



FAITH — HEALING ON DEMAND?

by Desmond Ford

According to a well-known TV advertisement, one in seven Americans goes to the hospital each year for treatment. Health care industries now match or surpass the nation's other leading industries. But the real solar-plexus jabbing facts are these: though approximately 70% of diseases are diseases of choice, none of us likes suffering for our sins be they social, gastronomical, or otherwise, and therefore all of us are tempted by the offer of miraculous "cure." The verdict of C. S. Lewis that most diseases are either cured by time or cannot be cured at all is one we are reluctant to accept.

Faith-Healing On The Rise

Perhaps this natural reluctance of ours explains the pervasive emphasis on miraculous healing found in religious programs over the U.S. radio and television. Millions are daily invited to lay hold of God's willingness to remove their ills. As Dr. Paul Brand has pointed out in a recent article, one television show claims to have in its files the records of over 60,000 miraculous cures.¹ In some cases we are even shown faith healers at work, inviting the sick

and suffering to leave the audience and seek a miracle through God's ministerial representative. The partially blind see, the deaf hear, legs are lengthened, invisible growths are eradicated and the visible evidence of forsaken crutches and wheelchairs call forth shouts of praise from sympathetic viewers.

But what of the millions of home witnesses or listeners who do as they are told, in faith demanding the miraculous blessing, but find themselves still as burdened as before? These are even more bereft because hope disappointed increases despair. And what if they find insult added to injury by the well-intended observation of a believer that it is their lack of faith which lies at the root of the withheld cure? Now guilt is added to sickness.

Furthermore, it must be asked: What view of the world and life does belief in easy and lavish miracles produce? What type of conduct is thereby encouraged? Does a "believer" see the universe as controlled by inviolable law which must be studied, learned and obeyed, or does he or she come to see their world as something very tractable indeed, ever prepared to

yield to the demand of faith, rendering obedience and effort unnecessary pedestrian expenditures? What sort of life springs from such convictions? Can it cope with the hard reality of daily existence, or is failure, frustration and anger ultimately inevitable?

To see this matter in perspective it is necessary first to acknowledge that the American scene is not typical of other parts of the globe. As an Australian who has visited about forty countries and who came to the U.S. as a guest-lecturer seven years ago, the distinction between this country and all others is obvious and striking. Here is the Mecca not only for those seeking new horizons or new employment, but also a religious and healing Mecca which has no real parallel anywhere else in the world.

A Valid Protest

At this point a protest is needed — the protest that our inquiry does not either deny the possibility of miraculous healing or suggest that all in the healing business are unscrupulous imposters. What is being questioned is whether every American Jack and Jill should be encouraged to believe that the simple way of faith guarantees escape from pain, and whether what well-intentioned men and women hail as miracles might not be something less spectacular.

Having innumerable medical doctors among my friends it has not been hard to discover their convictions on this matter. For the most part they are skeptical of claims to organic miraculous healing though simultaneously confident in the overruling providence of Deity which can and should be invoked. They would agree with a recent pronouncement:

...from my own experience as a physician I must truthfully admit that, among the thousands of patients I have treated, I have never observed an unequivocal instance of intervention in the physical realm.²

I well remember a ministerial student in my college classes who claimed miraculous healing. He gave his testimony from the chapel desk and in many other places around the country. Those most skeptical of his claims were friendly Christian physicians. Ultimately, the truth emerged — there had been neither organic disease nor miracle, only the

phenomenon of an insecure student seeking recognition and notoriety. The fact that my own wife was dying with breast cancer after years of struggle and soon to leave three young children, increased my interest in this case.

One of the dangers of a magical view of the universe has been well-expressed by Walter R. Thorson:

The attitude of the magic and occult movement in our culture, therefore, is not to deny the results of science, but rather to downplay and devalue their intellectual and philosophical significance in relation to reality. The style of its expression is to pour scorn on the tradition of science as mere child's play in comparison with the real secrets of power known only to the initiated. . . .³

Healing in the Bible

Of course it is the Christian Bible which is claimed to be the guarantor of the authenticity of modern healing emphases. Is the claim valid? The vast majority of scholarly exegetes of all churches deny that Scripture invites believers to demand miraculous exits from all the deadends of painful existence. One only needs to read Dr. Benjamin Warfield's *Counterfeit Miracles*⁴ to see how orthodoxy (in this case a former Princeton professor) has always viewed the matter.

Miracles in the New Testament are rare events after the initial supernatural establishment of the Christian church. Paul himself preached at Galatia while suffering from a protracted illness and at a later time he confessed that his prayers for healing received a negative reply. He advised Timothy to deal with his own frequent indigestion by using medicinal wine and also informed the young ministerial sufferer that he was not alone for poor Trophimus also was sick at Ephesus — left there by the Apostle, unhealed. Similarly, in the epistle to the Philippians we read of Epaphroditus who, because of arduous service, had suffered a sickness "nigh unto death." We do not read that he recovered through miraculous intervention resulting from strenuous personal faith.

The passage most often cited by faith healers is Mark 16:9-20 — a passage omitted by many modern Bibles because the evidence for its textual authenticity is inadequate. As for the claim that, according to Scripture, healing is dependent upon

the reality of the sufferer's faith — the fact is that the New Testament lists twenty-nine healings without any reference to faith. Some of those made whole were originally in a fever, a coma or insane. In certain instances some were dead. Who will claim that a dead person can exercise faith? In one case Christ rebuked the "healers" (the disciples) for their lack of faith rather than the sufferer (see Mt 17:16-17).

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How effective are faith-healing ministries? One thing is quite clear — Christians age and die. Even faith healers develop grey hair, wear glasses — for reading at least — and inevitably fall before the Grim Reaper. The other impressive fact is that even in Christian-healing circles there are strict limits to the cure-range. No amputated limb is ever restored, not even an extracted tooth, nor a loss of sight. Even bald heads defy miraculous reforestation. No hospital on earth has ever been emptied by a healer, which stands in strong contrast to the Christ who healed "all manner of disease."

On the other hand, what shall be said of the large number of cases who are improved by prayers of faith? None can say with truth that all claiming miraculous healing are deceivers or deceived. Similarly, it must never be said that all those religious leaders encouraging the sick to seek healing are cheats or cheated. What then is the truth of the matter?

Mind and Body

Apart from confidence in the sovereign God who obviously can work a miracle whenever and if ever He chooses, the chief key to the mysterious lock is the inter-relationship between mind and body. Not only Christians, but pagans before and since Christ have worked by suggestion to remove human afflictions. The priest-physicians of the Greek temples of Aesculapius, the African witch

doctors, and Emily Coue have all had success.

The most significant recovery of truth in the realm of medical science has been the revived awareness of the unity of man's nature, the so-called psychosomatic linkage between mind and body. The best of modern medical thought now recognizes that the mind is the body and vice versa. As a recent work affirms: "The mind is a function of the brain which is part of the body — hence they are one." Dr. Flanders Dunbar wrote in her now-famous book of a generation ago:

A physician with a scientific understanding of the psychosomatic approach can effect cures by medical methods which would have been considered miracles a generation ago.⁵

Wade H. Boggs agrees:

Perhaps the most reasonable explanation of the successes of faith healers is to suppose that they have stumbled upon the psychosomatic principle, and that while they operate in accordance with it, they more or less imperfectly understand it, and use it in a hit-or-miss fashion. This view of the matter contradicts the contention that God's power is being released in a miraculous way through them. Rather, it would seem that in using their accidental discovery of the psychosomatic principle, they are no more and no less effective than non-religious practitioners or even charlatans.⁶

We do but generalize as we cite these authors. Most men of faith who understand these things nonetheless believe that God can and does work miraculously though never on the lavish and unconditional scale others might suggest. Dr. Billy Graham has never operated as a healer of the body but he certainly believes in miracles, and thereby he exemplifies the vast majority of Christian preachers through the ages.

Dwight L. Moody's successor, Dr. R. A. Torrey, had the following to say:

There is an especial need of a dependable book on divine healing at this particular time. Everywhere there is a most extraordinary interest in the subject. People have flocked by the thousands and tens of thousands in different cities to adventurers and adventuresses who

oftentimes not only rob them of their gold but of that which is far more precious than gold. And not a few evangelists who have lost out in legitimate soul-winning work are putting to the front the matter of the healing of the body, and are certainly drawing much larger crowds and receiving far larger pay than they ever did before. There have been, to my personal knowledge, some very sad tragedies, insanity, death, and shipwreck of faith arising from this pitiable business. . . many say, "every believer has a right to claim physical healing for all their physical sicknesses and infirmities right now, *just as much as a right to claim immediate pardon for all their sins, on the ground of the atoning death of Jesus Christ.*" But that does not follow. It is very poor logic. For the question arises, *When* do we get what Jesus Christ secured for us by His atoning sacrifice. The Bible answer to that question is very plain, and the Bible answer is, *when Jesus Christ comes again.* We get the first-fruits of the atoning work of Christ, the first fruits of salvation in the life that now is, *but we get the full fruits only when Jesus Christ comes again.*⁷

Torrey's words are appropriate for many reasons and particularly so because large-scale faith healing had its modern origin in this country in his day. It was in the late nineteenth century when certain preachers of undeniable probity such as A. J. Gordon and A. B. Simpson began to proclaim to American audiences that the atonement was intended to give health to the body as well as the soul. (Their more orthodox brethren agreed except for the time of that blessing). Sadly Gordon died of pneumonia and bronchitis while Simpson after years of overwork

died of arteriosclerosis.

In the twentieth century modern Pentecostalism claimed the gifts of tongues and healing with the result that faith healers around the country marked by emotional hysteria made extravagant claims of miracles unlimited. Aimee Semple McPherson arrived in Los Angeles with less than one hundred dollars and began her healing campaigns in 1922. In four years, her holdings were worth a million dollars without counting the Angelus Temple which was valued at even a higher figure.

The fact that public healings are limited in scope, never restoring such obvious defects as a lost limb, makes it clear that whatever good is accomplished belongs chiefly to the psychosomatic field. One needs to remember that it is commonplace in medical literature today that up to eighty percent of human maladies arise from the faulty functioning of the imagination. In other words, a tremendous proportion of human ills have their source in mental and spiritual problems and therefore can be cured through those same avenues.

According to William James, America's most influential psychologist, mind-cure movements constitute the "only decidedly original contribution to the systematic philosophy of life offered by the American people."⁸ He is not entirely right but it is certainly true to say that here in the USA this contribution has been popularized as never before. And the evidence is to be found not only in our medical literature but on our daily television and radio religious programs.

A Warning and a Promise

In conclusion we offer a warning and a promise to all who are seeking relief from physical

affliction. First, the words of Leslie Weatherhead:

At our present stage of development any attitude of mind which regards as unnecessary the doctor, surgeon, dentist, nurse, masseur or other qualified worker on the physical level stands self-condemned...No amount of love, or positive-thinking, or denial of the existence of evil will take a splinter out of an eye. A thousand situations which we call disease are in that category . . . At the same time, man is not mere body. His body is the instrument of the mind and the soul.⁹

The promise is one I pluck from memory — a somewhat mangled reproduction of a statement found in an unknown *Reader's Digest* decades ago. It ran like this:

If ever there was a golden panacea for health, it is this: only remove the cruel pressures we place upon our bodies and minds by wrong habits and the natural resilience of health will assert itself. Live simply in obedience to the laws of nature concerning thought, diet, exercise, and rest and the reward will be inevitably yours.

1. "A Surgeon's View of Divine Healing," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 25, 1983, p. 15.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. Cited by James F. Jekel, *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, Sept., 19, p. 123.
4. Reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust, G.B. 1976.
5. *Mind and Body: Psychosomatic Medicine*, New York, 1947, cited by George Bishop, *Faith Healing: God or Fraud*, Los Angeles, 1967, p. 205.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
7. *Divine Healing, Does God Perform Miracles Today?* Moody Press, Chicago, n.d. pp. 6,13,25,36-37.
8. *Psychology, Religion, and Healing*, London, 1951, p. 495.
9. *Ibid.*