

# **The Magical Method**

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*Through the years people have asked me about the use of “magic” in my church programs. Here is a discussion of various questions I’ve been asked concerning the use of illusions as illustrations in ministry.*

How can we understand God’s inconceivable blessings? How can we illustrate these abstract concepts to a world that is looking for concrete evidence? How can a pastor illustrate the change that takes place when a sinner accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord? One of the best methods a person can use is “magical illustrations.”

“Hold on now! Doesn’t the Bible condemn the use of witchcraft?”

Yes, the Bible does condemn the use of witchcraft; but we’re not speaking of witchcraft. We’re talking about object lessons with surprise endings. When the Bible speaks of witchcraft, sorcery, divination, and the like, it is speaking of the practice of calling on demonic powers for aid or favors. That is NOT what I’m doing. I’m using visuals that surprise you, but there is no spiritual power used to accomplish these effects.

As T. Witton Davies states in his book Magic Divination and Demonology, the term magic “...in our time, ...means no more than the art of performing clever tricks with the hands.”

So, we are talking about two completely different things. Witchcraft, sorcery and black arts call upon satanic forces of evil. I am doing the opposite. I’m asking God to be glorified as messages are being illustrated through natural means.

You see, word meanings evolve. For example: consider the word “gay”. Twenty years ago, if you would greet a friend by saying, “You sure look ‘gay’ today,” it would be a polite greeting. Remember the Christmas song, “Don we now our gay apparel”? The word “gay” now has various meanings that are very different from each other.

The word “magic” has gone through the evolutionary process also. It now means different things to different people. Toby Travis, a Christian illusionist, states: “The word MAGIC itself is perhaps the largest source of confusion. We can find at least two meanings for the word magic in the dictionary. First we find; “The art of producing effects by SUPERHUMAN means, as by spiritual beings or the occult powers of nature: sorcery; enchantment; necromancy; power or influence similar to that of enchantment.”

A second definition, however, is: “The art of applying NATURAL causes, whose operation is secret, to produce surprising effects.” This defines what entertainers (called magicians or illusionists) do today. This is not witchcraft.

*“But, aren’t we supposed to abstain from even the appearance of evil?”*

Yes, we are to abstain from the appearance of evil. So the question is, "Do magical illustrations give the appearance of evil?" I suppose it depends upon the person's presentation of the effect. Just as a music performance could be presented in an evil way, I suppose an illusionist could give the appearance of evil. But, generally, in our society the answer is "no". In another society, such as one in which voo doo is practiced, the use of illusions may be misunderstood, confusing or inappropriate. The observers there may not realize the difference between a sleight of hand maneuver and a demonic demonstration. But in western society, illusions are not only condoned, they are desired. They are entertaining.

We enjoy being surprised. From the time that a small child plays Peek-a-boo (which essentially is a vanish and reappearance) up through the later years in life, we take pleasure in the unexpected. That's what laughter stems from; an unexpected ending to a joke, etc. A trick is, truthfully, not much more than a visual joke. In our society in the Christian's hand, the illusion can be a powerful force for good!

*"But people don't understand how it's done!"*

That's true, but that is not an argument. A person would not reject a ride to the grocery store just because he didn't know how the car worked. Toby Travis states, "Secrecy is an integral part of my work just as a certain recipe is for Kentucky Fried Chicken or the formula is for a famous soft drink. Secrecy is simply a matter of good business."

Not being understandable is one reason why "Gospel Magic" may be effective. No one really understands spiritual blessings: No one really understands how the vilest sinner can be made clean, or how the Holy Spirit fills the heart of the believer. These occurrences are beyond comprehension. Magical illustrations appear to be the same way. They visually parallel the spiritual truths we are trying to verbalize. We don't understand them: That is why they are ideal for teaching spiritual concepts. We don't cognitively understand, but it still happens.

*"That may be true, but we want to see real miracles, not fake man-made illusions."*

So does the Christian magician! He never tries to replace the workings of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, he wants to inspire people to believe for miracles, to open their hearts to the message of God, and to draw nearer to God than ever before.

As Paul Everett states, "The Christian magician has four goals: To educate, to edify, to entertain, and to evangelize." I personally have found that it is much easier to reach and teach people when they want to pay attention and listen. A clearly illustrated message may inspire faith to believe and receive God's blessing and aid in times of trouble.

*"But aren't magicians deceiving people?"*

No, they are not deceiving people. First of all, everyone knows that what the magician is doing is purely “make-believe.” People understand that the magician is simply an actor pretending that something is occurring.

Even young children understand this. When a trick is concluded, the first thing I hear a child say is, “I know how you did that!” And then they usually begin listing several different possibilities. They know it’s just a visual riddle.

Let’s consider this question of deception and apply it to all areas of our Christian walk and daily practice. Are there other areas where it seems to be acceptable? (Please note that an “illusion” is when it looks like something is happening, but it really isn’t.)

A heat mirage is an illusion. It looks like water is on the roadway ahead of the car, yet it “vanishes” as you approach it.

Women often wear “blush” to make their cheeks seem pinker. Lipstick is applied. Are these women trying to deceive us, making themselves look more beautiful than they truly are?

Often people who feel overweight will wear clothes that are striped vertically so they look thinner. Is this deception?

What about the emcee who tells a humorous story in his introduction of a speaker? This is an accepted common practice.

Some pastors use fictitious stories to illustrate sermon points. The Christian magician is doing the same thing, only he is illustrating visually rather than verbally. Both are using “make-believe” material to relay a spiritual lesson.

Let’s define exactly what deception is. Deception is: “expressing a falsity to be true.” Deception is leading people to believe a lie. But, the Christian illusionist is leading people to believe the truth – God’s truth!

I contend that the use of illusions to share a message is not deception. The message from the Word of God IS TRUE. It is not false. The message is complete in its truthfulness. Just because the eye does not perceive how the visual illustration is accomplished does not make the presentation deceptive. If we held up flash card pictures as we told a Bible story, the presentation would not be negated just because the audience did not understand how the pictures were drawn so colorfully.

The illusion is not deception. It is a visual illustration that the eye does not catch the mechanics of.

The next question which we need to consider is, “*Are they effective?*” If not, we have no need to consider using this method.

Personally, I often use a magical illustration at the conclusion of an evangelistic service. This illustration is visually presented as I discuss God's miraculous work of transforming a person's life.

We have seen hundreds of people commit their lives to Jesus in services we have conducted. In each service, magical illustrations were used. I am not saying that the tricks are what saved people. I am simply stating that when the Good News is clearly illustrated, it bears fruit. And that is the true test of a ministry, a method, or a man. Does it bear fruit?

The success of the magical illustration lies in the trick, the presentation, and the message. They must fit together with the emphasis on the message. If the presenter is well prepared, this type of illustration is one of the most effective means available. I have witnessed that time and again.

Can we understand God's inconceivable blessings? Not really. Can we illustrate these abstract concepts as fully as we want to? Well, probably not; but we can move a step closer by using the magical method.