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OPENING THE SUPERSTITIOUS TO THE GOSPEL

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“Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious” (Acts 17:22 KJV).

“It is doubtful whether Caesar will come forth today; For he is superstitious grown of late”
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, act 2, scene 1).

The July 12, 2004, issue of *Newsweek* displays a picture of pop star Madonna in concert, twirling on stage, her left arm stretching high above her head. The photo calls attention to a red-string bracelet on her wrist. What’s that? It’s a kabbalah bracelet, and its strings, said to be imbued with the protection of the Hebrew matriarch Rachel, are prayed over to guard wearers against the evil eye. The *Newsweek* sidebar by Lisa Helem notes that Demi Moore and Britney Spears have them as well.

Superstitious belief is nothing new. The apostle Paul, while awaiting the arrival of Silas and Timothy, meandered around Athens and viewed its many impressive religious temples, statues, and monuments. He was “greatly distressed” (Acts 17:16 NIV) to see the renowned university city’s widespread false religious beliefs. The Greek word he used to describe the Athenians is translated “superstitious” (Acts 17:22 KJV) or “very religious” (NIV, NASB).

The modern age offers countless certainties courtesy of science; yet people still desire more control over their lives, and superstitious belief may provide them with a sense of that. It has been said that Wade Boggs, one of baseball’s best hitters, believed that eating chicken every day brought him good luck at the plate. Lesser mortals may believe in lucky numbers and play the lottery by them. Some think that walking under a ladder brings bad luck, or that Friday the thirteenth is an unlucky day, so they carry a rabbit’s foot on their key chain hoping to change all that potential bad fortune into good fortune. Even those who quite innocently say, “God bless you!” after someone sneezes have no rational basis for it. They are simply repeating an old catchphrase rooted in a belief that people who sneezed had expelled evil from their bodies; so “God bless you!” became a customary congratulation. In other traditions, saying, “God bless you!” after a sneeze was believed to prevent the heart from stopping, or to keep the spirit from leaving the body, or to keep the devil from entering the body.

The strength and appeal of a superstition may not be easily rejected, for its power and appeal is often deep seated, arising from the person’s familial or cultural upbringing. Superstition, being a form of irrationality, can be a formidable barrier when trying to help some people to think clearly about the gospel; yet Christians are called to offer the superstitious the alternative means of grace, prayer, and trusting God for facing life’s contingencies. How may Christians help people break through this spiritual barrier to think biblically about the gospel?

The apostle Paul’s approach to the superstitious Athenians is instructive. He didn’t shoot them down with a heavy-handed theology. It’s true that when addressing the Corinthians he explained the relationship between pagan gods and demons (1 Cor. 10:20), but when addressing the Athenians he didn’t bring up the dark side of that relationship. Instead, as any good cross-cultural missionary would do, he found a point within their worldview by which to build a communication bridge from their superstitious beliefs to the gospel. Lesslie Newbigin stated the principle as follows: “The communication has to be in the language of the receptor culture”; but that alone is not enough. If it is truly the gospel that is being communicated, then “it will call radically into question that [culture’s] way of understanding.”¹

Paul used the language of the Athenians' own beliefs to reveal what was not obvious to them about God. With patience and tact he made it clear that their own poets, who were praising the Greek god Zeus, were close, but not quite there. After getting their attention, he explained the way to reach God. This opened up some listeners to hear more and some to repent and believe in Jesus and the resurrection. Paul presented the gospel by using language that fundamentally altered their understanding of their altars without attacking their beliefs.

This approach will, by God's grace, work for reaching the superstitious today. It affirms that the person is, no doubt, religious—someone who believes that there is more to life than physical reality—and uses that assessment to move the person closer to the truth of the gospel. It is an approach that relies chiefly on straightforward Christian witness.

A different approach rescues the superstitious through critical thinking. Many superstitious people have never learned how to think critically about their beliefs, to judge their value. They just accept a superstition as if it were true. Critical thinking, therefore, often holds the key to helping them understand what they have bought into and how to get free of that ritualistic burden on life and relationships.

A proven way to evoke critical thinking is through asking wise questions; for instance, deeply superstitious people may not understand that their belief suggests that this is how they think the world works. Carefully asking questions such as "Is there any evidence for this belief?" or "Is this the way you think the world really works?" will help them grapple with their belief at a foundational level that they may never have considered. At some point it could be suggested that since their belief is unfounded and restrictive, is there any point in hanging on to it?²

Another critical topic is *control*. Superstition gives people a feeling of being more in control of an upcoming event or situation through imaginary laws of cause and effect. The great irony is that, since superstition has nothing to do with natural laws—the very laws that grant us some control over our lives—superstitious belief actually reduces one's amount of real control. One may point out that superstitious belief actually leaves a person *less* in control of his or her life.

Magic and its dynamic within superstitious belief is also a powerful topic to address with critical thinking. Magic is based on the assumption that a causal relationship exists between the ritual manipulation of certain objects (e.g., amulet, rabbit's foot), symbols (e.g., five-pointed star, upside-down cross), or words (e.g., incantations, superstitious sayings) and events in the real world, such as good health, protection from evil, prosperity, or love. There is no scientific evidence for such a relationship; the "correspondences" are made only within the mind of the person who wants to believe them. This principle of correspondences is a basic law of all magic. These are blind leaps of faith, and strength of belief is the key.

Strong belief in astrology is a prime example; for instance, someone who believes that Taurus (the Bull) symbolizes stubbornness, or that Gemini (the Twins) indicates a split personality, may in time take on those characteristics, perhaps becoming someone he or she never wanted to be. This is how all superstitious belief begins to rule a person's life. It may lead to the kind of oppression experienced by Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, who eventually became so bound that he wouldn't leave his palace for the Capital without first having a good omen.³

The key to unwinding magical thinking is to explain "the principle of magical correspondences" (just noted), adding that there is no empirical evidence that, say, the number 13 is unlucky, or that if you knock on wood you will keep the good fortune flowing. The only linkage is the irrational leap of faith made in one's mind.⁴

Other dynamics, of course, also may be at play. Some people simply don't like working hard for things. They want shortcuts to success, such as a magic formula or a lucky rabbit's foot. Some individuals may have difficulty admitting doubt about a superstitious belief for fear of being declared an outsider by peers for expressing such doubt. Others cling to a false belief because to let it go would bring a sense of loss, and they are wondering how they will deal with that aspect of life, or a relationship, without having anything as a replacement to fill the newly created void.

Despite all this, the superstitious have something going for them, and this should be the ultimate goal of the Christian's conversation with them. The superstitious believe that there is something more to life than meets the eye, something beyond or above natural laws. "Voilà!" we may say to them. "You're on to something, and here's the good news. Superstition ain't the way, as sang Stevie Wonder; but Jesus is, and your belief in him will be the best 'God bless you!' you will ever receive."

— Charles Strohmer

NOTES

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (London: SPCK, 1990), 5–6.
2. See Charles Strohmer, *The Gospel and the New Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), chap. 16, for a fuller discussion on asking good questions. See also "Transforming our relationships with Seekers: Breaking Down the Barriers," *Christian Research Journal* 25,1 (2002): 32–40.
3. This was not unlike former First Lady Nancy Reagan's fear. After her husband, President Ronald Reagan, had been shot in 1981, Nancy resorted to astrological guidance to control the president's schedule. In his book, *For the Record*, former chief of staff, Don Regan, revealed how annoying it was to keep Nancy's color-coded calendar on his desk, detailing the good, bad, and "iffy" days for moving the president around the country and the world.
4. For a more in-depth examination of how the principle of magical correspondences rules a superstitious person's life, see Charles Strohmer, *America's Fascination with Astrology* (Greenville, SC: Emerald House Group, 1998), chap. 5.