised by magicians into different groups. Close-up magic refers to tricks, which can be done right under the noses of the spectators. Typically this might involve doing tricks with playing cards, coins and matchsticks. Then there is mentalism magic which involves the magicians pretending to predict the future or reading people's minds. The word 'illusion' is used by magicians in a very specific way. It refers to stage-sized tricks involving people or animals. Cutting a woman in half would be categorised by magicians therefore as an illusion. One of the up-coming forms of magic gaining a wide audience is street magic. The cool 'street-cred' of David Blane and others as they stop people on the street and reduce their street audience to screaming in disbelief at the effect of their magical tricks has just got to be seen.

Gospel Magic

No one knows for sure when magic tricks were first used as a visual aid for the Gospel but we can look to both the Old and New Testament to see that God loved to use dramatic illustrations for his messages. The prophets of the Old Testament used vivid visual aids to dramatise Israel's relationship with God. From breaking pottery, to going naked, to burying soiled clothing, through to being tied up there seemed to be have been a no-holds-barred approach as to what they would do in order to gain a hearing for the Word of the Lord. Indeed, God himself communicated through dramatic signs. There was the whole business with Moses – appearing in a burning bush, turning a wooden staff into a snake, bringing various plagues on the Egyptians and then leading the Israelites through the parting of the sea and providing for them all through miraculous means. God's interaction with his people was dramatic and certainly not dull.

In the New Testament, Jesus continued communicating the message of God through visual ways. The parables drew on common images to illuminate spiritual truths. The dramatic healings, the exorcisms, the cursing of the fig tree were all means in which Jesus illustrated his message. There is a strong Biblical precedent for the use of visual aids in communicating the message of God.

The use of magic tricks in preaching and proclaiming the Gospel thus follows a Biblical pattern in seeking to use dramatic ways to illuminate truth. Magic tricks by their very nature, stimulate interest, intrigue and the element of surprise ensures that people go away remembering the encounter for a long time.

One reason why the use of magic tricks are effective visual aids in today's world is to do with the belief that we are now living in a society which is described as 'post-modern.' One of the features that mark this society is a rejection of the notion of universal truth. The 'big picture' ideologies of science, communism and religion have been found wanting. The question which lies on people's lips is not "What is truth?" but rather "What is true to me?" When they explore other religions and ideologies they are making decisions based not so much on objective rationale but on subjective experience. So they will be asking, "Does this feel right or true to me?" Consequently they are interested in stories which illuminate individual experience. Gone is the desire and interest in theoretical explanations of the universe, but 'in', is the interest in personal and illustrated examples in which faith is revealed as something that "works" for individuals.

This is where magic tricks can connect with today's audience. Combined as a visual aid with testimony, we will see the Christian message connect with our listeners. In one sense we have gone back to the original intention which laid behind Jesus' presentation of his message. He used visual aids not to just convey a new ideology or religion, but rather to expose each individual's needs to encounter a God of salvation and forgiveness. The Gospel stories show time and time again that Jesus met with

individuals, and through the use of visual aids brought their needs into the open and offered opportunity for a personal and intimate encounter with God through the Holy Spirit. The woman at the well story illustrates Jesus' approach very well (John, 4). I personally use this approach when sharing my own story of how I became a follower of Jesus by illustrating how I felt before my encounter with Jesus. I invite people to tie me up in handcuffs. Then I talk about the frustration I endured with my hearing impairment. I describe the sense of feeling trapped by the prejudices of others and my own sense of inadequacy. I visually and dramatically illustrate what Christ did for me when I escape from the handcuffs, explaining what I have been liberated from and how. This manner of story telling will have far more impact than trying to explain the Biblical truths of Christian freedom as an abstract idea. As a preacher we need to be aware that the majority of people grasp truth and ideas far more easily when they are presented in a concrete form. This is true even for educated people. A quick survey of the Sun newspaper is a study of how news is presented in a concrete manner. News stories are usually illustrated with reference to an individual's experience and story. Contrast the Sun newspaper approach with the Times or the Daily Telegraph and you see a vast difference in approach. The latter is much more theoretical and abstract in reporting a story. Using magic tricks in preaching makes truth become more accessible. It becomes a concrete illustration of something which by its very nature is abstract.

This is why the use of magic tricks in evangelism is so powerful. Why people who would not normally give the time of day to listening to a Christian message will stop and pay interest. It's because an abstract truth normally perceived as something which is

beyond their interest is presented to them in a way which, is not only attention holding because of its novelty but also enables them perhaps for the first time to engage clearly with the Christian message.

So what are the problems in using this medium as a way of communicating the Christian message?

One objection I have encountered over the years is that magic tricks entail deception. As a people who are called to speak the truth, surely it is incompatible to use a means of deception to communicate truth! A response to this which I use, is that although people may not understand how magic tricks work, there is no deception involved in as much that they know that the visual aid they have seen is a trick accomplished by clever natural means. We could argue that story telling could be deceptive for they are often calling on the listeners to enter into an imaginary world, which is not real and so is therefore a falsehood. Yet we have no problem in using stories to enable, because people can use their imaginations to make a story illuminate truth. The critic will respond and argue that everyone knows it is just a story and that they can make the distinction between fiction and non-fiction – then I make the same point for the use of magic tricks. People share an understanding that a magic trick is not 'real' but is a visual aid with a difference.

Another concern raised over the years is that the use of magic tricks is so strongly linked with entertainment, that the message of God might be trivialised or even over-shadowed by the use of magic tricks.

The Oxford Dictionary defines entertainment as a way of holding people's attention. Surely when we preach we want to hold people's attention? The tragedy is that often sermons do not hold people's attention, and despite the excellent and truthful content of the message, they are ineffective because people simply have not had their attention or interest gripped. This comment also makes an assumption that somehow entertainment is not good, or at the very least it is seen as inappropriate for communicating truth.

Some of the most powerful conveyors of truth have been from the entertainment industry. Countless Hollywood movies can inspire us, and impact us with their powerful portrayal of historical events and ideologies. Movies like Ghandi, Cry Freedom, The Mission, Schindler's List and Saving Private Ryan are all deadly serious in communicating the mistakes of history, and succeed far more successfully than a mere talk.

Entertainment is sometimes derided as too trivial to ally with the task of proclaiming the Gospel. However, in the light of understanding that the word entertainment means 'to hold the attention of,' it is evident that there can be no conflict of interest. If we succeed in holding the interest of our audience, then the Gospel is more likely to be heard and received by open minds. The tragedy is that too often we do not hold the attention of our audience and the Gospel is not even heard, let alone received.

I believe that when the crowds went to see Jesus speak in the hills or from a boat, they went to see not some serious philosopher, but an engaging and lively communicator who used vivid and entertaining images to grip his listeners' attention. There is something very funny and entertaining about removing a speck from your brother's eye when you cannot move a log from your own!

As for the charge that magic tricks overcome the message; that can be true for any visual aid. We all know times when a good message has been flogged to death through the overuse of a visual aid. Care needs to be taken that the visual aid is appropriate and helpful in making a valid point.

For the parish minister who wants to break into new areas of his community, this is a skill, which can pay dividends. It is often assumed that this is something that only the 'children will like'. The truth is every generation is fascinated by magic tricks, and it has an almost universal appeal. I have performed in countries where the culture and language is far removed from my own, and my testimony is that magic tricks go down a treat there as well as they do here.

Finally, magicians are encouraged to keep the secrets of their tricks to themselves.

There are several reasons for this. The first is that it simply defies the point of the visual aid if one immediately explains how it is done. Secondly, the audience don't want to know how the trick is done. The reaction of the audience when they are told the secret

of a trick is usually disappointment, as they like the challenge of having to work things out for themselves. Once they are told how the trick is done this leads to disinterest and occasionally annoyance that they had been taken in so easily. One motto found in the Fellowship of Christian Magicians is 'Keep the secret, share the word.'

I hope I have demonstrated that it is possible to use magic tricks in Christian ministry as a visual aid. By providing some examples of magic tricks which lend themselves to a Christian message we hope that you are equipped to begin the first steps of using this medium as a feature of your own ministry.

Where to go next? Andrew David has written an easy to follow guide, with step-by-step instructions for ten gospel magic routines and messages which anyone can do.

To find out more about Andrew David's instantly downloadable ebook on

How to do Gospel Magic

then click right away on the following link:

<http://www.gospelemagic.com>