“What’s the Difference Between a Prophet and a Clairvoyant?”

How can I show my friend biblically that clairvoyance, tarot cards, and such are wrong? She seems to think that there is no difference in a prophet and clairvoyant (psychic reading), seeing as they both can predict the future. Can you help me explain the differences?

You might try to get your friend to understand the importance of making distinctions between prophecy and clairvoyance by pointing out the difference between poisonous mushrooms and safe mushrooms: they can both be eaten, but one kind will kill you! Those who claim to be clairvoyant are either fraudulent, making things up as they read the body-language responses of their customers, or they are being fed information from demons. [For an example of a fradulent psychic, see our answer to email “What About Crossing Over’s John Edward?“] And Jesus told us that demons lie (“[W]hen he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” John 8:44).

The biblical standard of a prophet of God is 100% accuracy. This is because the information about future events is coming from God Himself, and He is powerful enough to overcome the limitation of speaking through a fallen, fallible human being. That is a long way from the fuzzy “information” from self-proclaimed psychics and clairvoyants! If anyone is receiving their “power” or information from anyone except God, which would be demonstrated by 100% accuracy in their predictions (and, I would suggest, the mark of Christlikeness in their character and life), it is coming from the dark side—the Evil One. There is no such thing as morally neutral supernatural information or power.

It is a dangerous thing to play around with the occult, as many can testify that this is how they opened the doors to demon oppression in their lives.

We have several articles you may find helpful in showing your friend God's warnings to stay away from the occult:

"What's a Biblical Description of Witchcraft?"

The World of the Occult

The Occult Connection

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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See Also:

- "Is Clairvoyance Wrong?"

"What About Crossing Over's John Edward?"

I was watching TV and happened upon "Unsolved Mysteries." It aired a segment on "Edgar Cayce." I'm a Christian so this segment troubled me, prompting me to search on the internet for something on this man. I found several sites, but I zeroed in on yours. I was impressed and satisfied with what I read. [Webservant's note: See our article, "The Worldview of Edgar Cayce".]

I also found where several people had written in (most were furious with you), and one of them said that Cayce's ability was indeed a gift from God. I agree with you that the Bible is very specific about avoiding dabbling in these kinds of "gifts" (that word used in connection with the devil is almost comical), and I think that God wouldn't warn us like that if those kinds of "gifts" weren't really out there. I said all that to say this…Cayce is just one person but not "one of a kind." John Edward of TV's "Crossing Over" is another, and it seems that the times are beginning to be absolutely FILLED with these people.

My problem is this, I have a sister that is very dear to me. She has gotten interested in John Edward and began wondering whether his ability was really from God. She went to her PASTOR (remember that word), and I was shocked at his reply to her. He said that he'd "put it this way….all gifts from God aren't listed in the Bible." I nearly fell over when she told me that. So now she believes that John Edward might be operating within God's will. How do I answer her and compete with the pastor she thinks so highly of?

Thank you for writing Probe Ministries. Although I do not know a great deal about John Edward, my own position would be much different than that of your sister's pastor. From what I understand, John Edward claims to have the ability to communicate with the dead. This, of course, is something expressly forbidden in Scripture. For instance, in an extended passage from Deuteronomy 18:9-15 we read:

> When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD

> your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so. The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.

Notice that v. 11 specifically forbids consulting the dead. God also prohibits the Israelites from becoming mediums or spiritists, which is essentially what John Edward is. In v. 9, such things are referred to as "detestable ways." And it was because of such detestable practices that the Lord would drive the Canaanites out of the land (v. 12). Although these nations consulted the dead, and practiced sorcery and divination (v. 14), the Lord did not want His people to do so. Instead, He promised to raise up a prophet in Israel to whom He expected the people to give heed. Although this refers generally to all the genuine Old Testament prophets, it ultimately has special reference to Jesus Christ (see, for example, Acts 3:19-26).

But why does God forbid communicating with the dead? Although we may not know for certain, I think there are some important clues in the Bible. In the first place, genuine communication with the dead may (as a general rule) simply be impossible. The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 may indicate this. Although some may point to Saul and the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28, it's important to keep in mind that (1) this practice was prohibited and condemned by God (as already cited); (2) Saul had been rejected by God for his disobedience (e.g. 1 Sam. 28:6, etc). Indeed, this was just another act of Saul's unfaithfulness to God. Thus, it is not an example for us to follow. And (3) some believe the spirit of Samuel may have been a demon masquerading as Samuel. Although that is not my view, I suppose it is at least possible. [Note: also see the Probe article "What About the Witch of Endor Calling Up Samuel's Spirit?"] There is definitely clear New Testament

evidence linking demonic activity to divination (Acts 16:16-18), for example. But even if it really was Samuel (which I believe) the text does not encourage us to communicate with the dead (and other texts expressly forbid it – see, for instance, Isaiah 8:19-20, etc.).

Thus, my overall opinion of John Edward (and those like him) is this: to the extent that he is truly receiving information from the spirit world, I tend to think it is probably coming not from deceased human beings, but from demonic spirits. As always, their desire is to deceive the unsuspecting and lead them away from considering the biblical command to repent and trust Christ for salvation (see 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, etc.).

In light of all this, if your sister respects the Bible as the word of God, I would simply bypass the pastor whom she respects. Rather than directly disagreeing with him, gently point her to what God's word says. Remind her that even pastors can be wrong, but God never is. And His prohibitions are given with our welfare in mind.

Hope this helps,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

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.html

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 youa 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.
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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