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I SEE DEAD PEOPLE: A LOOK AT AFTER-DEATH COMMUNICATION

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SYNOPSIS

Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in contact with the dead. Much of this interest is due to the popularity of mediums such as John Edward, Sylvia Browne, and James Van Praagh. Edward and Van Praagh both have popular television shows, and all three have written best-selling books and have appeared on numerous talk shows. Several movies, such as the hit, *The Sixth Sense*, have also made spirit contact the theme of their stories.

Sylvia Browne and James Van Praagh do not practice spirit contact in a vacuum; they have complex spiritual beliefs spelled out in their books and expressed on talk shows. While Edward claims to be Roman Catholic, Browne and Van Praagh have openly rejected orthodox Christianity and embraced a nonjudgmental God more tailored to New Age beliefs. Edward, Browne, and Van Praagh all have backgrounds that include heavy psychic experiences as well as research into the occult and psychic worlds.

Skeptics have denounced these mediums and attempted to expose them as frauds. This raises questions: Are all mediums frauds, and can we be sure that they are? Is it possible that some mediums may be receiving information from a demonic source? Is the classification of mediums as frauds a helpful response? Despite seemingly being debunked by skeptics, mediums still generate strong interest. The belief in after-death communication should not be ignored or simply put down. Christians need to tackle two issues dealing with this phenomenon. First, we need to examine the mediums' claims and spiritual beliefs in a biblical light. Second, we should address the mediums' popularity and the best response to it; debunking should be a low priority unless there is strong evidence of a medium's fraud.

The church's response is important since it could portray Christians as either condescending or as caring and concerned. In the quagmire of beliefs that surround after-death communication, Christians should not lose sight of what can be offered to those who grieve — the true source of comfort, Jesus Christ.

Scene 1: A group of people sits in a circle in a dimly lit room. One of them speaks commandingly, "We surround ourselves with white light. We ask that only benevolent and helpful spirits be present."

Scene 2: A man faces an audience and says, "I am getting a K, or a C, and a T — I'm getting the number eight. I see lots of books...." A woman from the audience smiles and vigorously nods her head, "Yes, yes! That must be my grandmother Katherine. Her birthday was March 8th."

Scene 3: A young boy claims to see the dead. He realizes this communication with the dead is a gift that he can use to help the living. This story was portrayed in the hit movie, *The Sixth Sense*.

SPIRIT COMEBACK

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 John Edward, a popular medium with his own show, *Crossing Over*, on the Sci-Fi channel, now has his show in syndication on 180 local TV stations, which cover 98 percent of the United States.² A television show, *Beyond*, featuring James Van Praagh, premiered in early September of 2002.

Spirit contact, also known as spiritism, is an attempt to contact a disembodied being such as a dead person or ghost, an angel, a spirit guide, or a higher evolved soul in another dimension. There recently has been a revival of interest in contact with the dead, also called after-death communication.³ Following World War I, this practice became popular because people sought to contact loved ones killed in the war. Spiritualism, a religion that incorporates belief in contacting the dead, began in the 1800s and still exists. Before trusting Christ, I attended several spiritualist church services where ministers communicated messages purportedly from deceased relatives. I also took part in psychic development classes and séances, and I had a spirit guide.

Several psychics⁴ and mediums, such as Sylvia Browne, James Van Praagh, Rosemary Altea, and John Edward, claim their psychic abilities allow them to communicate with the dead, who are in a place they call the Other Side. Movies, such as *The Sixth Sense*, *What Lies Beneath*, and *The Others*, have featured communication with the dead as a significant element of their plots. One writer attributes this rising interest in after-death communication to a “spillover” from interest in “alternative medicine and Eastern spirituality” because people are more open to the “unseen.”⁵

Medium James Van Praagh categorizes mediumship as either *physical mediumship*, in which the spirit speaks through the physical body, or *mental mediumship*, in which the mind of the medium is used.⁶ Van Praagh claims to be a mental medium.⁷ John Edward calls himself a “psychic medium”⁸ and states that he acts as a “conduit of energy” from the “other side.”⁹ Sylvia Browne claims to be a trance medium and defines her experience as letting her spirit guide, Francine, take control of her voice but not her body or mind.¹⁰ Edward, Browne, and Van Praagh have all written bestsellers.

THE MEDIUMS

One need not go to a séance or consult a medium in order to witness spirit contact. Talk shows, such as *Montel Williams* and *Larry King Live*, often invite mediums on as guests to give readings from deceased family members to audience members or to callers. Edward’s show, *Crossing Over*, became one of the most successful programs on the Sci-Fi cable channel.¹¹

What do the mediums believe about God, death, and the afterlife? Can the dead talk to us? We will look at three popular mediums and a biblical response to spirit contact.

John Edward: A Rising Star. Born in 1969, John Edward is the youngest of the well-known mediums. He claims he astral traveled (traveled out of his body) from ages four to seven and had psychic abilities, which he thought were normal.¹² An uncle who was involved in yoga and psychic practices and whose wife was a card reader, greatly influenced Edward,¹³ whose own mother “was constantly getting readings from psychics” and often brought them to the house to do readings and séances for groups.¹⁴

At age 15 when Edward received an accurate reading from a psychic and was told he was psychically gifted, he was motivated to do research. He read “everything” he could on topics such as psychic phenomena, spiritualism, and spirit guides.¹⁵ He studied tarot cards and other “metaphysical” topics, eventually leading him to work at psychic fairs and seminars.¹⁶

At one of these psychic fairs, Edward had his first contact from what he believed was a dead person, which he claims was a “very different energy.”¹⁷ These spirits continued to interrupt Edward’s readings, but they brought to him “a feeling of contentment, love, and peace,” so he decided to learn about after-death communication.¹⁸

Edward subsequently discovered through guided visualization that he had five spirit guides as well as a master guide.¹⁹ After receiving information from his recently deceased mother, Edward was convinced of after-death communication and eventually went to work as a full-time medium.²⁰

Edward's television show, *Crossing Over*, which features him receiving messages from the dead, first became a hit on the Sci-Fi channel.²¹ According to Edward, he gets sounds, images, and sensations from the spirits since they cannot speak, and vibrate at very high rates, making communication difficult.²² Edward claims the dead person is validating that he or she is OK, so the surviving relative can be at peace.

Edward claims to be a Catholic, although he realizes that the Catholic Church opposes what he does.²³ He maintains that his relationship with God is important and that his "connection to God has never wavered."²⁴ Edward has priests and nuns as clients, and he prays the rosary and meditates before doing spirit contact.²⁵

Edward believes in reincarnation, while asserting that he does not know much about the Other Side. He says one must review one's life after death to prepare for the next incarnation.²⁶

Sylvia Browne: The "Christian Gnostic." Sylvia Browne claims that she was born psychic and that her psychic grandmother helped her understand her gifts. At the tender age of eight, Browne saw a glowing light, out of which stepped a dark-haired woman, who said, "I come from God, Sylvia." Frightened, Browne ran to tell her grandmother, who calmly told her this was her spirit guide.²⁷ Browne relies on her spirit guide, Francine, for most of her information, and Francine is the main source of information for Browne's *Journey of the Soul Series*.

Browne gives her background as Catholic, Jewish, Episcopalian, and Lutheran, but she rejects any religion with "harsh" and "cruel" concepts such as "sin, guilt, and retribution."²⁸ She also claims to have read "all twenty-six versions of the Bible," as well as the Qur'an, the Talmud, books on Buddhist teachings, and the Egyptian Book of the Dead.²⁹ In 1986, Browne founded her own church, *Novus Spiritus*, which is based on her "Christian Gnostic theology with shades of many other religions blended in."³⁰ According to Browne, being "Gnostic" means one "is a seeker of truth and knowledge about God" and not a seeker of "dogma."³¹ In order to be elevated to any spiritual level, one must have "total knowledge."³²

Browne's trilogy, *Journey of the Soul Series*, presents complex teachings on God, creation, good and evil, death, spirits, angels, reincarnation, and other theological topics. Browne denies the pantheistic belief that all is God,³³ but she nonetheless holds that we are a "divine spark" that emanated from God and that everyone has his or her own "God center."³⁴ God, moreover, does not punish or judge, and there is no hell; man made up hell.³⁵ It does not matter if Jesus is the Son of God because everyone is.³⁶ According to Browne, Jesus did not die on the cross but came to bring wisdom.³⁷

People live on earth in order for God to "gain information" through their "cells" because God is pure intellect and cannot directly know experience.³⁸ On the other hand, Mother God, whom Browne calls Azna, is pure emotion and experience. She is the original Creator, often appearing in the form of Mary.³⁹ She was suppressed by patriarchy but has come back through Gnostic teachings.⁴⁰ Mother and Father God are a "dual entity."⁴¹ The information on Mother God was given to Jesus via the Essenes and Gnostics and hidden in a scroll in France.⁴²

A believer in reincarnation, Browne states this life is her 54th and final one on earth.⁴³ Each planet has its Other Side; Earth's Other Side is superimposed on our reality with a higher vibrational frequency. People on earth are actually ghosts in the world of spirits but are less alive than the spirits, who are fully alive.⁴⁴ (This idea is also found in the movie, *The Others*.) All spirits on the Other Side are aged to appear 30 years old, but they choose their own physical attributes.⁴⁵ Those spirits who come to earth (who include every human on earth) do so to learn and are watched over by spirits from the Other Side.⁴⁶

James Van Praagh: Hunting Down Heaven. As a first-grader, James Van Praagh realized he was psychic when he knew that a car had hit his teacher's son before the teacher heard about it. This Catholic schoolteacher told young James that he had been given a gift and was "one of God's messengers."⁴⁷ As a

child, he also saw auras around people.⁴⁸ Raised staunchly Catholic, Van Praagh nevertheless found himself wondering whether God really existed and if the Bible were really true.⁴⁹ At age eight, after asking God to prove His existence, Van Praagh saw a large, glowing hand, pulsating with light, coming down toward him as he lay in bed, and he knew this was God.⁵⁰ Van Praagh continued to have paranormal experiences, including contact with a spirit via a Ouija board.

To please his mother, Van Praagh enrolled in a seminary in preparation for the priesthood, but he had many doubts about the teachings. During a meditation at the seminary, Van Praagh realized that God is love, nonjudgmental, and within us. He subsequently left the seminary and the Catholic Church.⁵¹

A few years later, armed with a broadcasting degree, Van Praagh worked in Los Angeles, hoping to be a screenwriter. He received a reading from a medium who told him that he had mediumistic abilities and that the spirits would use him.⁵² After reading books on how to develop psychic and mediumistic abilities, he practiced these techniques for about a year, increasing his psychic sensitivity.⁵³ Like Edward, Van Praagh states that doing spirit contact gave him a strong sense of "love and joy" and requests for his services led him to do this full-time.⁵⁴

Van Praagh believes all creatures, both human and nonhuman, are made of the "same God spark."⁵⁵ God is humankind's very "essence," and though many have come representing the "light of God," all of us are divine.⁵⁶ Van Praagh also believes in reincarnation. The soul's journey after death involves an intermediate astral world, then progresses to a higher level where it is more "enlightened" and finally reaches the "true Heaven world."⁵⁷

To communicate with the dead, Van Praagh says he must raise his vibrational level, since spirits vibrate at a higher level; and he must concentrate since he does not hear the spirits at a normal conversational level.⁵⁸ He opens his mind to the thoughts of the spirits and repeats exactly what he perceives.⁵⁹ Like Edward and Browne, Van Praagh believes everyone has spirit guides. Preparation for readings involves meditation; Van Praagh's books give instructions on various meditations.

ARE THE MEDIUMS' MESSAGES FROM GOD?

Why do people consult mediums? After losing a loved one to death, a person may want the comfort of hearing from that loved one again and may be curious about where the loved one is and how that person is doing. Others are hoping to find out about death and the afterlife. Could God be comforting people through contact with the dead? What does the Bible say about this?

God's Word on Contacting the Dead. God's Word clearly forbids consulting mediums or spiritists. These activities are forbidden in several places, including Leviticus 19:31, 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:10–11; 1 Chronicles 10:13–14; and Isaiah 8:19–20. Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) implies that the dead cannot contact the living. Consulting the dead, a practice called necromancy, usually was done for purposes of divination and seeking the advice of pagan gods.⁶⁰ God considers consulting mediums and spiritists as spiritual adultery (see Lev. 20:6).

According to 1 Samuel 28:3–23, King Saul consulted a medium. Saul had banned mediums, but, desperate for advice due to the advancing Philistine army and God's silence on what to do, he sought out a medium to call up Samuel's spirit. Samuel appeared and told Saul that he had disobeyed God in not destroying the Amalekites in a previous battle, that Israel would fall to the Philistines, and that Saul and his sons would die in battle the next day. This passage cannot be taken to endorse spirit contact at all, especially when the writer of 1 Chronicles 10:13 clearly states, "So Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the Lord, because he did not keep the word of the Lord, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance" (NKJV).

There is debate as to whether the spirit the medium called up was really Samuel or was actually a demon. The Bible, however, specifically says Samuel appeared. Samuel's accurate and specific predictions furthermore indicate that this was not a demonic spirit. Only God knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10) and, according to Deuteronomy 18:22, only prophets from God give predictions that consistently

are 100 percent correct. The medium's surprise to see Samuel strongly suggests that God brought up Samuel in an unprecedented miracle for the specific purpose of rebuking Saul.

Accuracy and Communication. Edward, Browne, and Van Praagh all freely admit that they are not always accurate;⁶¹ indeed, Browne writes that no psychic has 100 percent accuracy and that 70 percent is above average.⁶² In psychic development classes I attended, one teacher often told us that the best psychic on his or her best day is about 75 percent accurate.

Edward claims that what the spirits give him is often in symbolic language and therefore difficult to interpret. He explains this difficulty as the higher vibrations of the spirits.⁶³ There is no way to authenticate this information; we have only the word of the mediums and others who teach this concept.⁶⁴ Edward talks about the spirits playing "psychic charades,"⁶⁵ and Browne says that the spirits don't speak but communicate by pantomime in a sort of "divine game of charades."⁶⁶ The mediums can always explain, therefore, that inaccurate information is due to difficulties in communication from the spirit world or misinterpretation of the symbolic language.

Contrary to this routine fallibility are the Bible's clear and accurate messages given by God's prophets and angels. God moreover commands that those who seek mediums should seek out God instead (see Isa. 8:19–20). When God speaks through the Scriptures, His words and messages are clear; there is no need to interpret gestures, images, or pantomime. Because angels, who are spirits, were able to speak distinctly, it is reasonable to conclude that information from God or approved by God will neither be confusing nor difficult to transmit or understand.

What If the Information Is Correct? It is true that sometimes the mediums are correct in the information they pass on. This validates for many what the mediums are doing.

How does one explain that the mediums' accurate information is not from God? The writer of Deuteronomy 13:1–3 advises us that if a "sign or wonder" comes to pass from a prophet or a "dreamer of dreams," and what they said comes true, but then that prophet or dreamer asks that we follow other gods, we are not to listen to what this person says. If the medium gives correct information but has spiritual beliefs contradictory to God's Word, then what he or she is saying cannot be from God. Browne and Van Praagh deny the biblical God, contend God is nonjudgmental and within everyone, and assert we are a part of God. Browne denies Jesus' death on the cross and the need for judgment of sin. All three believe in reincarnation, a doctrine that nullifies salvation by Christ and grace alone by teaching that one can be saved by improving spiritually and morally through the course of many earthly lives.

On a John Edward fan site at www.johnedwardfriends.org, fans suggest books for reading on topics, such as contacting angels, psychic development, past-life regression, and Tarot cards. The person suggesting the Tarot book notes that Edward recommends these materials in his "development tapes." In fact, on his official site, www.johnedward.net, Edward offers a tape on developing psychic powers.

Since Edward still claims his Catholic faith, could his ability to contact spirits, or a similar ability from someone claiming to be a Christian, be a gift from God? The apostle James states God gives only "good and perfect" gifts (James 1:17). God would not give someone a special skill that He Himself condemns. Even if the information is correct, it cannot be from God, since the mediums are engaged in a practice God has forbidden and they espouse beliefs that conflict with God's Word.

SKEPTICS AND BELIEVERS: IS THERE A HAPPY MEDIUM?

How can mediums pass on what seems to be accurate information? Skeptics who have assessed mediums and replicated what they do have concluded that mediums are doing tricks and fishing for information.⁶⁷ Some say Edward and other mediums are practicing a technique known as "cold reading," in which initials or numbers are tossed out to the audience until someone eventually responds to them.⁶⁸ Skeptics also point out that people notice the hits more than the misses, even though the misses outweigh the hits. Believers in mediums are convinced by the hits, which often seem to be enough for them.

The issue is often framed in terms of “either-or.” Either the mediums are frauds or they are receiving information from spirits; but must it be one or the other?

What Edward, Browne, and Van Praagh describe about their experiences is similar to what I experienced as an astrologer and student of psychic techniques. When reading astrological charts, I did on occasion receive startlingly accurate information that seemed to be fed into my mind. I usually went into an altered state of consciousness⁶⁹ and felt a beam of energy connect me to the chart (not the client). I also did many charts for clients who were not physically present, ruling out the possibility of reading body language or being led by the client. If I was able to come up with accurate information without practicing the techniques described by the skeptics, is it not possible the same thing is happening to the mediums?

Due to their spiritual beliefs, meditative practices, and training as psychics, the mediums may be opening themselves up to information from somewhere. If it is not the dead, then who is giving information when it is specific and correct? According to 2 Corinthians 11:14, Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light. It seems possible that demons can disguise themselves as the dead and relay information that seems correct.

Even if skeptics are convinced that mediums are using tricks, is it necessary to use this accusation when we have God’s Word forbidding this practice and when there exists the possibility of demonic sources? Skeptical debunking tends to alienate and does not convince the mediums’ followers. It can also smack of smugness or condescension. The debunkers may convince doubters and people who deny the supernatural, but their exposés have seemingly not decreased the numbers of those who continue to seek out mediums.

Instead of trying to label all mediums as frauds, why not consider that what is happening results from a combination of factors: coincidence, good guessing, the mediums’ imaginations, generalities, demonic sources, and the client’s belief and interpretations to fit the situation? If mediums are truly trying to contact the dead, is it not possible they are contacting demonic spirits in some cases?

Debunking the mediums could backfire if the debunking seems hostile; a better response might be to speak to the issue of why people are seeking to contact the dead and offer the comfort and peace found through knowing Jesus Christ as Savior. Jesus, the One who died on the cross to pay for our sins and rose on the third day, is the only One who has truly come back from the dead to give us a message. Let us offer a positive message and proclaim Him. As Christ said, “I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”⁷⁰

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.
2. Brian Lowry, “A Medium to Channel the Dead,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 2001, sect. F.
3. 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).
4. Most psychics do not normally try to contact dead people.
5. La Ferla.
6. James Van Praagh, *Talking to Heaven: A Medium’s Message of Life after Death* (New York: Signet, 1997), 51.
7. *Ibid.*, 54.
8. John Edward, *One Last Time* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1999), xiv.
9. Terry Morrow, “Media Medium Tunes to Departed,” *Washington Times*, 20 August 2001 (<http://aasp.washtimes.com/printarticle.asp?action=print&ArticleID=2001820-526642>).
10. Sylvia Browne with Lindsay Harrison, *The Other Side and Back* (New York: Signet, 2000), 191.
11. Chris Ballard, “John Edward Is the Oprah of the Other Side,” *New York Times on the Web*, 29 July 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/29/magazine/29PSYCHIC.html?searchpv=day0>.
12. Edward, xiii, 5–6, 12.
13. *Ibid.*, 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 8.
15. *Ibid.*, 10–12.
16. *Ibid.*, 13–15.

17. Ibid., 15–16.
18. Ibid., 24.
19. Ibid., 25–26. I was introduced to my spirit guide in a guided visualization in the mid-1970s. This is a technique whereby someone verbally guides a person into a meditative state through a series of images and suggestions.
20. *New York Times on the Web*, 29 July 2001.
21. “Psychic Raises Ratings for TV’s Sci-Fi Channel,” *CNN.com*, 31 October 2000, <http://www.cnn.com/2000/SHOWBIZ/TV/10/31/john.edwards/index.html>.
22. Edward, 43–45.
23. Ibid., 104.
24. Ibid., 109.
25. Ibid., 45, 107, 222.
26. Ibid., 158–59.
27. Browne, xxii.
28. Ibid., xxiii, xxv.
29. Ibid., xxiv.
30. Ibid., xxv.
31. Sylvia Browne, *Journey of the Soul Series, Book 1: God, Creation, and Tools for Life* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2000), 3.
32. Ibid., 22, 39.
33. Ibid., 185.
34. Browne, *The Other Side and Back*, 7, 13, 203; Browne, *God, Creation, and Tools for Life*, 7, 81.
35. Browne, *The Other Side and Back*, 181; Browne, *God, Creation, and Tools for Life*, 21, 150.
36. Browne, *God, Creation, and Tools for Life*, 4.
37. Ibid., 50, 74.
38. Ibid., 6–8.
39. Ibid., 9–10, 18–19, 22.
40. Ibid., 20, 41.
41. Ibid., 13, 19.
42. Ibid., 15.
43. Browne, *The Other Side and Back*, 64.
44. Ibid., 3; Browne, *God, Creation, and Tools for Life*, 119.
45. Browne, *The Other Side and Back*, 4–5.
46. Ibid., 8–9, 216.
47. Van Praagh, 4–5.
48. James Van Praagh, *Reaching to Heaven* (New York: Signet/New American Library, 1999), 26.
49. Van Praagh, *Talking to Heaven*, 8–9.
50. Ibid., 9–10.
51. Ibid., 29–30.
52. Ibid., 33.
53. Ibid., 34–37, 243.
54. Ibid., 41.
55. Ibid., 42.
56. Ibid., 43.
57. Van Praagh, *Reaching to Heaven*, 51–52, 92–93.
58. Van Praagh, *Talking to Heaven*, 40, 54–55.
59. Ibid., 55–56.
60. Divination, often called fortunetelling, involves seeking information through an occult method or reading hidden meanings in the natural world. Divination includes palm reading, numerology, astrology, card reading, the I-Ching, and Rune Stones.
61. Tim Goodman, “Medium’s Well-Done Show Wins over Some Skeptics, Chats with the Dead Make Compelling TV,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 January 2001 (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2001/01/23/DD26094.DTL>); Browne, *The Other Side and Back*, xxiii, 58, 209; Van Praagh, *Reaching to Heaven*, 39.
62. Browne, *The Other Side and Back*, 58.
63. Edward, 43–52.
64. The concept of moving to a higher vibration as part of spiritual unfoldment was a part of New Age teachings I received. This is described in James Redfield’s best-selling novel, *The Celestine Prophecy* (Warner, 1993).
65. Goodman.
66. Browne, *The Other Side and Back*, 166.
67. Michael Shermer, “Deconstructing the Dead: Cross Over One Last Time to Expose Medium John Edward,” <http://www.skeptic.com/news/worthy13.html>; also see information on James Van Praagh at <http://www.skeptical.com/vanpraagh.html>.
68. La Ferla. When I was an astrologer, we used the term “cold reading” to mean reading a chart without preparation; it had nothing to do with tricking people.
69. This happened spontaneously, perhaps due to my many years of Eastern meditation.
70. Revelation 1:17–18.