

## **A Christian Perspective on Smoking Ceremonies.**

An Aboriginal Christian Elder, Rodney Rivers, wrote an article about smoking ceremonies. In it he expressed passionately and powerfully that Smoking Ceremonies were bringing a curse upon the people who participated.

I was talking to an experienced missionary and their understanding of what Rodney had meant is that the intention in the heart of the elders or indigenous ceremony leaders, of the Smoking Ceremony was to curse the participants or particularly to curse the non-indigenous intruders . That may in some instances be true, however that is not what has been shared with me in my 33 years of intimate interaction with traditional Aboriginal people across Australia and I don't think that that is what the author meant. **He is saying that A CURSE is however an outcome or the unintended result of the practice.** Unintended maybe by the people but a curse is the intention of the spirits involved.

### **About The Author**

The author of this *Smoking Ceremony teaching* that has been circulated by *Khesed Ministries*, writes from the perspective of being firstly a son of God (**John 1:12**) who knows and trusts The Word of his heavenly Father (The Bible and witness of The Spirit). He is indwelt and empowered, taught and led by The Spirit of Christ. He is a Christian Elder and minister of The Gospel.

Secondly he can see and writes on the issue through the lense of being an Aboriginal elder from The Kimberley region of WA with a wealth of traditional knowledge.

Some people will struggle with this but, I will go to thirdly, he is a man who believes in and operates in the gift of The Holy Spirit called "discerning of spirits"(**1Cor 12:10**). This involves a Holy Spirit supernatural awareness of what is happening in The Spirit World. *This may extend to being given an open vision to see spiritually exactly what is happening and to see spiritual activity as God wants a person to see it. ( Not as the spirits may want to be perceived or try to appear)*

### **A Traditional View of The Smoking Ceremony.**

What has been shared with me almost universally from North to South of the country and East to West is that the intended purpose of the smoking ceremony is to drive away potentially malevolent spirits, and to invite the blessing and protection by ancestral, totem and ruling territorial spirits that live in and are deemed to have authority over the land and all who dwell on it or visit. These ancestral spirits are also believed to have the power to keep any evil spirits away from you. This is part of the idea behind the smoke itself. But that's not the big picture story.

Smoking Ceremonies are used today often as part of, or associated with a "Welcome to Country" ceremony. This is a more modern emanation of Aboriginal culture bringing together a number of ancient practices and modern political and possibly international influences.

Smoking Ceremonies in the belief of the traditional Aboriginal culture of many of those I have worked with, involve talking to deceased ancestors who are presumed to live in the land over which they have authority. There is a presumption traditionally that if you trespass on land that is not yours without seeking the permission and blessing of the ancestral spirits that dwell in it that they will punish you in various ways including but not limited to sickness and accidents, and that the land will not yield it's bounty in hunting or gathering. They may even appear or physically manifest to drive you out. However the use of a smoking ceremony for the protection of visitors seems to have been unknown in the Northern Territory where I have worked.

### **Alternative Answers**

If you ask an Aboriginal person why you are doing the ceremony you might get the blanket answer "Because it's our culture" partly because that is an answer that is generally unquestionable by white people or it generally seems to satisfy them. It may also be the main reason they are doing it because people are constantly telling them to get back to their culture and so they may have been convinced it is the right or best thing to do.

Another answer you will get is "For respect". Respect is a universal value. It also reflects core values of the indigenous culture of Honour vs Shame. Respect and fear are the same word in Hebrew and some Indigenous languages...though "respect" sounds a lot better than "fear" in English. However again these are more surface level answers that reflect a cultural distaste for a lot of questions. The traditional position on knowledge and education is that information is shared at the initiative of the teacher to those with a right or need to know not necessarily with the person who asks.

Elders in one area explained to me that a reason for the smoke in a more traditional smoking ceremony, is so that the spirits in the land cannot see you when you approach them while the ceremony leader is asking for peace with and protection of the ancestors or from the spirit of a recently deceased loved one who might be a gry with the living or not want to "return" ( reincarnation belief) to the realm of the dead. The smoke itself is a protection so that you will not be instantly attacked or that "others" will not be attacked. Some Aboriginal people themselves fear that the ancestral spirits may attack/ punish them for bringing "strangers" at first until permission is sought and granted. It is from a traditional practice of gaining protection from the dead and peace for the dead by and for remaining relatives that the more contemporary practice of a welcome ceremony seems to have been drawn. *( Remember that details of traditional belief vary from place to place and may change over time especially with the modern phenomena of broader interaction between different Aboriginal groups and and International cultural groups.)*

The more traditional practice of smoking ceremonies is to encourage the spirit of a deceased person to leave places that they were familiar with in their life. Again the smoke in some places was believed to obscure the view of the ceremony leader from the spirit of the deceased to protect them but also to obscure the departing spirit's view of their former places in this world to help encourage the deceased to pass from this world to the "spirit world" or "under-world". This is basically what some Europeans might call the exorcism of a ghost or spirit from a place.

*Another thing to remember when researching for yourself in the "field" is that the "why" or details of a ceremony like the effect of the smoke may only be passed on to those who are considered that they will be soon responsible to conduct the ceremony. Other indigenous community participants may only need to understand the expected effect which is blessing and or that spirits are encouraged to leave.*

*With the pressure of the dominant colonial culture often the traditional process of passing on these understandings can be lost in a whole region or generation. This is also connected to the traditional view of how knowledge is acquired and owned. Because miracles have been attributed to my prayers there is a sort of respect given me by some traditional Aboriginal leaders who are willing to talk about things with me that they may not share with others.*

### **So why would Rodney say that it was cursing those who participate?**

Firstly, The Bible says that talking to The Dead is a sin that is punishable by death in The Old Testament.

Deu 18:9-13 EasyEnglish "9 *When you go into the country that the LORD your God is giving you, be careful! You must not do the very bad practices of the people who live there. 10 You must not burn your child in a fire, as a gift to a false god. You must not become a servant of Satan and obey him. His servants do very bad things. 11 They are cruel and they often frighten people. They also try to speak to dead people. 12 God hates anyone who does these things. It is because of these very bad practices that the LORD will kill the people in the other nations. 13 You must live in a right way, and always obey the LORD your God."*

Leviticus 19:31CEV "Don't make yourselves disgusting to me by going to people who claim they can talk to the dead."

Leviticus 20:27EHV "A man or a woman who is a medium or deals with the spirits of the dead must certainly be put to death. They must be stoned to death. Their blood is on them."

Isiah 8:19-22 CEV "19,20 *Someone may say to you, "Go to the fortunetellers who make soft chirping sounds **or ask the spirits of the dead.** After all, a nation ought to be able to ask its own gods what it should do."* None of those who talk like that will live to see the light of day! 21 *They will go around in great pain and will become so hungry that they will angrily curse their king and their gods. And when they try to find help in heaven 22 and on earth, they will find only trouble and darkness, terrible trouble and deepest darkness."*

It is interesting that the translators equate ancestral spirits to being the gods of nations other than Israel. Elsewhere these "gods" are equated with familiar-spirits, fallen-angels or demons. I believe that the Scriptures identify that when people try to talk to the dead they are actually speaking to demons who have set themselves up as false gods. In the NT Paul identified Satan himself as "*the god of this world*" ( 2Cor 4:4)

That's pretty heavy stuff.

***Understanding of Old and New Testament relationship and relevance to us today in The Bible***

I can hear people reacting "But we are not under The Law or Old Covenant. We are under Grace or the New Covenant". Which is true, but it is not the whole story.

We need to understand that Jesus fulfilled the Law for us...He did not "abolish" it. (**Mat 5:17**). One application of this, for us as beneficiaries of The New Covenant, when we pass the "Moral Law" (as distinct from ceremonial law) through "The Cross" we see that the Old Testament prescribed penalties ( e.g. death, banishment, imprisonment) rather reflect the consequences in life of disregarding the Moral Law.

The Old Testament Moral Law punishments are based on the principle in the Bible of "*An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*" (**Duet 19:21**). This is the basis of Western jurisprudence principle that "The punishment must fit the crime". Or that the punishment must reflect the pain and damage and loss or threat to others that are the result of that action. Remembering that "*God IS Love*" (**1John 4:8**). His sole motivation is our welfare. Therefore if a sin under the OT is punishable by death, then that tells us that the consequences of that from God's all seeing all knowing and ultimately loving perspective must involve the death of people (and or worse, eg. eternal separation from God) if His prescribed penalty under The Law was death.

If a sin under the OT is punishable by death, then in The Light of The Cross, Jesus in His Grace, has taken the prescribed punishment that we deserve. That is eternally awesome. However for life in this world Jesus hasn't removed the natural and spirit-world consequences. There are still consequences of disregarding our designer and creator's instructions for living life at peace and fruitfully with our fellow human beings.

### **More of the Biblical Reason to Abstain from the Smoking Ceremony.**

There are a plethora of other serious Biblical reasons actually. These include that *the whole process is predicated on ideas that contradict the scriptures and undermine foundations of the Gospel's eternal salvation message*. The Bible itself says " ...God is true, even if everyone else is a liar."(**Romans 3:2**). *Jesus Himself revealed the origin of all lies as being Satan himself, who is identified as "a liar, and the father of lies"*(**John 8:44**).

The Word of God declares that *we have authority over evil spirits only "in The Name of Jesus"* (**Mark 16:17**) not because of our culture, human heritage, secret knowledge or societal position ( Traditional Owner or Jungai ( traditional ceremonial leader ).

*The Smoking Ceremony reinforces the unbiblical belief that the spirits of the dead can choose to roam the earth as ghosts*. Paul makes it clear that "to be absent from the body is to be present with The Lord"(**2Cor 5:8**), not roaming the earth. *This effects people's faith in the Gospel's message about our eternal destiny and life after death* (**Rom 1:16**).

Jesus makes it clear in the story of The Rich Man and Lazarus (**Luke 16:20-31**), that the unsaved dead are not destined to return to this world whereas *the idea of talking to departed ancestors is built on the understanding that life is an unending cycle of births and rebirths from the below world (the dead) to the above world (the living)*. The writer of Hebrews lets us know that "it is appointed unto all men to die once and after that, The Judgement." (**Heb 9:27**) The issue of the afterlife is a foundational truth of the Bible's good news message. It is

also motivational as to how we are going to live our lives morally in this life. To believe the underlying tennets of *The Smoking Ceremony takes away a key motivation to repent and submit to the Lordship of Christ*. We don't get another chance at Life...We are judged on the basis of our faith and rewarded for our deeds.

The only spirits that The Bible tells us reside in the Earth are *fallen angels (Rev 12:7-9)*. They are the most reasonable source of what the Bible refers to as false gods, familiar, evil and unclean spirits or demons. *Familiar spirits* are the most likely candidate for the imposters that pretend to be departed loved ones and ancestors in order to deceive and influence us to believe and act on their lies.

*The Smoking Ceremony presupposes that all authority over the land rests with the ancestral spirits and the ceremony "leader"*. Jesus declares (**Matt 28:18**) that "ALL authority in heaven and on earth" has been given to Him! This authority is delegated to His disciples as they go out in obedience to preach The Kingdom and make disciples (**Matt 28:19,20**). *To submit to the Smoking Ceremony is to fail to recognise Christ's authority as Lord of all contradicting your confession of Salvation (Rom 10:9) and undermines our authority as His ambassadors (2Cor5:20)*.

Jesus wants us in preaching The Gospel and as His Kingdom's Ambassadors to declare the urgency of repentance and faith in Christ for an eternally blessed life with Him. *The belief that we have a second or unlimited chances at life other than through the scriptural born again experience, takes away from the urgency of The Gospel*.

There is the reinforcing of the belief that a human spiritual leader ( Arnhem Land word across many languages: *Jungai*) has the power to help us find our blessed future spiritual home *after* we die. Jesus said (**John 14:6**) that none come to The Father except through Him. Paul reminds us "He is the only one true God! And there is only one person who talks to God on behalf of people. That person is Christ Jesus, who himself is a man!" (**1Tim 2:5**)T4T. What seems like a harmless welcome and blessing ceremony undermines the truth that Christ alone can save us. This may cost people their hope of eternity with Jesus.

**The second general category** of reason is that Rodney has observed that people who have submitted to the Smoking Ceremony as a means of blessing and protection have actually experienced the opposite, or curse. They certainly haven't as a general observation, experienced what was promised by the advocates for these ceremonies. Put simply, It doesn't work. Rodney speaks of people experiencing demonic encounters and nightmares following participation in Smoking Ceremonies though they may have previously lived in the area or even lived in other predominantly Aboriginal areas for years and never experienced anything like it. It is as though the participation in and embracing the practice and promise of the practice has actually opened them up to spiritual attack. The author has observed an increase in accidents, injuries and illness and deaths rather than the promised protection and blessings.

**Thirdly, from the perspective of the operation of the Christian Holy Spirit empowered gift of "discerning of spirits"**, the author has witnessed an increase in the activity of malevolent spirits ( demons/ fallen angels) following the invitation of elders to conduct

smoking ceremonies usually as part of the recently widely adopted practice of "welcome to country".

*Regarding the gift of "discerning of spirits" this is Biblically distinct from what people refer to as innate Aboriginal spirituality. Outside of Christ our window into the Spiritual realm is primarily what those spirits want us to see and how they want to be perceived. However that is not denying that Aboriginal people culturally have a greater awareness of the reality of this realm. Accordingly I have observed that as Aboriginal people may be engaging with the spirit realm they are more likely to look to The God of The Bible to help them understand it and for power to deal with it.*

**In conclusion.** Though the second and third categories of reason may be considered subjective. Even if it was the only reason, the Biblical admonition to not try to speak to the dead should be enough for Bible believing Christians to politely refuse to participate once you understand the basics of what the Smoking Ceremony is all about. That the beliefs underpinning the Smoking Ceremony undermine the eternal truths on which The Lord builds the salvation message of The Gospel. If we believe the Gospel ourselves and care about the eternal destiny of others, then we would not want to undermine the strength and sense of that message, as The Smoking Ceremony does, in every point.