

CHRISTIANS SPURN THE CURIOUS ARTS

by Pastor William P. Terjesen

Question: *Pastor, I recently overheard a Christian friend mentioning to someone that they were going to a fortune teller. I was shocked by what I heard. Doesn't the Word of God forbid such things? Why would a Christian go to a fortune teller?*

Answer: God's Holy Word is very clear that we are forbidden to consult fortune tellers or to dabble in any way with any of the occult arts. In Deuteronomy 18:9-14 there is a list of occult practices that are forbidden to God's people. They include divination, fortune-telling (soothsaying), interpreting omens, sorcery, casting spells, consulting familiar spirits, spiritist, calling up the dead (necromancy). These practices are all called abominations, and those who do them are an abomination to the Lord. We are told that these practices were part of the reason why God visited His wrath on the people of Canaan and drove them out before the Israelites. God's people, therefore, are to have nothing to do with such things. (Other passages prohibiting such activities are: Ex 22:18; Lev 19:26,31; 20:26f.)

In 1 Samuel 28 Saul, the habitually rebellious first king of Israel, finally resorts to witchcraft and necromancy before he dies in rebellion against God. In 2 Chronicles 33 the wicked reign of Manasseh is described, during which he practiced idolatry, human sacrifice, and most of the occult arts forbidden in Deuteronomy, and we are told that under his reign the Jews did worse than the heathen whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel.

The New Testament takes the same stance as the Old regarding occult practices. In Galatians 5:20 we learn that witchcraft is one of the works of the flesh that bars entrance to the kingdom of God. In Revelation 21:8 and 22:15 sorcerers and idolators are among those excluded from the New Heaven and the New Earth.

In the Book of Acts we have several accounts that show the opposition of God and God's people to the occult and its practitioners. In Acts 8 after Philip begins to win many converts in Samaria, a local occultist, Simon the Sorcerer, who had long bewitched the Samaritans with his sorceries, was converted, baptized, and continued in close association with Philip. He who had captivated the Samaritans with sorcery, was now captivated by the signs and wonders done through Philip. Later when Peter and John came to town to confirm the faith of the Samaritans with the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, Simon, seeing the Holy Ghost being given through the ministrations of the Apostles, faltered in faith and offered them money if they will grant him such power. Peter thoroughly rebuked him: "Your money perish with you... your heart is not right in God's sight... repent!... you are in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity!" The story closes with a repentant Simon asking for the Apostles to pray for him so that he might be forgiven.

A second account is found in Acts 13, where Paul and Barnabas are preaching their way through the island of Cyprus. They came to Paphos where the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus called for them, desiring to hear the Word of God. But a Jewish false-

prophet and sorcerer named Bar-jesus (or Elymas), who was in some way attached to the proconsul, withstood Paul and Barnabas and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Paul, filled with the Spirit, rebuked Bar-jesus, calling him a child of the devil, and telling him that he will be blind for a season. Bar-jesus was immediately struck blind and wandered about seeking someone to lead him by the hand. And the proconsul was brought to faith in Christ.

In Acts 16, Paul and his companions entered Europe for the first time, doing missionary work in Philippi, Macedonia. While they preached and taught throughout the city, they encountered a slave girl who was possessed with a demonic spirit of divination. By this spirit she was able to tell fortunes, which made money for her owners. She began to follow Paul and company around crying over and over, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who show us the way of salvation." This went on for quite a few days. Finally, Paul turned and commanded the demon to come out of the girl in the name of Jesus. The demon left her immediately, her powers were gone, as was her owners' source of income! (The purpose of demon causing the girl to cry out about the office and mission of Paul and company, was to create confusion, suspicion, and mockery around the missionaries, and to harass them.)

The final account for our consideration is found in Acts 19, where Paul spends an extended period of time in Ephesus in Asia Minor. During his stay there, God did special miracles by Paul's hand, so that even handkerchiefs brought from his body to the sick and possessed brought healing and deliverance. In the same town, the seven sons of a certain Jew named Sceva, vagabond exorcists, began to say the name of Jesus over the demon possessed, saying, "We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches." A demon answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know. But who are you?" And the demoniac leapt upon them, overcame them, and prevailed against them so that they fled from the house naked and wounded. When this became known, many were filled with fear, the name of Jesus Christ was magnified, and many believed. Scripture tells us that many of those who believed and had previously used 'curious arts' brought their occult books together and burned them publicly (the books were worth about 50,000 drachmas, each drachma being about a day's wage). So the Word of God grew mightily and prevailed.

So, anyone can see from this brief survey of Scripture that God is strongly opposed to, and forbids the use of occult arts such as fortune telling, witchcraft, sorcery, etc. Why is God so opposed to these things? Two reasons:

First, seeking to access the spiritual realm apart from the Lord God and His Holy Word is an act of unbelief and rebellion against the First Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me". Any spirituality that is disconnected from the one true God and His revealed Word is idolatry and grievous sin. It is not God's desire that we destroy ourselves through such rebellion, but that we fear, love, and trust in Him alone, for He is the fountain of life and the source of true freedom and truth.

Second, occult practices, like all idolatry, has the devil and his demons at their root. Occult powers are not good or neutral, but demonic and evil. Through these practices the devil would bring people into deception, spiritual blindness, unbelief, bondage, and destruction. St. Paul said, "The things that gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God... I don't want you to have communion with demons!" (1 Corinthians 10).

By forbidding the occult, God is endeavoring to protect us from apostasy, bondage, and possession. His desire is for our welfare. But isn't that stuff all just a bunch of hokum? Yes, many occultists are mere tricksters and frauds, but some of them are not. Some occultists are in touch with real though demonic powers and are capable of extraordinary things. But the devil is not fussy. He can use the real thing or a fraud and huckster to bring an unsuspecting person into bondage and away from faith in the true and living God. Therefore, it is imperative that we heed the warnings of Holy Scripture and avoid these things.

The second question you asked was, "Why would a Christian go to a fortune-teller?" Two things: First, not everyone who claims to be a Christian is, in fact, a Christian. There are many whose profession of faith is insincere. It's quite possible that your Christian friend is a Christian in name only. Why would a real Christian want to have anything at all to do with fortune-tellers and the like? And that brings me to my second point. Never underestimate the power and extent of ignorance. Many people who are professing Christians are massively ignorant of the Bible and proper Christian doctrine. The longer I've lived, the more ignorance I've seen in people who should have known better. It's possible that your friend is a sincere Christian who doesn't know any better, and is about to blunder ignorantly into sin, rebellion, and apostasy. Your prayers and a word of warning would be very appropriate here.

Bottom line: Occult practices are often mere fakery, and sometimes an expression of real but demonic powers. Either way, dabbling in them is an act of rebellion against God and His holy Word. We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. It is He who made us, preserves and keeps us, and has redeemed us for eternal life through His Son. When we pray, He hears and answers according to His gracious promise. All we need to know to enjoy God and His gift of eternal life is ours in Christ and His pure, infallible Word. Having this bounty of spiritual riches, why would we want to root around in the muck?