

Christadelphian Bible Mission

Spiritualism - Challenges Bible Authority

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Two hundred years ago education was almost totally in the hands of the established church. Its message was authoritative and rarely, if ever, challenged. On questions about life and death, the church taught that a man or woman's innermost self survives bodily death, and continues to exist in a spirit world either of blissful reward or eternal punishment.

As the nineteenth century progressed and the age of rationalism opened up, these long cherished beliefs were subjected to intellectual enquiry and scientific testing. Only those things that attracted concrete proof passed these tests. The belief that death is simply the gateway to a new but different conscious experience was a theory that could not be reproduced in the laboratory. Where was the evidence that man's essential being survived death? It only existed by virtue of the authority claimed by the church.

This teaching was not supported by the Bible, as we shall see later in this booklet. But through all the preceding centuries, the scriptures were not available to the greater part of the population. And, from 1859 when Charles Darwin wrote his book *The Origin of Species* challenging the Bible account of Creation, the Bible itself was rejected by many people who no longer accepted it as the wholly inspired Word of God.

Modern Spiritualism

Modern Spiritualism emerged against this background of rational enquiry following some strange happenings in Hydesville, a small town in New York state in America. A family named Fox moved into a house in the town where unexplained noises were reported by previous tenants. When this happened during the Fox's tenancy, the youngest daughter challenged whoever or whatever was making the tapping to repeat the number of times she clicked her fingers. Subsequently, by using a series of codes created by the girl and her elder sisters, answering raps provided the information that the house was inhabited by the spirit of a man who had been murdered there.

As the girls' alleged communication with the spirit world first occurred on March 31, 1848, this date is taken as the birth of Modern Spiritualism. When news of the events in Hydesville began to circulate, the girls' claims were subjected to various tests, and eminent scientists quickly took sides; some claimed that a supernatural event had occurred, and others suggested it was all an elaborate deception. But so much attention was focused on the claims, that many gatherings were held elsewhere in America and then in Europe in an attempt to communicate with the spirits of the dead.

Acceptance of Spiritualism

A number of famous mediums were quickly accepted into high society. The two Fox girls were very profitably managed by their elder sister, and other mediums too benefited personally from the exercise of their abilities. Seances, as the spiritualist gatherings were called, grew more and more elaborate. One very well known medium, Daniel Douglas Home, presided over gatherings where tables moved apparently by themselves, where he was able without injury to hold red hot coals in his hand, and even to levitate off the ground and float in and out of windows. He was feted at many of the European royal courts.

A great stimulus to the general acceptance of modern spiritualism was provided by Queen Victoria's interest – an interest generated by the loss of her husband Prince Albert. Shortly afterwards, with the enormous loss of life in the great wars of the twentieth century, men and women bereaved of their loved ones tried to get in touch with those who died in order to obtain messages of comfort and advice, just as they did when their relative or friend was alive. This is perfectly understandable. Human

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relationships form an important part of each person's life, and when death intervenes, those who are left alone naturally feel the need to continue the communication they previously enjoyed, if at all possible.

Spiritualism offers to answer that need, for it claims that death is not the complete end of consciousness. At the moment of what we call death, spiritualists believe that a person's essential being merely transfers from the material realm to the realm of the spirit. There is, so they claim, no loss of consciousness, just the transition to a higher and better plane of existence. Added to this is the further claim that communication can occur between the material world and the spiritual world, but normally this needs to be facilitated by an intermediary - or medium - who can only assist if the conditions are favourable.

Concepts of Spiritualism

Three basic and interconnected concepts thus underlie Spiritualist beliefs:

1. That there is personal and conscious survival of bodily death;
2. Death is the transition from one realm of awareness and life to another that is an advance on our present existence; and
3. When conditions allow it, communication between this world and the world of spirits is possible with the help of intermediaries.

These concepts were expressed most succinctly during 1948, the centenary year of Modern Spiritualism, when Spiritualists adopted the following brief description of their beliefs:

"The Proof of Survival"

From this it is apparent that great emphasis is placed on the communications that occur through the assistance of mediums. Without these, there would be no proof of survival, and the ability to survive death and unconsciousness would be just an unproven theory. Much rests, therefore, on the nature of the communications that take place, and whether they provide sound, reliable and incontrovertible evidence.

The Hydesville evidence was not accepted universally. For each person who was convinced that communication had occurred with the spirit world, there was another who was equally convinced that some form of deception was involved. Unlike the evidence for gravity or the boiling point of water, the "proof of survival" did not convince everybody.

Confusing Events

Various eminent scientists investigated the claims of the Fox family; some finding for and some finding against the existence of spiritual communication. Two further events in that story leave the matter unresolved. About fifty years after the first contact with the alleged spirit of the murdered man, bodily remains were discovered hidden in the walls of the house. Until that time, there was no real evidence of a crime having been committed, there were only rumours.

But at about the same time, two of the Fox sisters confessed to trickery, agreeing with the conclusion of one investigator who discovered that the "spirit's rappings" were silenced when the girls' knee joints were firmly held. Subsequently these confessions were withdrawn, and it is now impossible to know if the girls were involved in a complicated web of deception or if something remarkable actually happened.

How is it possible to know whether Spiritualism is soundly based? If eminent scientists cannot agree on the evidence, where does it leave the ordinary man or woman who wishes to learn the truth? For those who believe that God is the Supreme Being, the Creator of heaven and earth, claims about life and death are resolved by turning to His revealed Word. What then does the Bible have to say about the claims of Spiritualism? How does it describe death? and What does it have to say about life after death?

Ancient Spiritualism

So far we have only mentioned Modern Spiritualism, but spiritualism has existed for thousands of years. Many ancient societies believed that death is merely a transition to another world, and some of them also believed that communication can occur between this world and the next. The spirit world was also reckoned to be the realm of the gods, with whom a person became associated as death freed them from their earthly existence. God's message was given to men and women who lived among these societies, and we should expect Him to have something to say about their beliefs.

As the children of Israel were being led by Moses out of Egypt towards the land God promised to them, He warned them strongly about the dangers of involvement with other nations: You shalt not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan,

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to which I am bringing you" (Leviticus 18:3). These are uncompromising words. According to God, both the Egyptian and the Canaanite societies were corrupt in various ways. In this context, God said in the next two chapters: "Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God" (19:31); and: "A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them" (20:27).

The message is clear. God warned His people in ancient times not to engage in spiritualism: according to His law given through Moses, involvement in spiritualism is personally defiling, and those who promoted it were to be stoned.

This message is confirmed in a later passage, first given to Israel by Moses as the nation stood on the threshold of the land of Canaan:

"When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 18:9-13)

This adds to the information given in Leviticus. Not only does Moses say that involvement in spiritualism is morally defiling, and that its promoters were to be executed, he explains that the practice in all its forms is an abomination to God. He further explained that there is no need to turn to such sources for information about life and death. In a prophecy about the Lord Jesus Christ, Moses spoke these words on God's behalf: "I (God) will raise up for them (Israel) a Prophet like you (Moses) from among their brethren, and will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (verse 18).

If answers to mankind's questions about life and death are answered by God's gift of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no need to turn to those who claim to communicate with the dead.

"You shall be blameless..."

But there is another reason given in this passage to explain why God did not want His people to involve themselves in spiritualist practices. He told them, "You shall be blameless before the LORD your God" (verse 13). According to the margin of the King James' Version, the word "blameless" means 'upright' or 'sincere'. God declares that spiritualist practices are not 'upright' or 'sincere'. That is

- why involvement with them is morally defiling
- why they are an abomination in God's sight, for He is a God of Truth, and
- why those who promoted them were to be excluded from Israel.

Now these are strong words. God describes spiritualism as practiced in ancient times as deceptive, and not at all suitable for His people. How did these commands translate into practice? Is there any indication in the Bible of how God's people responded?

The Slave Girl in Philippi

We can start by looking at a New Testament example, one that occurred 1,500 years after God spoke through Moses. In the times of the apostles, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers preached in his name. Paul and his friends went to the Roman city of Philippi, and for a time were followed by a slave girl, "possessed with a spirit of divination ... who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling" (Acts 16:16)

We must note two things about this girl. First, as the above passage make clear, this was a lucrative business, if not for the girl, then certainly for her masters. Secondly, she had an unusual gift, a "spirit of divination", and it was claimed that this allowed her to act as an intermediary between this world and the spirit world.

The Oracle of Delphi

This "spirit of divination" is literally, in the original text of the passage, "a spirit of Python". This takes us back to much earlier times, and one of the wonders of the ancient world, the Oracle of Delphi. This was a shrine in Northern Greece where the gods could be petitioned, and was guarded by Python, a female serpent. Her priestess, called Pythia, was a middle aged woman who descended to an underground chamber and sat on a three-legged stool over a chasm in the earth. After chewing laurel leaves (containing small amounts of an hallucinogenic substance), she entered into a trance-like state, so that the oracle spoke through her. Her voice changed, and the message sometimes had to be interpreted by another medium.

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The girl in Philippi was similar. The messages she uttered were alleged to come from another realm – the realm of the dead or of the gods. And like Pythia, she was supposedly controlled by Python the guardian of the oracle.

She followed Paul and his companions as they went about Philippi, crying after them: "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17). For a time, nothing happened. The slave masters must have been content, for they did not complain. And Paul and his companions also took no action, presumably hoping that the girl's attention would soon be diverted elsewhere. But she continued for "many days".

A True Message

What she said about Paul and his friends was true, they were "servants of the Most High God" and they were "proclaiming the way of salvation". But she did not need to be in contact with the spirit world to know this. As Paul himself said on another occasion about his preaching work, "the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26).

Why then was Paul "greatly annoyed" (Acts 16:18)? Why did he take action to ensure that the girl would never again act as a medium? The only answer is that he knew her life was a sham, and that she was being mercilessly exploited by her slave masters.

We noted that these men were content for her to talk about Paul being a servant of God, and took no action to stop her, even though she continued to follow the apostle for "many days". They only took notice when Paul commanded her to stop her spiritualist practices. This was cutting off a lucrative source of income, so "when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities" (verse 19).

This is an important Bible passage about spiritualism, and it is worth reiterating some of the main points it teaches:

- The girl's messages were used to make money for her masters.
- Her statements about Paul and his friends contained information that was readily available to anyone. She did not need to be in touch with the spirit world.
- Paul did not consider that her skill was useful to aid his preaching.

Ventriloquism, Sleight of Hand, etc.

What was the skill that enabled the girl to convince people that she brought messages from the spirit world? There is a verse in the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah that gives a clue. Speaking of the impending downfall of Jerusalem and its inhabitants, he said: "You shall be brought down, you shall speak out of the ground; your speech shall be low, out of the dust: your voice shall be like a medium's, out of the ground: and your speech shall whisper out of the dust" (Isaiah 29:4). Another passage we have already considered also helps here. In the Septuagint (Greek) translation of Leviticus 19:31, it speaks of "ventriloquists and enchanter's". It seems therefore that the slave girl in Philippi, and other mediums too, have used a variety of different techniques.

These methods of seeking answers and information from the spirit world are only successful when the conditions are right. Spiritualists say that they cannot make contact on behalf of anyone who denies that communication is possible. This suggests that a person's mind has to be conditioned to accept the messages it will be given. Seances and consultations are thus often held in darkened rooms, and the minds of those who attend are relaxed by the use of music, chanting and other means to be receptive and compliant. But if Spiritualism can really provide "Proof of Survival", it must do so both for the skeptic, and for the person who firmly believes that such contact is possible.

This is not to say that all spiritualists set out to deceive. It is certain that most, if not all, are sincerely convinced that they are able to communicate with the spirits of dead persons. Some of the techniques that are used, like telepathy and hypnotism probably use unexplored parts of the human mind, and this can lead to some strange results that are hard to ignore or dismiss. These must not be confused with sleight of hand, conjuring and other practices. The question to be asked is whether it is possible - whatever means are used - to communicate with those who have died. An Old Testament example will help here.

The Woman with a Familiar Spirit

During the reign of Israel's first king Saul, he felt the need to consult a spiritualist medium. During most of his reign Saul was able to obtain Divine counsel and advice through God's prophet Samuel. But two incidents caused a breach between the king and the prophet. First, Saul refused to obey God and totally destroy Israel's enemies, the Amalekites. Samuel prophesied that this refusal to follow

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God's command would lead to the kingdom being taken from Saul and given to another king. Samuel refused to counsel Saul again. Then Samuel died, leaving Saul without an advisor from God.

The king felt completely alone, especially when the country was attacked by the Philistine army. Where could he turn for help? He decided to approach "a woman with a familiar spirit", and the night before Israel's army was due to face the enemy he traveled in deep disguise to Endor where his servants told him there was such a woman. She knew her position was precarious, for early in his reign "Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land" (1 Samuel 28:3). Without revealing exactly who he was, Saul told her not to worry, and asked her to "Bring up Samuel".

The woman described "(gods) ascending out of the earth ... an old man coming up, covered with a mantle". From this description, Saul was convinced it was Samuel, and explained, "I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me any more, neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do" (verse 15).

He receives the answer that the position is hopeless. The kingdom will be taken from Saul and given to David, because of Saul's faithlessness. And in the battle against the Philistines, Israel will be defeated and Saul and his sons will lose their lives.

Did She Communicate with Samuel?

Was this really a message from Samuel? Did the woman act as a medium between Saul and the realm of the dead?

We can answer these questions by looking at the message Saul received. Was he told anything that only 'the spirit of Samuel' could reveal? When we examine the incident carefully, we learn how much the woman knew, and how much she was able to discover from Saul himself. It is also apparent that Saul did not see anything, he had to ask the woman what she saw. All he heard was a voice, and he was prepared in a variety of ways to believe it was Samuel's.

The woman knew five things:

1. Her visitor was Saul - he was the only person in Israel who could guarantee her immunity from prosecution, and his great height would be difficult to conceal.
2. Saul was receiving no counsel from God - the king said this himself in her hearing (28:15).
3. Saul disobeyed God when he failed to destroy the Amalekites - this was a well-known incident causing the estrangement between the king and the prophet Samuel.
4. David would be the next king - even Saul admitted this (1 Samuel 24:20), and David was clearly the people's choice.
5. Saul was facing certain defeat and probably death.

Each of these items of information occurs in the message the king received through the medium. Like the Philippian slave girl's description of Paul, there did not need to be any communication with the dead for the woman at Endor to tell Saul of the impending disaster. She made skilful use of the information Saul unconsciously revealed, and then deceived the king into thinking he could hear Samuel's voice.

Saul wanted to get in contact with Samuel. He traveled under difficult circumstances to contact the spiritualist medium and obtain her help. He was convinced by her reaction that she could actually see the dead prophet, even though Saul himself saw nothing at all. Everything combined to condition Saul to receive a message from Samuel.

This is the common link in all the cases we have considered. Queen Victoria wanted to get in touch with Prince Albert, the parents of dead soldiers were desperate for some kind of contact. And king Saul had nowhere else to turn. All of these were prepared to interpret favourably any sign they received as the answer they desired.

But if it is really possible to communicate with the dead it should not require special conditions or a prepared atmosphere. Far from confirming the claims about communicating with the dead, the Bible examples we have considered show why God's people were told not to become involved in the practice - it is not upright or sincere. Compared with the clear teaching of the Bible, that is often specific in its detail when it prophesies future events, messages that are claimed to come from the dead are confused, difficult to apply and often ambiguous.

Death is Unconsciousness

The Bible explanation about death is clear and straight-forward: The dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten" (Ecclesiastes 9:5). To put it simply, death is unconsciousness. Nothing of the person survives, there is no transfer to another realm: "Also their

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love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun" (verse 6).

Isaiah the prophet, speaking in an age when God's people were turning away from Him to worship other gods, said: "When they say to you, 'Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter', should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:19,20). Why should those who are alive seek information from those who are dead? If the dead are unconscious, they have no information about what is happening to the living. The only source of reliable information about the future is in God's word, like a light in a dark place.

No consciousness ... no communication ... no share in the living. This is God's explanation about death, and it is completely at variance with spiritualist claims. It is also different from the teaching of many churches down through the centuries, who have used the ideas of heaven and hell as places of reward and punishment to instill a religion of fear into the minds of many people. A verse we considered earlier from Deuteronomy now assumes a much greater importance. After telling His people not to get involved in the spiritualist practices of the surrounding nations, God explained that He was providing a Prophet – Jesus – and they must listen to him.

The Good News about Jesus Christ

The gospel or good news of Jesus Christ is that, like all other men and women, he lived his life, and then died. In his case, he was put to death for his beliefs, despite having lived a life that was righteous and free from sin. After his crucifixion, his body was placed in a rock-hewn tomb, and Jesus was as unconscious as any other person who has died.

But because he obeyed God faithfully in everything he did, Jesus was raised by God from the unconsciousness of the grave and granted everlasting life. He is the only person who has survived the corruption of death to be raised to immortality. He promises all who faithfully accept him that they too can be released from the grave and have hope of sharing eternity with him. This is the great Christian hope of resurrection, of which the apostle Paul wrote to believers in Corinth:

"As in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at his coming." (1 Corinthians 15:22,23)

God asks us to trust His word. We must have faith in God that what He has promised He is also able to perform. This faith is based on the historical evidence of the resurrection of Christ. Jesus is "the firstfruits". Naturally speaking, the first produce from the ground promises a rich harvest to come. Jesus' resurrection promises the raising to life of many, many more to share the glories of the coming age.

Put aside all the conflicting messages claiming to come from the dead, and listen instead to the message of the living Lord Jesus.

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