

A medical view of Miraculous Healing

This issue of The Briefing is devoted to 'healing'.

In this extract by English professor VERNA WRIGHT, some of the claims of 'healing ministries' are examined from a medical viewpoint.

A Wimber meeting

Recently, John Wimber was in Leeds where he conducted in St George's church one of his evening meetings. Five of my colleagues (Christian doctors) who go to that church were present. They were so incensed by what they saw that they afterwards wrote an account of their reactions. I will quote to you what they said.

There was an hour's repetitious chorus singing which began the proceedings. A fair amount of reeling and writhing commenced at the start of the singing. No space was found for a Scripture reading as such. The congregation was at no time called to prayers of confession of sin and repentance. "Hold out your hands. Feel heat coming through you. Your eyelids may feel heavy. You may feel like falling; some persons may scream. It is all right. You can see the Holy Spirit resting on people, the power of God resting on many."

Subjects for the team's healing ministry were gathered from the audience by a team member who took the microphone to broadcast his word of knowledge. There were descriptions of symptoms or illnesses that were being suffered by persons present. Those so described were asked to step forward. The list of conditions was general enough for the description to fit several in any group of five hundred or more.

The volunteers were then put into trance while hands were laid on them. They were not unconscious and would, we were assured,

hear what was said to them. They remained thus for many minutes with assorted shakings, tremblings, smilings, fallings, swayings and utterings. Their various features were then exhibited to the congregation. We were assured that the smile here and the posture there were clearly visible evidence that the Holy Spirit had descended.

Throughout the building other individuals proceeded to fall into trance. The audience was told that the Holy Spirit might lead some persons to scream or to breathe very deeply. As one expected from hypnotic states these things happened more or less at once. Uncontrollable laughter, crying, groaning, shrieking and sobbing, together with the murmurings of many who wished to minister some spiritual comfort to the affected brethren made it more difficult to follow any more the official progress of events.

Amplified voices of team members came through, "It is increasing everywhere. Give us more, Lord. Break that bondage. Release their hearts. Set them free. Relax."

All five of the doctors, one of whom is one of England's leading psychiatrists, described this as hypnosis. Indeed the psychiatrist said it was "a very expert performance containing all the textbook characteristics of the induction of hypnosis". The conclusion of my colleagues was this:

Hypnotic trance with suggestion is a powerful psychological tool. It has many uses. Psychosomatic disorders and physical symp-

toms related to neurosis are very likely in the short term to respond to this treatment. Relief of pain as in dental extraction or childbirth is relatively commonplace with hypnosis. In the Wimber team's meeting we saw no change that suggested any healing of organic, physical disease. Given the concern of many attenders to be of use to their neighbours some very helpful suggestions were undoubtedly made during the numerous trance states.

The hypnotic state, though conscious, is not what Scripture means by self-control, the mind of Christ in us or mind renewal. To describe these trances, their visible or audible features, or any healings experienced as the perfectly legitimate result of hypnosis—to describe this as the plain work of the Holy Spirit is a deception. To encourage techniques which produce hypnosis and hysteria and to teach that one is learning how to exercise kingdom rule over demons, disease and nature is false; it is misrepresentation.

I cannot emphasize my agreement with this conclusion too strongly. All the detailed analyses which have been made of healing claims over the years have failed to produce evidence of cures being achieved except for the kind of disorders which in medicine we call functional states.

Miracles under scrutiny

Perhaps one of the earliest investigations of miraculous healing undertaken in this century was an Anglican commission headed by nine eminent Anglican clerics assisted by eleven doctors. Their conclusion was this. They acknowledged that no sharply defined fundamental distinction could be drawn between organic illness (in which there are structural changes in organs) and functional ailments (in which there is no change in structure, but the illness has a psychological cause). However, they were forced to the conclusions that faith and spiritual healings,

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In its expanded form, this material is also available in a book:

The Healing Epidemic

by Peter Masters

Available from Koorong Books, or through your local Christian bookstore.

like all treatment by suggestion, could be permanently effective only in cases of what are generally called *functional* disorders and that the alleged exceptions are so disputable that they cannot be taken into account.

We could quote survey after survey in the same vein.

More recently, my friend Duncan Leighton, an evangelist, obtained a Kodak traveling scholarship to go to Africa and America. He wrote an article entitled, *Signs? One Wonders*, in which he tells of his own investigations of miraculous healings:

In Africa in 1984, I followed the Derek Prince team through Zambia where they claimed thousands of miracle healings. We found none. Dr Eric Rea examined one miracle leg-lengthening and pronounced it a hoax. My letter asking Mr Prince for detailed information was passed down the line until it reached Brian Bentley who knew someone whose sinus was cured.

Duncan Leighton then went to California where he looked at some of the healing groups there. Roger Ziegler, a Californian chiropractor who is a Christian man, said that after one healing meeting, "Almost half the bad backs I deal with have already been healed in this place."

This is the kind of testimony we receive from those who have looked objectively and sympathetically at healing claims over a long period of time. We must therefore, by way of medical considerations, appreciate the meaning of doctors when they loosely describe remission as 'a miracle'. We must also appreciate the possibility that patients may have misunderstood what has actually been said about their condition. (This is very common). We need to appreciate the difficulty of the measurement of response. We must understand the mistakes made by doctors in diagnosis. We have to understand something of the variability of diseases, even those which seem the most sinister, and we must never underestimate the power of the psyche.

The dangers of 'miracle healing'

I am certain that the person who claims to have a gift of healing discredits the person of Christ, because if (and it is a big 'if') there are ninety-nine successes and only one failure, even that would discredit Christ, because he *never* fails. If we say to a man, "In the name of Jesus rise up and walk," and he continues to lie at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, that is a failure which reflects upon the person and the power of Christ, and this is happening all the time.

At a local college there is a Christian Union in which the charismatic view has gained increasing sway. A girl who was a member of this Christian Union fractured her ankle and was also smitten with chickenpox. She was taken into the sick bay where some members of the committee went to visit her, prayed over her, assured her she was healed, and therefore smuggled her out of the

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window of the sick bay. But by the time she had crossed the field to her living quarters she was so ill that they had to take her back again to the sick bay. What does this kind of activity do for the cause of Christ?

So many of the success stories which we hear amount to reporting from a distance, but the physicians on the spot see a different picture. Those of you who have read Canon Michael Green's book *I believe in the Holy Spirit* will know that he quotes instances of healing in Africa, in places where there had been great healing meetings. You may be

interested to know the views of a missionary doctor who had been working in that area for many years.

He wrote, "During my career in this country from 1944, there have been many reported healings, particularly in the area on both sides of Lake Nyasa, now called Lake Malawi. The 1973 outbreak in the Dar es Salaam area was the only one which I have heard of outside the Lake Nyasa area.

"All the outbreaks I have come across have followed the same pattern, that is, tremendous popularity initially with thousands of people being attracted to the meetings, followed by gradual thinning out of the attendances. When the popularity has waned the outbreak ends and the organizers move to another area.

"My own impression is that there is nothing to these healings, and that the initial popularity of the meetings decreases as the actual results become known. I have not come across a single case of undoubted cure proved by medical examination of the clinical condition before and after the alleged healing."

Now, that was the impression of someone who was on the spot, and therefore I wish to emphasize that spurious claims discredit the person of Christ. Not only that, but they undermine the authority of God's Word. How many of us were saddened that David Watson's testimony was so marred by the fact that on radio broadcasts he said not once but two or three times, "The one thing that encourages me is that all around the world the prophets have said that this sickness is not unto death."

Prophecies which fail

So often, in my experience, the 'healings' of the charismatic movement are bound up with such words of prophecy and words of knowledge. I quote from the John Wimber meeting at St George's, Leeds: "You receive a word of knowledge; God wants you to speak it out loud. You make some mistakes, never mind, go for the next one!" How unscriptural and extraordinary that is, but those very

words were said.

This is not being said behind the back of the John Wimber team because the day following the meeting in question there was a gathering for Christian leaders and ministers and some of my medical colleagues went along to express their strong reservations about what was happening. When they did so they were told that it was wrong to use the mind to assess these matters. What

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Christians needed, it was said, was to feel the touch of God. However, we must assert that to bypass the mind in such a way is to discredit the Word of God and to undermine its authority.

Apart from the damage which the miraculous healing movement is doing to the faith, it is a *cruel teaching* because by claiming that all may be healed if they have sufficient faith, it increases the agony of many who are sick.

At Horsforth, on the edge of Leeds, Don Double conducted a healing crusade. Now, he heals different ailments on different nights and it so happened one night he was healing the deaf, and a friend of mine who is deaf in one ear thought he would have a go at being healed. Hands were laid upon him and he was told that he was healed, but he said, "I am not." The healer said, "Yes you are."

"No, I am not," my friend insisted, only to be told, "Well it must be that you have not got sufficient faith." After a brief altercation

the healer went on down the line of deaf people. When the healing activities had finished my friend turned to the lady next to him and said, "What did it do for you, love?" and she replied with her hand cupped to her ear, "What did you say?"

We may be amused by that, but there are times when it can be very distressing. I have other friends whose eleven-year-old son has just died of leukaemia, but this couple had been promised and assured of healing for their child and they had both believed that promise deeply. Their distress is almost intolerable.

I think of a church in Sheffield where a couple had a child who was severely afflicted and disabled with cystic fibrosis. Cystic

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fibrosis is caused by a recessive gene, which means that it must be carried by two partners. If two such people marry there is a strong probability of the offspring having cystic fibrosis. The couple went to the doctor to ask about a future family and the doctor advised against it, explaining that there was a one in four chance that other children would be affected. They reconciled themselves to the situation.

One day in their church someone stood up with a word of knowledge and said, "You will have a normal child." So they had a child, but it was more severely affected than the first, and for five years now they have been looking after a most disabled child.

William Nolan was a distinguished surgeon in the USA, a very caring man who signed on as a helper for the famous healing meetings of the late Kathryn Kuhlman. He went with an open mind, his desire being to help. Ultimately he was to leave the organization and to write a book entitled, *Healing:*

A Doctor in Search of a Miracle. This is what he wrote:

I had mixed emotions about the follow-up study. On the one hand I felt that Kathryn Kuhlman was a sincere, devout, dedicated woman who believed fervently that she was doing the Lord's will; I did not want to hurt her. On the other hand I was not sure that whatever good Miss Kuhlman was doing was not far outweighed by the pain she was causing. I could not get those crippled and idiot children and their weeping, broken-hearted parents out of my mind, and all the others cruelly disappointed.

Disastrous consequences

Such conclusions could be justifiably repeated again and again. But it is necessary to say that this miraculous healing teaching is not only damaging, it is often *dangerous*. I think of a general practitioner who was a great friend of mine, a fine Christian lady who had led many people to Christ, but she suffered from severe depression. Fortunately her depression was controlled by medication.

Her counseling ministry was one that I valued so much that I would often send my depressed patients to her for help. Unfortunately she fell in with a group who majored on this miraculous healing teaching, and she was informed that she had been healed. She therefore abandoned her medication, but three weeks later she hanged herself.

I think of another person, a girl from Headingley, Leeds. Susan had severe epilepsy, but fortunately she was controlled by medication. She too fell in with a similar charismatic group, and likewise she abandoned her medication. One day she traveled over to Harrogate, stepped off a bus, had a major epileptic fit and fell under the wheels of an oncoming car to be killed outright.

I put the deaths of those two useful Christians firmly and squarely at the door of those who promoted such disastrous teaching, and I assert as strongly as possible that it is *distressing*, it is *damaging*, and it is *dangerous* in the extreme. □

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Some Observations on Healing

by Ken Simpson

The Moral Dilemma

There is little doubt that the God of the Bible can heal people. If you believe that God is all-powerful and in control, then it is absurd to say that God cannot heal. The real questions are "Does God heal today?" and "Is it God's will to heal me?"

In offering the following observations about healing from Scripture, it must be acknowledged that there is much more to the topic than can be covered here. We should also be careful about resolving a theological problem by recourse to experience. Our challenge is to think Biblically and observe our world as objectively as we can.

Our question then is: if God can heal people then why doesn't he heal everybody? We have all had the experience of praying for God to heal us of a specific problem and he does not. Why is this so? Is he unable to do it? Do we have to help? Does he not want to heal us? Is he evil? We understandably recoil in horror at the final suggestion but that is the logical end of the argument. Do we have to twist God's arm by 'having enough faith'? Does he somehow measure us up and say that we are not 'good' enough for him to heal us? Is he no better than the sinner who only loves those who love him? ¹

We find the same problem in the area of God's sovereignty. He is truly sovereign over all aspects of life and he wants all men to be saved.² Yet we are certain that not all men are saved.³ So what God wants and what he

does are not the same. Another, perhaps clearer example, is as follows. It is not God's wish that any innocent man should die,⁴ yet by his set purpose and plan the only innocent man ever to live was put to death.⁵ We cannot believe that this was outside God's control. There seems to be a paradox between what God wants and what he wills.

And we cannot leave this as a philosophical problem. We have to know how this paradox affects our lives. How does the Bible apply these ideas to healing? What does the New Testament teach about healing?

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Handbook for Living

The New Testament Letters are the apostles' authoritative advice about how to live the Christian life. We take them as being definitive because God wrote them.

The letters are didactic and are therefore different to the narratives of the Gospels and Acts. No-one, for example, would suggest that it is normative for Christians to curse fig trees when walking into Jerusalem (even if they have no fruit⁶), or to go without bag and provisions and ignore the Gentiles when preaching the kingdom of heaven.⁷

When it comes to the subject of healing, we find the epistles almost silent. For something that seems to be of such importance today, the instructions for Christian living give almost no guidance about it, and what instruction there is seems ambiguous.

Gifts of healing are mentioned only twice

1. Matthew 5:43-48

2. 2 Peter 3:9

3. Matthew 7:13-14; 2 Peter 2:17

4. Exodus 23:7

5. Acts 4:27-28

6. Matthew 21:18-19

7. Matthew 10:5-10

in the Epistles and these seem deliberately vague.⁸ From these references we cannot even delineate exactly what the gift of healing is. It may well include the ability to heal in a "scientific" or "medical" sense. In fact, Paul calls them "gifts of healings" (double plural). What are "healings"—are there different types? The reference is enigmatic and in the end we are unable to determine the meaning accurately. We can understand the "shape" of what was happening, but we cannot tell exactly what was meant by this, or for that matter, many of the other gifts of God.

The other main passage in the New Testament where healing is addressed is James 5. Here the sick man is promised "salvation" or "deliverance" in response to prayer. To suggest from this that healing will come whenever we pray is to misunderstand the words that are there, the passage as a whole and the wider Biblical context. The word translated "heal" in James 5:20 in the New International Version has a wider meaning of "salvation" or "deliverance". Thus, the man is not necessarily promised healing, but deliverance. This has a much wider implication and fits the pattern of New Testament teaching. It is also interesting to note the other language in these verses.

"And the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick ...Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed."⁹

This would be an astonishing thing to say if the sickness were not due to a specific sin. Why else would the sick man need salvation, or the sinner a specific healing?

This would help explain the examples in the Bible where people are expressly not healed such as Matthew 26:36-42, II Corinthians 12, II Timothy 4:20 and I Timothy 5:23. As it is, we have two options: 1) doubt the efficacy of Paul's and Jesus' prayer; or 2) doubt God's ability to heal. There is another option, however.

The third option is that "deliverance" can come in one of three ways: 1) by physical healing, and there are examples of this in

Acts; 2) by death which Paul sees as a real alternative;¹⁰ and 3) by the provision of grace which allows man to trust in God and say "That is why...I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."¹¹

So the strong Christian, the powerful Christian, the Spiritual Christian, is seen as the one who suffers and yet gives praise to God.¹² The Spirit-filled person is the one who groans with this age as he awaits the re-creation of his physical body. He has his heart, mind, body and soul set on the age to

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come—the age of the Spirit.¹³

Physical well-being is not a characteristic of life now. Expecting the kingdom to be on earth now removes from us an object of hope, and yet we are called the ones who "hope in Christ."¹⁴ It is not until heaven that these results of the Fall will be reversed, for then God will dwell with men. "They will be his people, and God himself will be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."¹⁵ At the dawn of this new age we can expect healing and prosperity—all the blessings of the age to come. The reality is that we are still in this "present evil age".¹⁶ We are subject to frustration and there will still be seemingly pointless suffering until it is all put right at the end.¹⁷ God gives us hope, in which we are saved—"a new birth into a living hope."¹⁸

8. 1 Corinthians 12:9,28,30

9. James 5:15-16 (RV)

10. Philippians 1:21

11. 2 Corinthians 12:10

12. Romans 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12; 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:13-15; James 1:2-4, 5:10-11; 1 Peter 4:12ff

13. Romans 8:18-25

14. Ephesians 1:12

15. Revelation 21:3-4, my emphasis.

16. Galatians 1:4

17. Romans 8:20

18. 1 Peter 1:3