

# Are Ghosts Real?

The morning program on a Dallas radio station recently featured a story about one of the show personalities going to a “ghost hunt” at a supposedly haunted hospital. The staffer came back with video of a flashlight turning on and off by itself. She went as a skeptic but came back as a believer.

In ghosts.

She offered her perspective: we all go to heaven or hell, but some people get delayed on their way to their final destination. The discussion opened a stream of callers eager to share their “knowledge” about ghosts, such as the woman who has slept in cemeteries to learn about spirits. “Sometimes children don’t know they’ve died,” she assured the radio audience.

Are ghosts real? How should we think about ghost hunting and anecdotes of people seeing disembodied spirits? My grandmother reported that she had seen her late husband walking through the living room years after he died; what do we do with stories like that?

It really doesn’t matter how we feel or what we think—the only thing that matters is what God has revealed to us about the spirit world. And there is no room in a biblical worldview for the spirits of dead people wandering around, stirring up mischief or playing with flashlights.

The Bible says that “It is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). That means heaven or hell. The apostle Paul wrote that for the believer in Christ, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). In chilling language, Deuteronomy 18 forbids any kind of dabbling with the occult, which the pagans already living in the Promised Land indulged in, and which God absolutely prohibited:

“When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.

There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer,

or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.

For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.” (vv. 9-12)

Ghost-hunting is seeking occult encounters, which is the domain of evil spirits, and God warns us to stay far away from all of it.

But people, lots of people, have reported seeing *something*. How should we interpret seeing those who have died, and inanimate objects moving of their own accord? I would suggest that this is all the work of demons, evil angels who have rebelled against God. God’s word tells us they masquerade as something other than what they are; Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Devils lie and deceive. It makes sense that they would deceive people by appearing as ghosts and impersonating dead people. Whether they terrorize the living through fear or just distract us from what is true and good, it’s all the work of God’s enemy.

We not only live in a fallen world, we live in a war zone where we walk around as targets of the enemy, whether we recognize it or not. Paul wrote that we struggle against the powers of this dark work and against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12). Part of that spiritual war is the strategy of terrorism or distracting us by things like counterfeit ghosts and the movement of physical objects by unseen but real spirit beings who can

manipulate the physical world.

When I think about the radio listeners who called in to offer their “knowledge” about ghosts, I found myself thinking about the critical-thinking “[Killer Questions](#)” that we ought always be using as a filter for what we read, see and hear. Especially “Where do you get your information?” and “How do you know that’s true?” Someone who sleeps in a cemetery to gain information about the spirit world may well be receiving information from “the other side,” but how accurate and trustworthy is it? Why should she believe everything the spirits are telling her? What kind of spirits are feeding her “facts” about how things work in the spirit realm?

I am grateful for the trustworthiness and reliability of God’s word that tells me how to think about ghost-hunting and ghost-busters. It’s about messing with demons pretending to be something other than what they are. (In my angel article [Angels: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#), I call them “ugly angels”) That’s why He forbids us to dabble with anything dark and occult. He wants to protect us because He’s a good, good Father.

This blog post originally appeared at  
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# The World of Animism – A

# Biblical Perspective

# Worldview

*The belief in spirits and their effect on our world appears in just about every culture. Christianity should replace this anti-Christian worldview, but instead many Christians just incorporate it into their own belief system. Dr. Pat Zukeran contrasts these two belief systems.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

## Worldview of Animism

From Genesis to the present, the biblical worldview has clashed with the worldview of animism. Animism (or folk religion) is a religion that sees a spirit or spiritual force behind every event, and many objects of the physical world carry some spiritual significance.

In most parts of the world, animism blends in with formal religions. Among followers of the major religions lie many animistic beliefs and practices. Animistic beliefs actually dominate the world. Most Taiwanese believe in the Chinese folk religions. Most Hindus and Muslims in Central and Southeast Asia, and most Buddhists in China and Japan combine their religion with various animistic beliefs and practices. In many parts of the world, Christianity has not displaced the local folk religion but coexists beside it in an uneasy tension.

The animistic worldview contains both the observed or physical world and the unseen or spirit world. There is no sharp distinction between the two realities; what happens in one affects the other. The seen or physical world consists of what we can see, feel, and experience. It includes forces of nature and physical beings. In the seen world the earth plays a prominent role because it is viewed as a living entity and is

often worshiped as Mother Earth. Nature is believed to be alive. Hills, caves, mountains, and lakes are often revered as sacred places. Animals may be embodiments of spirits. Many are worshiped as sacred, such as the cow and monkey in India.

Plants can also contain spirits and some are worshiped. Forests are seen as places where the spirits dwell. Trees like oaks, cedars, and ash are worshiped in Europe. In many parts of the world, there exist numerous subhuman beings that are supposed to live in lakes, forests, and caves. For example, in Europe they include mythical beings like trolls, gnomes, and fairies.

The unseen world of animism begins with the understanding of "mana," or the life force that permeates the entire universe. This power is impersonal and not worshiped. This sacred power concentrates more heavily in the deities, sacred people, places, or objects. This mana rules over all creation and is not controlled by the gods or man.

Also part of the unseen world is the Supreme God. Following him are a host of lesser gods who dwell in particular regions. Following the gods are the spirits, who often dwell in nature and are confined to a specific area. Then there are the spirits of the ancestors who continue to play a role with the living.

There also exist unseen forces that include supernatural powers like fate, cosmic moral order, the evil eye, magic, and witchcraft. There are also impersonal energy forces in objects that give the objects power. These objects are believed to give a person power to do good or evil.

In the Bible, God transforms the animistic views of Israel into a biblical view. He teaches them that the other gods are not gods at all (Isaiah 43:10). He condemns the use of magic, witchcraft, and divination. He shows that suffering is not the result of the spirits or the gods but His sovereign act of

bringing people back to Himself.

## Themes in Animism

Do you ever wonder why some Christians worship their ancestors? It derives from the first of several themes within the ancient religion of animism. The first of the themes is a community-centered life. The ancestors, the living, and the unborn are the center of existence. The clan life is the most important entity because an individual has meaning only in the context of a community.

The second theme is the role of the spirit world. Humans live in a world surrounded by supernatural beings and forces, most of which are hostile to humans. The worlds of the seen and the unseen are interconnected. For this reason, people spend their time seeking to appease the gods, the spirits, and the ancestors with offerings or bribes. Extreme care is taken to maintain the harmony between the two worlds. Since all created things are connected, a simple act like eating a fruit from the wrong tree may bring disaster.

Third is the focus on the present. The primary concern is with the here and now. People seek to deal with success and failure, power and knowledge needed to control life.

Fourth is the focus on power. People view themselves as constantly struggling against spirits, other humans, and supernatural forces. Everything that happens can be explained by powers at war. The goal is to attain power to control the forces around them.

Fifth is pragmatism. Animists are not interested in academic understanding of spiritual and scientific truth but in securing good, meaningful life and protection from evil. The test of a folk religion is, "does it work?" To achieve their goals, most people will turn to several methods that may be contradictory in hopes that one will work. I was once speaking

to a Chinese woman who was suffering from lung cancer. Although she attended church and prayed to the Lord for healing, she also visited the Chinese Buddhist temple seeking prayers for healing from the priests. For those in animistic cultures, in times of need people will beseech aid from various religions or gods to find a method that works.

Sixth is transformation and transportation. Things may not be what they appear to be. Spirits can take the form of animals or plants. Shamans in a trance believe they can travel to distant places and bring harm to an enemy. They also believe they can travel to the spirit world, find information, or retrieve lost souls.

Seventh, animism takes a holistic view of life. The obsession with invoking good luck and avoiding bad luck involves every aspect of life—from what you eat, to where you place furniture (such the current feng shui fad), to how you sleep. In Al Hambra, Los Angeles where there is a large population of Chinese, houses with the number “4” in the address do not sell. The number four, pronounced “shee” in Chinese, is the first letter in the word for death, so the number is considered very unlucky.[\[1\]](#)

Eighth is particularism. People are tied to their land. Each community has its own set of gods and spirits. The gods gave the people their land, and that is where the ancestors reside. In battles, victories and defeats are attributed to the power of the territorial gods.

Finally, fear plays a major role. In a world full of spirits, omens, and spells, life is rarely secure. Many see the world as a hostile and dangerous place filled with spirits and forces antagonistic to people. Seemingly mundane activities such as moving the wrong rock can bring potential disaster. People turn to their ancestors, gods and spirits for protection.

The focus of the Christian life, in contrast, is the relationship believers have with God. God's relationship with mankind is based on grace and love. Since God is gracious, He does not need to be constantly appeased by believers. His laws are clearly revealed to us in the Bible. When we disobey, we may suffer the consequences of our sin or experience His discipline, which is always motivated by His love and intended to bring us to a right relationship with Him. In times of difficulty, we do not fear His wrath but He invites us to draw even closer to Him. 1 John 4:16-18 says, "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like Him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear . . . ." Although believers encounter tragedy and suffering, we do not live in fear but in faith, trusting in the character of God.

## **Gods in Animism**

It may surprise you that most animistic religions teach that there exists one Supreme Being. He is often described as omniscient, eternal, beneficent, omnipotent and righteous. He is the creator, the moral lawgiver, punishes those who do evil, and blesses those who do good.

However, this being has distanced himself from man and cannot be known personally. Legends abound that he was once near but was angered with man and removed himself. He left men to their own devices and used lesser gods and spirits to do His will and serve as His ambassadors.

Therefore, most of the worship goes to the lesser gods and spirits who are in direct contact with humans. Anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt studied numerous cultures and concluded that man's first religion was monotheism, which then corrupted into polytheism.[\[2\]](#) This would concur with Paul's timeline of man's rejection of God that he lays out in Romans 1.



An example comes from the folk religion of China. Long before Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism, the Chinese worshiped Shang Ti, the Lord of heaven. He alone was worshiped until the Zhou dynasty, which began in 1000 B.C. From then on, only the emperor was allowed to pay homage to Shang Ti, and the knowledge of Shang Ti among the common people was lost. The worship-starved Chinese eventually embraced the religions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that provided spiritual knowledge and worship.[\[3\]](#) Numerous stories like these abound throughout the world. In Korea, the supreme God is called Hananim. The Gedeo people of Ethiopia call Him Magano. Missionaries use this belief of a high God to point people to the God of the Bible.

Following the Supreme God is a host of lesser gods. These beings mediate between man and the Supreme Being, but must first be paid homage. Gods possess specific powers and are localized to a geographical area. The gods inhabit places such as rivers, mountains, forests, oceans, etc. Some gods exercise power over human affairs (business, marriage, death, etc.) other gods exercise powers over nature (storms, rain, etc.) Among the Hawaiians, Lono is the god of the oceans and controls the clouds and storms. Pele, the fire goddess, dwells in the volcanoes. Many still honor these gods in Hawaii today.

The biblical worldview teaches that a personal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God governs the universe (Colossians 1:16-17). He alone rules creation and there are no other gods besides him (Isaiah 43:10). The God of the Bible is not distant from man, but mankind has distanced ourselves from God. God remains involved in the affairs of this world, constantly pursuing men and women to receive His gift of grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

## **Spirits and Ancestors**

Do you ever wonder if there are spirits in forests or other dark places? Can the dead communicate with the living? Animism

holds to a belief that numerous spirits exercise their power over places where they dwell, such as mountains, streams, and rivers. Spirits have never inhabited human bodies, and since they can be either good or evil they must constantly be appeased. For example, the South Sea islanders ask forgiveness of the trees they cut down for canoes so that the spirits of the trees will not harm them.[\[4\]](#)

There also exist legendary half-divine beings. Some are humans who became gods. Some gods are thought to have become human. For example, the pharaoh of Egypt and the emperor of Japan were believed to be descendants of the sun god. Many teach these beings had supernatural birth and did not die, but vanished into the sky. Many are believed to have taught humans valuable skills like making fire, canoes, houses, planting fruits, etc.

Important in animism is the remembrance of the ancestors. Animism teaches that people possess immortal souls. At death the soul is free to wander near the grave, travel the earth, or enter the world of the spirits. The spirits of the ancestors participate in the daily lives of family members. Neglecting to honor them has severe consequences. Souls of the departed who did not live fulfilled lives or died tragic deaths become ghosts. Ghosts search for bodies to inhabit and often bring harm.

At death, one enters the realm of the ancestors who maintain a relationship with the family. Ancestors remain deeply interested in the family they began. They care for, protect, and punish those who seek to do harm.

Ancestors are revered for several reasons. First, as the founders of the family, they remain interested in the care of the family. Second, they have answered the question of what follows death, so they can help the living through dreams, necromancers, and visions. Third, some have accomplished great achievements, which must be celebrated. Fourth, animists

believe they protect the family. Fifth, they function as mediators between God and the family.

One's happiness in the afterlife depends on the care given by one's descendants. Anyone banished from a family or tribe in essence becomes extinct with no one to remember or care for them.

As Christians, we agree with the animists that there is an immaterial soul that exists beyond the grave. We also place the family as a high priority. One of the Ten Commandments is for children to honor their father and mother. However, no departed souls remain on earth. According to Hebrews 9:27 upon death, one is immediately in heaven or hell. Secondly, the dead do not have contact with the living. In Luke 16, the rich man who was suffering in hell sought a way to communicate with his living family to warn them of their fate. However, he was not able to communicate in any way nor could the living communicate with him. Christians celebrate and honor the memory of our loved ones, but we do not worship them nor seek to appease their spirits. We wait with joy and anticipation in knowing we will be united again in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Basic Practices in Animism**

In animism there are numerous taboos or prohibitions. Prohibitions are made to preserve the harmony between the spiritual world and physical world. Places or people where the life force is concentrated are protected. Myriads of taboos exist and violation of them can result in cursing of a community and must be atoned for by sacrifices.

Second, there are sacred places. Sacred places of worship exist to commune with the spiritual world. These are places where sacred power is concentrated. In Haiti there is a sacred tree where a pact with the devil was signed over 200 years ago by the animistic witch doctors. These witch doctors were most

displeased when Christian pastors recently prayed over the tree and successfully commanded the spirits to leave it.

Third, there are sacred things. A whole host of objects possess power and are potentially dangerous. Stones are often believed to possess sacred power. This is one reason you can easily find crystal jewelry and other semi-precious stones for sale in catalogs and stores. Certain plants and insects are believed to be sacred and taboo. Carved images are believed to possess the spirit of divinities.

Fourth, there are sacred actions. Worship includes sacrifices of animals or plants to the deities. The priests or shamans perform the sacred rites. Omens play an essential role; this is the origin of saying "God bless you" after someone sneezes, to protect the spirits from jumping into the suddenly vulnerable person. Signs in the heavens and certain reptiles or animals encountered in a day (such as a black cat crossing one's path portending bad luck) may predict one's future.

Fifth, there are sacred words. There are many oaths, curses, and blessings. The spells of both white and black witchcraft are sacred words. Words are charged with sacred power if uttered by a priest. Such words possess the sacred power, mana.

Sixth, there are sacred persons. Witches use their powers for good and evil. They can use their powers to protect communities from enemies. They can use their power to communicate with the gods and spirits. In most societies, witchcraft and sorcery are most feared. Witches are believed to travel great distances in short periods, kill at a distance, and master demons. Witches have supernatural powers to inflict harm on others. They can cast spells on others. They can inject foreign bodies into a victim, causing illness. Witches have the ability to communicate with dead spirits. Many societies believe they can transform themselves into animals.

Then there is the shaman or the medicine man. He can cure sicknesses. He directs sacrificial rites and escorts souls to the other world. At times he can leave his body and observe events from a distance. He is born into the family or earns the job by passing tests and rituals. There is also the sacred king. Then there are sub-humans such as trolls and water spirits. Finally there are "little people," such as leprechauns.

Seventh, there are sacred rituals that must be performed regularly. The head of the family performs some; others require the expertise of the priests.

Eighth, there is the practice of magic and divination. The art of casting spells and communicating with the spirit world are reserved for the priests.

The Christian must be aware when his practices are influenced by animism. Often many feel that saying "amen" or wearing a cross brings protection. Others use sacred stones or believe performing a ritual will bring them fortune. A Christian has direct access to God through Christ and does not need to rely on another person of a sacred office. Also, Christians have all we need in Christ and do not need powers from the spiritual realm. Christ has given us all we need to overcome.

## **Overcoming Animism**

As our study has revealed, fear is the overriding disposition among those in animistic religions. There are several reasons for this. First, one is never really sure if a taboo has been broken and the gods, the spirits, or the ancestors have been angered. Should one of these beings become angered, they may inflict horrific punishments. In Hawaii, there are several frightening stories about the night marchers, the spirits of ancient warriors who march along a sacred path each night. It is believed that some people have been killed because they were in the path of the night marchers.

A second reason for the prevalence of fear is that animism includes some of the most feared practices known to man. Sorcery, magic and voodoo are some of the ancient arts that strike terror in the hearts of people. It is a frightening thing to know that a priest or witch has placed a curse upon you.

Throughout the Bible and even today, believers continually encounter animistic practices and thinking. In times of crisis, many young Christians will pray to God, but also seek help from their animistic religion.

Among Christians, animistic beliefs will be displaced only when Christians transform their minds with God's word and free themselves from the life of fear in animism. Transformation takes place when Christians understand the Bible explains the true nature of the universe. First, in contrast to the many temperamental gods in animism, the Bible teaches that there is only one God. Isaiah 43:10 states, "'You are my witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.'" There is no pantheon of gods—only the one true God, and all others are false gods.

Second, in the Bible God forbids the animistic practices of witchcraft, necromancy, magic, and worship of foreign spirits. Deuteronomy 18:10 commands, "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination, sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who consults the dead." Those who practice these arts are entertaining spirits who are opposed to God and seek the destruction of all people.

Third, Christians do not need to live in fear of hostile spirit beings and spells. Christ, who loves His people, has triumphed over all. Colossians 2:15 says that He "disarmed the powers and authorities, [making] a public spectacle of them,

triumphing over them by the cross.”

Christ has brought into submission all authorities under His rule. Not only that, nothing enters into our life until it first filters through His loving hand. God’s hand of protection shelters His people. David wrote in the Psalms, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God whom I trust’” (Ps. 91:1). When tragedy strikes, Christians understand that its purpose is not to punish believers, but to teach us new things about God and ourselves, refining our character to make us more like Him. Christians can be freed from a life of fear and find joy in a life of faith in Christ.

## Notes

1. Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1999), 157.
2. Norman Anderson. *The World’s Religion*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 38.
3. Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*. (Ventura, CA.: Regal Press, 1984), 62-70.
4. Hiebert, 55-56.

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# Don't Wish Me Luck

*Dec. 6, 2011*

A Christian high school in the Chicago area displayed a disturbing message for one of their teams on their marquee: "Good luck in the State Finals!" I knew they were wishing them well, but unwittingly, the message writer had bought into an unbiblical worldview.

There is no such thing as luck!

The concept of luck is an animistic belief, which is the core of folk religion worldwide: a belief in the unseen world that is populated by various kinds of spirits such as the spirits of the dead (ghosts) and nature spirits, as well as unseen supernatural forces: fate, the "evil eye," magic, witchcraft, impersonal energy forces ("chi") . . . and luck.

People think of good luck as a supernatural force that has to be attracted, or coaxed ("Come on, double sixes!"), or somehow manipulated to work for us. And bad luck is an unseen negative force that we need to protect ourselves from. So people put their trust in sacred or magical objects and actions in hope of manipulating this supposed force of luck.

When I was young, I wore a "miraculous medal" on my watch, a charm that I believed would keep me safe. I see rosaries



hanging from rear view mirrors for the same purpose. Then there are magic/sacred items thought to bring luck: a rabbit's foot, a horseshoe, a four-leaf clover. Lots of people scheduled weddings and other events on November 11 of this year (11-11-11) in the belief it would bring them luck. (One woman on the Dr. Phil show was planning to marry for the eleventh time on 11-11-11 because she thought it would bring her luck after ten bad marriages! Wisely, Dr. Phil told her she didn't need luck, she needed pre-marriage counseling.)

The idea of luck as a force to be wielded, much like "The Force" in Star Wars, plays no part in a biblical view of life and reality. But lots of people believe in it anyway, because the majority of people, including Christians, do not think biblically. They are captive to the false ideas of the surrounding culture, one of which is animism.

[Animism](#) is a degradation of a true understanding of reality, which has been revealed by God in His word: that God has created things we can see, which are temporal, and things we can't see, which are eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). The unseen spiritual dimension contains both good and evil spirits—angels and demons—as well as the souls of people who have died and now exist either in heaven or in hell. They do not wander around looking for rest. The evil spirits—demons—do have limited power, mainly lies, schemes and deceptions. But God's power is always greater.

If you're looking for favor and blessing, don't hope for luck. Look to the God of grace. He is the source of favor and blessing. And His power is the strongest in the universe, which is why trustful dependence on Him is the best way to tap into that power. Not trying to manipulate it—but asking for it in humility and trust.

Which is why I say, don't wish me luck. It doesn't exist.

Ask for God's blessing instead.

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue\\_bohlin/dont\\_wish\\_meLuck](https://blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/dont_wish_meLuck)

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# **“What About Ghosts in a Haunted House?”**

I’ve found your site helpful as I create a bible study on spirituality and dangerous “spiritualties.” I read over Michael Gleghorn’s [“Communicating with the Dead,”](#) but I felt it didn’t deal directly with my question for my Sunday School class this week: What does the Bible want us to think about ghosts and supposed ghostly encounters? Several people in our church have experienced what they call ghosts in their homes, and I want to explore what the Bible says about that during our class. Michael’s essay spoke about the small chance that souls from heaven, like Lazarus’s and Abraham’s, could return for very special occasions; what about the weird things that fall outside of human experience in a so-called haunted house? Should we always assume those are evil spirits parading as ghosts? What Bible verses help us to understand those things?

As I argue in my article, the Bible seems to suggest that it is a very rare event for a person who has died to return to earth to communicate some message to those still living. Also, given that the rich man was not able to return to warn his brothers (even though he wanted to), it seems that a dead person could only return with the permission of God (as one supposes was the case with Samuel returning to Saul to pronounce God’s judgment upon him, or with Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration). If this is correct, then I think that we would have to regard the vast majority of ghostly sightings, etc., to be either visions

(caused by God or some other power), or hallucinations (caused by drugs, lack of sleep, sickness, psychological problems, a close emotional bond with the deceased, etc.), or demons. Of course, as I said, there may also be the rare instance when God allows a deceased person to return for some reason. In addition, I suppose a ghostly encounter could also be explained in terms of an angelic visitation.

The bottom line, I think, is this: when it comes to questions of this sort, I don't think the Bible speaks clearly (or explicitly) enough to the issue for us to be dogmatic. There are many possible options for the sort of phenomena you mention—and each would have to be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis.

Morally and spiritually speaking, the Bible seems much more concerned to warn us against trying to communicate with the dead than it does in answering our questions about the nature of ghostly encounters, etc. This, I think, is the really important point: we are forbidden to attempt to make contact with the dead. If God wants to send someone back with a message, that's His business. Ours is to obey His commands. Having said this, however, I personally think that most ghostly sightings are probably either visions or hallucinations. Some may be demonic, others angelic. Rarest of all, I think, is the actual return of a dead person, but even this (as I've said) is not impossible—assuming that God commands it for some reason.

I hope this helps a little.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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# “What About the Witch of Endor Calling Up Samuel’s Spirit?”

I just read the [Animism](#) article. It states that Christianity specifically teaches against the existence of ghosts (spirits of dead people) in the world, and that dead people cannot communicate with the living and vice versa. What about the passage in I Samuel 28 with Saul and the witch of Endor? She calls up Samuel’s spirit to communicate with Saul.

The incidence in 1 Samuel 28 is one of two exceptions to the “no crossing over” boundaries in scripture, both highly supernatural miracles. The witch of Endor had no power to truly conjure up the spirits of dead people; that’s why she screamed in terror when Samuel actually appeared. It was God at work, not the witch or even the departed prophet responding to the summons. Samuel gave the word of the Lord to Saul, and his prophecy was fulfilled shortly thereafter.

The other miracle was when Moses and Elijah appeared along with a transfigured Christ to Peter, James and John (Matt. 17). The disciples did not summon the spirits of these dead saints; they were sent by the Father (probably to encourage the Lord Jesus).

The fact that there are two biblical exceptions, both of which required divine intervention to send departed spirits into this world, does not affect the truth that there is a “great gulf fixed” between the living and the dead (Luke 16:26). That’s the point of miracles: they are God-powered exceptions.

Hope this helps!

# Communicating with the Dead – A Christian Perspective on Its Reality

*Can John Edward and James Van Praagh really communicate with the dead? Michael Gleghorn takes a skeptical and biblical look at the phenomenon of after-death communication.*

<https://www.ministeriosprobe.org/docs/comunicacion-muertos.htm>



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

## Mediums and the Media

Both John Edward and James Van Praagh are highly sought-after mediums who claim to possess the ability to communicate with the dead. Each has his own Web site and hit television show. They have both authored best-selling books, been interviewed by television personalities and news journalists, and each has about a three-year waiting list for personal readings.

“According to a recent Gallup Poll, 38 percent of Americans believe ghosts or spirits can come back in certain situations. In 1990, it was 25 percent. Today, 28 percent think some people can hear from or ‘mentally’ talk to the dead, compared with 18 percent 11 years ago.”[\[1\]](#) Some believe that the increased interest in after-death communication is a “spillover from the growing interest in alternative medicine and Eastern spirituality.”[\[2\]](#) But whatever the cause, the popularity of self-proclaimed mediums like Edward and Van

Praagh has soared in recent years.

John Edward was 15 when he first learned of his life's work.[{3}](#) He received a reading from a psychic who told him that he would help bring comfort to the living by reuniting them with those who had crossed over to the other side. Since



then, John has gone from doing private readings in his home to making appearances on popular radio and television shows. He has been a guest on *Entertainment Tonight*, *The Crier Report*, and *The Maury Povich Show*, just to name a few. He's also been interviewed by *The New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and others. He's authored three books, produced a series of audio tapes that explain how to communicate with the other side, and, since June 2000, he's had his own television show, *Crossing Over with John Edward*.



The story of James Van Praagh is similar. On his Web site we learn that James was 24 when a medium told him that he would be in the same line of work within just two years.[{4}](#) Although James was initially skeptical, he soon realized that he indeed had the ability to communicate with the dead. Since that time, James has gone from doing psychic readings for friends, to making television appearances on such

shows as NBC's *The Other Side*, *Oprah*, and *20/20*. In addition to writing four books, he's produced two meditation tapes and a video about psychic development. The popular CBS mini-series, *Living with the Dead*, was based on his life and work. And since September 2002, he's been the star of his own

television show, *Beyond with James Van Praagh*.

What are Christians to make of all this? Is there good evidence that Edward and Van Praagh can really communicate with the dead? And what, if anything, does the Bible say about such matters? These are just a few of the questions that we will wrestle with in this article.

## The Tricks of the Trade

Both John Edward and James Van Praagh claim the mediumistic ability to communicate with the dead. And thousands of adoring fans believe these claims are true. One reporter tells the story of Sally Morrison, who visited Edward after the death of her husband.[\[5\]](#) During the reading, Edward reportedly asked her, “I’m getting a screwdriver; what does that mean to you?” Ms. Morrison remembered that the day before she had spent an hour looking for a screwdriver in her late husband’s tool box. Afterward she told the reporter, “It was such an everyday thing to bring up. But to me, it was incredibly comforting, a sign that Paul had been there.” Apparently, Ms. Morrison was persuaded that Edward had really made contact with her late husband. Similar stories could also be told of James Van Praagh’s apparent successes.

But if this is so, why haven’t Edward and Van Praagh managed to convince the skeptics? Michael Shermer, who I must point out is also skeptical of Christianity, observes that there are three techniques commonly used by mediums to convince people of their alleged paranormal powers: cold reading, warm reading, and hot reading.[\[6\]](#) These techniques might be thought of as the tricks of the trade, so to speak.

In cold reading, mediums make use of methods that help them “read” a person who was unknown to them in advance. Such methods may include observing body language, asking questions, and inviting the subject to interpret vague statements.[\[7\]](#) For



instance, by carefully observing body language and facial expressions, the medium can often get a good idea of whether or not he's on the right track. Also, by asking questions and inviting the subject to interpret vague statements, the medium can gain valuable information. This information can then be used later in the reading to make what appear to be stunningly precise revelations from the spirit world. Indeed, Shermer contends that by effectively applying these techniques, the medium actually gets the subject to do the reading for him![\[8\]](#) Skeptics hold that both Edward and Van Praagh make use of such methods.

Warm reading involves making statements that tend to apply to most anyone. For example, many people carry a piece of jewelry that belonged to their dead loved one. By asking if the subject is carrying such jewelry, the medium has a good chance of making a "hit." This can give the impression that the information was divined from a paranormal source. In reality, of course, it may have been nothing more than a highly probable guess.

The last technique, hot reading, actually involves getting information about a subject *before* the reading begins! But surely Edward and Van Praagh have not availed themselves of such methods. Not according to the skeptics! It appears that both mediums have apparently been caught red-handed using "hot reading" techniques.

## Caught in the Act

Skeptics contend that self-proclaimed mediums John Edward and James Van Praagh have both been caught red-handed using "hot reading" techniques. "Hot reading" involves gathering information about a subject *prior* to doing the reading. Although most skeptics agree that such techniques are probably not used as much now as they were by spiritists in the past, there seem to be strong indications that both Edward and Van



Praagh have, on occasion, attempted to obtain information about their subjects in advance.

In an article written for the *Skeptical Inquirer*, Joe Nickell describes one such episode involving John Edward.[{9}](#) The incident occurred on a *Dateline* special. During a group reading, Edward indicated that the spirits were telling him to acknowledge someone named Anthony. The cameraman signaled Edward that that was his name. Edward appeared surprised and asked, "Had you not seen Dad before he passed?" John Hockenberry, the *Dateline* reporter, was initially quite impressed with this revelation. The cameraman's name was Anthony and his father was dead. Hockenberry later learned what really happened.

Earlier in the day, Anthony "had been the cameraman on another Edward shoot."[{10}](#) The two men had talked and Edward had learned of the death of Anthony's father. When confronted by Hockenberry in a later interview, Edward reluctantly admitted as much. Of course, Edward still maintained that he got this information from the spirits as well. But can anyone blame the skeptic for being suspicious?

Michael Shermer relates a similar incident, this one involving James Van Praagh, which occurred on 20/20.[{11}](#) While relaxing during a break, Van Praagh asked a young woman, "Did your mother pass on?" The woman shook her head, but said that her grandmother had died. Unfortunately for Van Praagh, the cameras had accidentally been left rolling during the break. The entire episode was caught on tape! Unaware of this, Van Praagh later turned to the woman during his reading and said, "I want to tell you, there is a lady sitting behind you. She feels like a grandmother to me." Afterward, when confronted by 20/20's Bill Ritter with the video evidence captured during the break, Van Praagh insisted, "I don't cheat. I don't have to prove . . . I don't cheat. I don't cheat. I mean, come on. . . ." Shermer concludes, "Interesting. No one said anything about cheating. The gentleman doth protest too much."[{12}](#)

The fact that both Edward and Van Praagh have been caught using information in their readings that they gained beforehand ought to alert us to the possibility that these men may not really be what they claim. Still, to be fair, we must at least admit the possibility that these men not only had advanced information about their subjects, but that they also received such information later through a spiritistic revelation. But is this really possible? Let's see what the Bible says about after-death communication.

## **Saul and the Spirit Medium**

In 1 Samuel 28, we read that Israel and the Philistines were preparing to make war with one another. When Saul, the king of Israel, saw the Philistine army, he was filled with fear. Desperate for a word from God, he inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him. Hoping for guidance by another means, Saul told his servants to find him a medium. At this point in Israel's history this may not have been an easy task, for "Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land" (1 Sam. 28:3). But why had he done this?

It was actually an act of obedience to the Word of God. In Deuteronomy 18 the Lord had said, "There shall not be found among you a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the Lord" (vv. 10-12). The Lord had also told His people that they were not to seek out mediums (Lev. 19:31), that the person who did so was to be cut off from his people (Lev. 20:6), and that mediums were also to be put to death (Lev. 20:27). In spite of all these prohibitions against turning to mediums, Saul was apparently so desperate for guidance that he ordered his servants to find him one. They did, and he disguised himself and went to her by night.

Although initially hesitant to practice her art, the medium, not recognizing her client as Saul, eventually agreed to call

up the prophet Samuel who had died some time before. "When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice," suddenly realizing that her client was Saul! (1 Sam. 28:12)

Samuel's message to Saul was both tragic and prophetic: "The Lord will . . . deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me" (1 Sam. 28:19). Reflecting on these events, the author of Chronicles wrote, "So Saul died for his unfaithfulness . . . against the Lord, because he did not keep the word of the Lord, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance" (1 Chron. 10:13). Whatever truths we may glean from the story of Saul and the medium, it clearly does not sanction man's attempt to communicate with the dead.[{13}](#)

But does it confirm that after-death communication is really possible? Although some have speculated that the spirit of Samuel was actually a demonic spirit, the text repeatedly identifies the spirit as Samuel (vv. 12, 14, 15-16) and nowhere even hints that it might be a demon. Thus, we are forced to conclude that after-death communication is not intrinsically impossible. But here we must be careful. Possibility does not suggest probability. The text seems to imply that God allowed Samuel's special return in order to pronounce judgment against Saul (vv. 16-19). And as we'll see, there are good reasons to believe that this was, in fact, an exceptional event.

## **The Rich Man and Lazarus**

Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) clearly suggests the immense improbability of the dead communicating with the living. Both the rich man and Lazarus died. Lazarus went to "Abraham's bosom," a place of paradise for the righteous dead (Luke 16:22). The rich man went to Hades, a place of conscious torment for the unrighteous. Though separated by a great chasm, the rich man could still

see and speak with those dwelling in paradise. He called out to Abraham, asking that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers, lest they share his torment in the afterlife. But Abraham refused, saying that if they would not listen to the Word of God, they also would not listen if someone rose from the dead.

But why didn't the rich man just go and warn his brothers himself? After all, if it were a simple matter for the dead to communicate with the living, then why did the rich man ask that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers? Apparently, the rich man was not *able* to warn his brothers. He could not escape his place of punishment to do so.

But wouldn't it also, then, be impossible for Lazarus to warn them? Not necessarily. Although it seems to be a rare occurrence, it appears that the righteous dead are, on occasion, permitted by God to communicate with those still alive on earth. The Old Testament records the appearance of Samuel to Saul (1 Samuel 28), and the New Testament records the appearance of Elijah and Moses to Jesus and some of his disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17). Nevertheless, the biblical evidence indicates that after-death communication is extremely rare.

Does this mean that mediums like John Edward and James Van Praagh are charlatans? Skeptics certainly think so, and the skeptics may be right. But the Bible allows for another possibility; namely, that the spirits with whom Edward and Van Praagh claim to communicate are not human at all, but demonic. Consider the following.

The Bible indicates that messages from the human dead are extremely rare. It's therefore unlikely that Edward and Van Praagh should receive such messages all the time. In addition, listen to what the spirits are alleged to say. Do any of them, like the rich man, strive to warn their relatives about a place of conscious torment? Do they urge repentance for sin or the need for personal faith in Christ? On the contrary, such

important Christian doctrines are typically either ignored or denied. But if the Bible is truly God's Word, and the spirits deny its teachings, then who are these spirits likely to be?

Of course, maybe Edward and Van Praagh aren't really communicating with spirits at all. But if at times they are, I fear it's probably with demonic spirits – not spirits of the human dead.

## Notes

1. Bill Hendrick, "Higher Communication," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 31 October 2001, sect. C; Greg Barrett, "Can the Living Talk to the Dead?" *USA Today*, 20 June 2001, sect. D; cited in Marcia Montenegro, "The Resurging Interest in After-Death Communication," *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 01, 2002, 12.

2. Ruth La Ferla, "A Voice from the Other Side," *New York Times on the Web*, 29 October 2000

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/29/living/29/DEAD.html>).

3. See the information about John at

<http://www.scifi.com/johnedward/aboutjohn/> and his official Web site at [http://www.johnedward.net/about\\_John\\_Edward.htm](http://www.johnedward.net/about_John_Edward.htm).

4. See the information about James on his Web site at

<http://www.vanpraagh.com/bio.cfm>.

5. La Ferla.

6. See Michael Shermer, "Deconstructing the Dead: Cross Over One Last Time to Expose Medium John Edward,"

<http://www.skeptic.com/newsworthy13.html>. I have relied heavily on Shermer's article in the following discussion.

7. See Joe Nickell, "John Edward: Hustling the Bereaved," *Skeptical Inquirer*, November/December 2001, Vol. 25, No. 6, p. 20. I have relied on some of Nickell's observations in what follows.

8. Shermer.

9. Nickell.

10. Ibid.

11. See Michael Shermer, "How Psychics and Mediums Work: A

Case Study of James Van Praagh,” <http://www.skeptic.com/>. See also Michael Shermer, “Does James Van Praagh Talk To The Dead? Nope! Fraud! – Parts 1” at <http://www.holysmoke.org/praagh1.htm> and “Does James Van Praagh Talk To The Dead? Nope! Fraud! – Part 2” at <http://www.holysmoke.org/praagh2.htm>.

12. Shermer, “How Psychics and Mediums Work: A Case Study of James Van Praagh.”

13. Montenegro, p. 16.

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