

Concordia Theological Monthly



A P R I L • 1 9 5 9

Faith Healing

A Discussion

By EDWARD J. MAHNKE

Is it right to promise health or material advantage to people who practice a religious life? This question is basic to the considerations involved in the practice of faith healing.

Man threatened by foreign powers, missiles, disaster plans, evacuation routes, tossed back and forward by doctrines of every kind, finds himself shaken. He is uncertain about God. He needs health and money to maintain control of his life and future. In Deut. 8:17, 18 the Lord insists that He is the source of all goodness. But He also warns man not to think of God as a resource by which man's will is achieved.

MEDICINE AND RELIGION

Medicine and religion have always been closely associated. However, as scientific methodology developed, it seemed to drive a wedge between the provable evidence of science and medicine and what now appeared to be superstition and the false assurance of religion. Psychology and the study of the total being has also shown that emotions, social contacts, and the inner life play a part in the health and illness of the individual. It is true man does not know all that there is to be known about man. He is not able with his knowledge and skills to prevent or cure every disease at will. There are still incurable diseases because man has not discovered the cure, but scientific progress hopes to decrease the number.

Man has increased his knowledge of the laws of nature. A better acquaintance with them, however, does not eliminate God. What we call the law of nature is the normal agency of God's power. But if He so chooses, He can dispense with the course of natural events to heal as and when He wills it.

In recent years a growing relationship between medicine and religion is evident. Associations between doctors and clergy, psychiatrists and clergy, are increasing. The relationship between hospitals and religious ministry is fully recognized. The number of new books treating these two areas certainly indicates that research is going on.

FAITH HEALING AND THE CHURCH

The *Christian Century* reports (April 17, 1957, p. 495):

After five years of deliberation on faith healing and the laying on of hands, the Glasgow presbytery has almost unanimously given its support to a deliverance approving the endeavors of ministers who in humility seek to bring help to the sick by these means. The deliverance emphasized that a clear-cut answer as to the precise value of the laying on of hands could not be given in the light of the evidence examined. It recommended that such healing services be given only with the cooperation of the patient's physician and his own minister, and be carried on only in private homes or at services within the congregational life.

Charles Braden, in a study of spiritual healing in the churches by the Commission on Religion and Health of the Federal Council of Churches, carried out in the Chicago area, distributed 982 questionnaires to pastors. 460 replied. "142 gave an unqualified yes answer to the question: Have you ever as a minister attempted to perform a spiritual healing? Eighteen gave a qualified yes."¹ Following statistical methods, he finds a group of 45% of those responding who have in some sense practiced spiritual healing in their own ministry or observed it. Among the clergy carrying on healing services the report shows healings as follows:

- 65% by Episcopalians
- 39% by Presbyterians
- 33% by Lutherans
- 30% by United Brethren
- 29% by Methodists and Disciples
- 25% by Baptists

Regarding the validity of diagnosis and the permanency of cure sufficient evidence is given to produce an acceptable conclusion, at least one which merits consideration as valid.

McCall's magazine (February 1957) reported on a questionnaire to 1,000 pastors in the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U. S. A. Faith healing, in one form or another, was being practiced with reasonable success by about 500 of the pastors.

¹ A. Graham Ikin, *New Concepts of Healing* (New York: Association Press, 1956), pp. 224—234.

The Lutheran Hospital Association, meeting in Chicago in 1957, asked that a committee be established to make a study of faith healing.

At its 1958 convention the United Lutheran Church of America acted favorably on a proposal made by the Maryland Synod that a committee of clergymen and doctors make "a long-term intensive study" of the question of faith healing. In support of this recommendation a committee of the Maryland Synod had suggested that "the church ought to reclaim the power to heal, and to restore the doctrines of healing to their rightful place in the evangelical theology." (*The Lutheran*, Oct. 29, 1958)

The Consul of the British Medical Association addressed a memorandum to the Archbishop's Commission on Divine Healing entitled: *Divine Healing in Co-operation Between Doctors and Clergy* (*British Medical Association*, 1956).

England, Germany, France, and the Scandinavian countries are reporting study programs on the relationship of religion and health.

In 1927 the International Medical Association of Lourdes was organized. Its enrollment includes over 5,000 doctors, from 30 countries, including Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, Protestants, atheists, unbelievers. The function of this association is the methodical checking of alleged cures at Lourdes. After it has made an examination and decided that the cure is outside the laws of nature, the case is presented to the medical commission at Paris, a group of 20 physicians and surgeons. When this body states that it finds no natural or scientific explanation of the cure, it is passed on to a commission of the Roman Catholic Church for evaluation as a miracle.²

In about a century of its existence, 54 cases have been pronounced miraculous cures. In addition, some 1,200 cases are considered unexplainable under scientific and natural laws, and 4,000 are considered complete and genuine cures.

Luther speaks of emotions causing illness and symptoms. He records in considerable detail the incident of Melanchthon's illness, describing his pallor, lack of nutrition, and the conviction of those around him that Melanchthon would soon be dead. Luther says

² Ruth Cranston, *The Miracle of Lourdes* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1955).

he reminded God of every promise He had made to hear and answer prayer and then added the importance of Melanchthon to the work of the Reformation. After three hours of praying he returned to Melanchthon's room and saw a new will to live and a desire for food. His recovery has been associated with Luther's prayer.³

FAITH HEALING IN OTHER GROUPS

Christian Science, Divine Science, Unity, and related groups lay stress on the health of the individual as a manifestation of his inner spiritual life.

The Milwaukee Journal (June 21, 1958) states: "Christian Science believes that evil of every sort, including illness, is unreal. God is the source of all reality, the Christian Scientist says. He also would say that evil could not come from a God who is all good, any more than that a dog could give birth to kittens or a cat could produce puppies." In an editorial of the *Christian Science Monitor* (June 13, 1958) the report of the Archbishop's Commission on the Church's Ministry of Healing of the Church of England, based on a five-year study, is quoted: ". . . they do not deny for a moment the possible occurrence of extraordinary and medically inexplicable healings which present themselves to faith as miraculous, but use them only as occasional marvels and do not believe definite and precise rules can be deduced from an examination of Christ's practice." Commenting on this, the *Monitor* adds: "Healings are very far from being occasional marvels, but are rather the natural results of a cultivated spiritual understanding of the divine principle and the rules of Jesus' healing. The scientific age may rightly deduce that if the Master's Christian healings are to be accepted at all, they can only be explained on the basis that He heals through the Law of God, not in violation of the Law. The experience of Christian Scientists supports this rule."

Among the Pentecostal bodies and Holiness churches one finds the greatest number of advertised faith healers, promising cures from cancer, blindness, lameness, etc. "Photographing a Miracle" is the title over five pictures in the magazine *Healing* (April 1956) telling the story of an 11-year-old polio victim allegedly healed.

³ August Nebe, *Luther als Seelsorger* (Philadelphia: Schäfer und Koradi, 1883).

In the February 1956 issue of *Healing*, pages 10 and 11, the letters from the readers have this heading: "Arthritis, heart trouble, alcoholism, bursitis, and anemia all vanish under the healing touch, these readers testify."

Merle Conant, pastor of Pratt Memorial Methodist Church in Rockland, Maine, says about Oral Roberts in the magazine *Abundant Life* (August 1957, p. 21):

At 17, as he lay dying of tuberculosis, the Spirit of God literally raised him from his deathbed and restored him to health and strength. To heal Oral Roberts' body God used the prayers of his family, his Church, and the personality, faith and capacity of an evangelist. During his severe illness he wanted, above all else, to get well. Oral Roberts was in rebellion against the kind of religion that would merely give him strength to bear his burden of pain and suffering. He longed for the healing touch of God on his body. I close this editorial with Mr. Roberts' threefold confession: "All men are not healed through my ministry. I am merely an instrument of God's healing power. The conversion of a soul is God's greatest miracle."

Roberts' healing right arm is the major attraction of his ministry. Although carefully worded statements speak of his being an instrument only, the promises of health have put his program on 200 radio and 100 TV stations. Estimators say he has reached two million people with his message.

Lawsuits charging these healers with the practice of medicine without a license made no impression. Jack Cole escaped punishment from the law for taking braces off a polio victim in Florida. Warned by a doctor of the serious damages that had resulted, the parents sued Cole. Cole later died of polio.

Wm. Freeman came for a healing series in St. Louis but apologized to the thousand or more in his audience for the laryngitis he had contracted, making it impossible for him to preach.

Although thousands claim to have been healed in these services, there has been virtually no systematic study of the cures. In Phoenix, Ariz., a group of clergymen offered \$1,000 to anyone giving proof of divine healing while Roberts was in the city. No one claimed it.

Since these loosely named "faith healers" believe themselves to possess a charismatic gift, they do not invite investigation of the

methodology or process for fear of losing the gift. In carefully worded statements they guard against claiming special powers for themselves, but the psychological reaction is to acclaim them for the power they have over illness. By contrast the Canonical Commission of the Roman Catholic Church, in connection with Lourdes, has set down the following requirements for a miraculous cure, according to the *Reader's Digest* (December 1955, p. 182):

1. The malady must be grave and not improving under medication
2. The cure was instantaneous with no period of convalescence
3. The cure was perfect and there was no relapse.

WHAT IS HEALING?

To help us consider the validity of healings we must set up a definition. Hiltner gives the following: "The restoration of functional wholeness that has been impaired as to direction and/or schedule."⁴ Proceeding from this definition, he lists four factors from which man needs healing: 1) Defect as seen in the idiot, etc.; 2) Invasion — bacteria poisons which might also include social conditions; 3) Distortion — foot-binding, false goals, distorted leaders; 4) Decision which is not, however, conscious choosing but more a pattern of living as a result of the influential habits trained into the pattern of living.

If one is ready to accept Hiltner's definition of healing, the place of a minister in the process becomes obvious. By the use of Word and Sacraments he supplies the means by which a reorientation of life and its goals can be brought about. To aid him in a better application of these means he makes use of the deeper insights gained through a scientific study of people and available to him through the professional practitioner. This kind of healing is referred to most frequently as spiritual healing. Usually no suspension of natural laws is involved except that it relies for its cure on the limitless power of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual healing recognizes the limitation of medical science, since certain diseases do not respond to therapy based on natural and scientific laws and therefore are labeled incurable. To deny

⁴ Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 113.

the existence of this limitation would be virtually to deny death itself. There is also the conviction that God uses natural means in the healing process but that He is not bound to them. The Lord can and does set aside the natural laws of therapy and set into motion other actions which produce a recovery or cure. Almost every pastor or medical person can vouch for occurrences of such healings.

HEALING THE WHOLE PERSON

There is bona fide evidence of miraculous cures. Luther says: "I will admit that through the prayers of the church some such punishments could be lifted from the weak, namely, sickness, cares, plagues, and fevers; for St. James taught the elders of the church to bring in and anoint the sick one in order that the Lord might relieve him through the prayer of faith, James 5:14-16."⁵ Churches carrying on a healing program express their conviction in the limitless power of God, before which also every disease must give way. But they also stress that this power of God is coupled with the wisdom of God. He sees and foresees everything in the life of the patient. Nor is the love and the mercy of God to be forgotten which prompt Him to apply His power and omniscience for the eternal welfare of the patient. God may hurt to help, but He doesn't harm to destroy His children. One cannot speak of God's power to heal and leave out of consideration the full God of revelation. In spiritual healing (as defined by Hiltner) the pastor makes no unconditional promise of health in the sense of removal of pain or illness. The patient may be seeking it, and in God's providence it may result in response to prayer. But the pastor's ministration can always be helpful in achieving that wholeness by which the patient accepts the disease as God's gracious will and receives the strength to bear it.

This is truly health, for no healer has been able to continue to restore the body to its original state or function and thus to exercise power over death itself. Restoration to wholeness is not a denial of reality but rather a full acceptance of life, with all its pain, discomfort, pleasure, and work. The peace of God surpassing understanding is not to be equated with a tensionless peace of living,

⁵ *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 31, p. 91.

so frequently sought after and promised in religion today. Growth in sanctification comes from tension. Nowhere in Scripture are we promised a life of ease because we pray or practice religion. The interesting thing in the reports of the men who are involved in spiritual healing is that they frankly confess that when physical health was restored the minister was just as surprised as the patient. Such cures, however, are on record and cannot be brushed aside as hysteria, autosuggestion, or psychosomatic, nor can they be explained apart from God. Yet these pastors do not pretend to command God to cure but look upon their role as one of glorifying God, who alone has the power to cure.

ABUSE OF FAITH HEALING

Among the Holiness and Pentecostal sects we find faith healers who have been censured and criticized on medical as well as theological grounds and yet are attracting hundreds of thousands of followers every year. These men use the promise of physical healing as bait to attract people to their services but in reality do not guarantee such healing. Their carefully worded statements on their purpose and function speak of regeneration as the important phase of their mission. They are fully aware of thousands who come and go without any change in their physical condition. Yet by an unqualified insistence that faith produces health they make faith a tool by which God is manipulated to do man's will. The disastrous results are obvious. The physically sick becomes depressed because he must tell himself that his faith wasn't strong enough for a cure.

The faith healer need not be a charlatan. Some are sincere. They are usually poorly informed and lack theological training. They know how to draw crowds by an emotional appeal, centering their ministry in healing and neglecting that part of the ministry of the Word which helps people to be whole in their illness. They make an idol out of health and lose sight of the divine purpose in Jesus' agony in Gethsemane, Paul's thorn in the flesh, and the disciples' martyrdom. In the final analysis, they completely ignore physical degeneration and death as a reality and fail in fostering spiritual growth which helps the Christian to accept these as part of the God-ordained process of temporal living.

THE ATTRACTION OF FAITH HEALING

After visiting a series of these services where long evangelistic sermons are preached with a great deal of emotion, this writer must confess that they appear to be attracting people who are not drawn to the average church of the community. Perhaps there is a satisfaction given these people which is not supplied by the sedate formal type of worship of most churches. One can't help feeling certain that some of these worshipers will be in heaven because of what they heard of the Gospel. One also wonders whether the cripples and spastics would be as welcome in church services, be encouraged to take front seats, and be accepted by the congregation, as they are in these tent services. Unfortunately they have been drawn by a promise of healing and leave without it.

The publicity and fanfare places the spotlight on the healer. His name and picture are promoted with the skill of trained agents. The promise of healing is prominent, presenting the healer as one possessing a special gift which he is ready to give to the people who will come. There is little in the ballyhoo which calls for a worship of God or a humble glorifying of His name. The method and procedure of using the charismatic gift which they claim is completely different from the New Testament concept of such charismatic gifts.

The personal income of some healers has led people in and out of the church to criticize them. The emphasis on a substantial collection at each service, using the contributions as evidence of good faith in the healer — and even threatening to leave without using their healing power if a certain financial goal is not reached — has made people suspect the motives of healers. Some have made fortunes for themselves while practicing an art which they call a charismatic gift. This is not in keeping with the spirit of Peter, Paul, or John. The commercialism of some healers who take advantage of a superstitious and gullible sick person is certainly revolting. Nothing can be lower than to capitalize on the misfortunes of others by making promises he has no skill or ability to keep. A legally licensed medical practitioner would be barred from practicing his profession for far less.

These irresponsible healers have centered their ministry on healing because this is what so many are looking for as they search

for security in a world of insecurity. When the practice of healing takes on such proportions that the healer usurps the position of God and operates on the basis that the power of God is at his disposal to use as he sees fit without consideration of the will of God, it has lost its right to be considered a part of the Christian ministry. Its basic error is its flouting the Scriptural significance of illness. (Cf. Deut. 8:2-16; Lev. 26:18-41; Ps. 119:67-75; Is. 38:17; 2 Chron. 6:26; Dan. 11:35; Zech. 13:9; Job; John 11:4, 15; 2 Cor. 12:9; Heb. 4:14; 12:1-11)

This type of healing emphasizes faith but not trust in God. It defines faith in such a way that it becomes a crowbar by which God is manipulated or pressured into doing what the manipulator wants. This in effect makes the manipulator God and is different from the New Testament concept of faith or confidence in God.

That some changes from illness to health are possible under these circumstances we do not deny. The alleged cures, however, have never been investigated by a procedure similar to those at Lourdes. The healers fear loss of power should they be scrutinized too closely. We know that under the pressure of autosuggestion and mob hysteria changes might be possible. There could be a type of unexplainable cure. But can a cure be promised? One cannot deny it as a possibility, although medical science has far more evidence for producing cures than the faith healers.

Illness, the result and evidence of sin, is a sign of something out of control in man. All of us wish we could possess powers to change this situation. We idolize the doctor who can cure, and we envy his ability. There is something satisfying about knowing a home remedy or patent medicine by which you control a symptom. All of us would like to be healers. It takes true greatness and genuine humility to know the proper place for oneself in the area of healing, whether doctor with medications and procedures or pastor with prayers and understanding and faith, to accept the role of servant and child of Him "who healeth all thy diseases." The adulation and gratitude of those healed who idolize the doctor for his surgery and the pastor for his prayer must never lead us into a complex in which we feel ourselves to be the Savior or use God as a resource to satisfy the whim of an individual.

The church needs to develop the understanding of people and utilize the power that it has in God over disease and illness and death. Trusting the omniscience and love of God to temper and direct His power, the church can help people in suffering to enjoy wholeness and contentment. But it can never promise that it has the power to free from pain and sickness as if by magic.

St. Louis, Mo.

Books

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Braceland, Francis J. *Faith, Reason and Modern Psychiatry*. New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1955.
- Cranston, Ruth. *The Miracle of Lourdes*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1955.
- Doniger, Simon. *Healing: Human and Divine*. New York: Association Press, 1957.
- Fisher, Walter. "An Examination of the Teachings of Faith Healers." Unpublished Bachelor's Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1947.
- Galdston, Iago. *Ministry and Medicine in Human Relations*. New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1955.
- Hiltner, Seward. *Preface to Pastoral Theology*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1958.
- Ikin, A. Graham. *New Concepts of Healing*. New York: Association Press, 1956.
- Kew and Kew. *You Can Be Healed*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1953.
- Luther's Works*. Vol. 31, American Edition. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957.
- Maslow, A. H., and Bela Mittelman. *Principles of Abnormal Psychology*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951.
- McNeill, J. T. *A History of the Cure of Souls*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951.
- Nebe, August. *Luther als Seelsorger*. Philadelphia: Schäfer und Koradi, 1883.
- Wise, C. A. *Religion in Illness and Health*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942.
- Young, Kenneth R. "The Christian Response to Sickness." Unpublished Bachelor's Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1955.

Magazines

- Abundant Life* (August, October, and November, 1957).
- The Cross and the Caduceus*, VII (May—June, 1958).
- "The Reformed Faith and Mental Health," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, XXIV (October 1952).
- Healing* (September 1955; February and April 1956).
- Kobler, John. "The Truth About Faith Healers," *McCall's* (February 1957).
- "The Miracle of Lourdes," *Reader's Digest* (December 1955).
- "Our Own Miracle of Lourdes," *Reader's Digest* (April 1958).
- Waterson, A. P. "Faith Healing and Faith Healers," *Theology*, LX (January 1957), edited by Alec R. Vidler and published by S. P. C. K., Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone Road, London, N. W. 1.