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A Healer in the House?

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A HEALER IN THE HOUSE?
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON HEALING
IN THE PENTECOSTAL/CHARISMATIC TRADITION

Vinson Synan

As fellow Pentecostals, we are here to look at the history of divine healing from a Pentecostal/Charismatic perspective and to learn whatever lessons we can gather from both the strengths and weaknesses of the tradition. Just who are “Pentecostal/Charismatics” anyway? Following the great Catholic scholar, Kilian McDonnell, my broadest definition would be “those Christians who stress the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit toward the proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father.” This would include all Christians who have been called “Classical Pentecostals,” (Assemblies of God, Church of God in Christ, Pentecostal Holiness Church, Church of God, etc.), and both Protestant and Catholic Charismatics.” All together they accounted for over 500,000, 000 members in 1998 and are by far the second largest family of Christians in the world after the Roman Catholic Church.¹

In emphasizing and experiencing the charismata or gifts of the Spirit, Pentecostal/Charismatics have tended to single out two gifts above all others, glossolalia (speaking in tongues as evidence for receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit) and divine healing as a “signs and wonders” gift useful for edification and evangelization. It is the gift of healing in

¹ Recent broad surveys on Pentecostalism include Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: The Charismatic Movement in the Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) and Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997). An indispensable general resource is Stanley Burgess, Gary McGee, and Patrick Alexander, eds., *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988). The statistics are taken from David Barrett’s forthcoming revised *World Christian Encyclopedia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999).

answer to prayer that will concern us as I attempt to give a short overview of healing in the Pentecostal tradition.

Actually the emphasis on divine healing has a much longer history than tongues in the Pentecostal tradition, and has caused not only spectacular growth, but at times resulted in confusion and turmoil within the churches. While tongues came to the fore in 1901 and 1906 with the ministries of Charles Parham in Topeka, Kansas and William J. Seymour in the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906, the emphasis on healing goes back to the mid-nineteenth century when efforts were made to restore New Testament signs and wonders to the church.²

Before this time, most Christians had seen no contradiction between faith and medicine. Most would have agreed with Sirach in the inter-testamental book *Ecclesiasticus* when he advised:

Cultivate the physician...for him also hath God ordained. It is from God that the physician getteth wisdom.... God created medicines out of the earth, and let not a discerning man reject them. Was not the water made sweet by the wood that He might make known to all men his power? And He gave men discernment that they might glory in His mighty works (Sirach 38:1-8).

This was written in a time when many devout Jews refused to see a doctor or take medicine because medical treatment might imply a lack of faith in God. So what I would like to discuss is not so new in religious history.

The roots of all modern healing movements lie in Europe where healing in answer to prayer was first taught by Presbyterian Edward Irving in London (1830), by Lutheran Johann Christoph Blumhardt in Germany (1843), by Dorothea Trudel in Switzerland (1851) and by Otto Stockmayer in Switzerland (1867). These teachers developed not only the idea of the "healing home" (a hospital-like retreat where prayer was administered instead of medicines) and a theology of healing which was

² For the development of the healing movement in the Holiness Movement see Paul Chappell, "Healing Movements," in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, pp. 353-74. Also see Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury, 1987), pp. 115-41, and William Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel: The Significance of Eschatology in the Development of Pentecostal Thought* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 115-86.

to affect many in America and to lead to the Pentecostal doctrine of divine healing “as in the atonement.” The most influential book coming out of Europe in this period was Stockmayer’s *Sickness and the Gospel* (n.d.) which pioneered the idea that physical healing for the body was included in the over-all atonement.³

In this paper, I want to point out some of the important persons and events that make the history of divine healing one of the most interesting chapters in modern church history. In particular, I wish to discuss the roles played by such pre-Pentecostals as Charles Cullis, A. J. Gordon, A. B. Simpson and Alexander Dowie, as well as by later Pentecostals, Charles Parham and Oral Roberts.

1. Charles Cullis

Although divine healing had been practiced in America by George Fox, founder of the Quakers, Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormons, and Elizabeth Mix, the Black Holiness evangelist, the first person to bring healing to the attention of Americans was Charles Cullis of Boston, Massachusetts. Cullis, already a medical doctor, began his ministry in 1864 when he opened his first free faith home for consumptives where the sick could receive “the comforts of a warm home and complete medical care.” His first efforts were quite similar to the ministry of Mother Teresa’s “home of the destitute and dying” in Calcutta.⁴

By 1870, however, Cullis added prayer to his ministry of care-giving and traditional medicine after seeing a patient, Lucy Drake, who was instantly healed of a debilitating brain tumor after the laying on of hands. This led Cullis to turn his homes into “healing homes” where the patients would be treated with loving care and prayer, minus medicine.

By the 1880s Cullis was conducting annual healing conventions in Old Orchard, Maine as well as holding conventions around the nation. By 1885, the message of healing had become international when William Boardman convened the first “International Conference on Divine Healing and True Holiness” in the Great Agricultural Hall in London

³ For early European developments, see Chappell, “Healing Movements,” pp. 355-66.

⁴ Chappell, “Healing Movements,” pp. 358-60; Dayton, *Theological Roots*, pp. 122-25.

where 2000 persons gathered to advance the cause of divine healing around the world.⁵

After this event a stream of books on healing flowed from Holiness and Evangelical presses extolling the power of healing in answer to prayer. These included Boardman's 1881 book, *The Lord that Healeth Thee*, and Kelso Carter's 1884 book titled, *The Atonement for Sin and Sickness: Or a Full Salvation for Soul and Body*. These books brought healing beyond the level of anecdotal testimonies and into the arena of theological discourse and debate.⁶

2. Adoniram J. Gordon

The man who elevated divine healing to the level of the atonement was A. J. Gordon, the popular Boston pastor who eventually founded the seminary that bears his name today. Through his association with Cullis, Gordon became a staunch believer in divine healing, so much so that in 1882 he published his famous book, *The Ministry of Healing*, in which he asserted that healing for the body was part of the atonement. Using Psalm 103:3 "who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases," and Matthew 8:17 "He himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases," Gordon concluded that divine healing for the body was included in the atonement side by side with the forgiveness of sins for the soul.

After many other teachers including A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, added their agreement to Gordon's formulation, a host of teachers and churches asserted their belief in divine healing "as in the atonement." Decades later when the Pentecostal denominations were formed, they all added this phrase to their statements of faith.⁷

3. Alexander Dowie

By the turn of the century, the idea of "healing homes," where the sick could be cared for without cost and where the treatment would be

⁵ Chappell, "Healing Movements," pp. 359-60.

⁶ Chappell, "Healing Movements," pp. 360-61.

⁷ Dayton, *Theological Roots*, pp. 127-30.

prayer instead of traditional medical treatment, had spread far and wide. It was Alexander Dowie, the fire-breathing healing evangelist from Scotland and Australia, who made a complete break from medical treatment, denounced doctors as “agents of Satan” and called on his followers to trust God completely for their healing. His distrust for the medical profession may have come from his years as a surgical assistant in Scotland while he studied theology at Edinburgh University. Later, after serving as a Congregationalist pastor in Sydney, Australia, Dowie left his denomination to found an independent holiness church in Melbourne before immigrating to the United States in 1888.⁸

After two years of itinerant healing ministries on the West Coast, where he organized local chapters of his “International Divine Healing Association,” Dowie settled in Chicago where in 1893 he set up a wooden tabernacle outside the entrance to the Chicago World’s Fair. Soon the inside walls of the building were covered with the crutches and braces of those who claimed healing at the hands of the balding evangelist.

Shortly afterward, Dowie bought the Imperial Hotel in Chicago and converted it into a healing home. In these “golden years,” Dowie was lionized by the public, spoke to the largest audiences in the history of Chicago, and was received by presidents McKinley and Roosevelt.

It was not long, however, that the ecclesiastical and medical establishments in Chicago began a concerted attack on Dowie and his healing claims with many vicious anti-Dowie articles published in the Chicago newspapers. By 1895 Dowie had been arrested for practicing medicine without a license, had spent 120 days in court answering over 100 arrest warrants, partly for his vociferous attacks on the corrupt politics of the city government. In response, Dowie in April 1895 published his first but not last volley against the medical establishment. His vitriolic article titled, “Doctors, Drugs, and Devils, or the Foes of Christ the Healer” appeared in *Physical Culture* magazine. In it he made the following statements:

I want to say today that doctors as a profession are directly inspired by the devil. There is not an atom of foundation for science in medicine.

⁸ Two biographies of Dowie are R. Harlan, *John Alexander Dowie and the Christian Apostolic Church in Zion* (Evansville, WI: R. M. Antes, 1906) and Gordon Lindsay, *The Life of John Alexander Dowie* (Shreveport, LA: Voice of Healing, 1851). The major recent source for Dowie is Faupel, *Everlasting Gospel*, pp. 116-35.

All doctors are “poisoners-general and surgical butchers” and “professional destroyers They are monsters who hold in their hands deadly poisons and deadly surgical knives, and in the name of the law demand that you lie down upon the altar of their operating tables, that they may deprive you of your consciousness and make you a living sacrifice.”⁹

With the immense popularity gained at the Chicago World’s Fair and in response to such articles, Dowie in 1896 proclaimed the founding of a new last days church for all true believers, the Christian Catholic Church and called on all his followers to join with him in a holy war against the religious establishment. By 1900, he began construction of “Zion City” on 6,500 acres 20 miles north of Chicago. Planned for 200,000 residents, Zion was to be a center of commerce and government as well as religion. In short order Dowie constructed homes, banks, schools, a hotel and a wooden tabernacle that would seat no less than 8,000 persons. Those who took the commuter train from Chicago for Sunday services were greeted with large signs stating that Zion was “the only place where it is easy to do right and difficult to do wrong.” They were also told that in Zion there would be:

No Profanity, No vulgarity, No sorcerers, No medical poisoners, No cut throat competition, No saloons or beer gardens, No intoxicating liquors, No surgical butchers, No cigarette or tobacco stores, No vaccination: the foulest of all the foul inventions of the Devil and some dirty doctors, No drugs, No theaters, No dance halls, No opium joint, No gambling establishment, No house of ill fame assignation, No pharmacy, No apothecary’s shop, or drug store, No place for the manufacture or sale of drugs or medicines of any kind, No place or office of residence of a practicing physician or surgeon.... No unclean food or oysters, that scavenger of the sea, or swine, that scavenger of the earth. No place for holding secret meetings or assemblies of any oath bound society.¹⁰

Indeed, Zion would be a place where holiness and healing would be in and everything else would be out!

⁹ Alexander Dowie, “Doctors, Drugs and Devils, Or the Foes of Christ the Healer,” *Physical Culture* (April, 1895), pp. 81-86.

¹⁰ This passage was supplied to me by Terryl Todd of Libertyville, IL. who copied them from a contemporary photograph.

A sad footnote on Dowie's ministry was that in 1901, he suddenly proclaimed himself to be "Elijah the Restorer" in fulfillment of the scripture and announced plans to set up new Zion communities all over the world. On top of this, in 1905 he suffered a stroke that made him a living vegetable leading to power struggles over control of his vast religious empire. He died in disgrace in 1907, ignored by those who formerly adored him.¹¹

Dowie's stern position against all medicine and doctors, however, took root in many sectors of the Holiness movement and became the majority view of the Pentecostals when the movement began in 1901 in Topeka, Kansas.

4. Charles Fox Parham and William J. Seymour

Although Parham is known as the man who formulated the doctrine that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, he was first widely known as a healing evangelist. As a Methodist pastor and later as a Holiness teacher, Parham adopted Wesleyan language to describe divine healing. He once said that sickness is instantly "cleansed away root and branch" in answer to prayer.¹²

In 1898, after a visit to Dowie's Zion City, Parham established his Bethel Healing Home in Topeka, Kansas where the sick could come and rest in a "spiritual hospital" where prayer and Bible reading took the place of doctors and medicine. It was only after he opened his Bethel Bible School that he and his students made the discovery that tongues was "the Bible evidence" of the baptism in the Holy Spirit on January 1, 1901, the very first day of the twentieth century. After this Parham preached a "five-fold gospel" emphasizing the new birth, second blessing sanctification, the baptism in the Holy Spirit evidenced by tongues, divine healing "as in the atonement" and the instant rapture of the church. In this schema everything happened in an instant, including divine healing.¹³

¹¹ See Lindsay, *John Alexander Dowie*, pp. 193-75 and Faupel, *Everlasting Gospel*, pp. 118-33.

¹² The definitive biography of Parham is James Goff, *Fields White Unto Harvest: Charles Fox Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), esp. pp. 32-70.

¹³ Goff, *Fields White Unto Harvest*, p. 90.

When Pentecostalism exploded on the world scene at Azusa Street in 1906 under the black pastor William J. Seymour, his teachings were the same as his teacher Charles Parham. These included divine healing as in the atonement. In one article on healing, Seymour lamented that many Christians “will take a doctor before Jesus. They put a doctor between them and the atonement... the doctor gives you poison and you die because you dishonor the atonement.”¹⁴ When someone wrote a letter to Seymour’s *Apostolic Faith* asking, “Do you teach that it is wrong to take medicine?” The answer was as follows: “Yes... medicine is for unbelievers, but the remedy for the saints of God we find in Jas. 5:14....” In another note on healing, Seymour stated that “a sanctified body is one that is cleansed from all sickness and disease. The Lord gives you power over sickness and disease....”¹⁵

For the next decade the Pentecostals generally held to Parham’s and Seymour’s “atonement” view that taking medicine or going to a doctor showed a lack of faith in God. But healing now was taken out of the residential “healing homes” and preached from the rooftops. Healing evangelists laid hands on the sick in gospel tents, in schoolhouses and in whatever church would allow them a hearing.

Many Pentecostal saints vowed that they would never touch another pill for the rest of their lives while “trusting God for their bodies.” The standard testimony was as follows:

I praise God that I am saved, sanctified, filled with the Holy Ghost, looking for Jesus to come, and I have trusted God for my body for 40 years” (or however many years since they had taken their last medicine).

In 1920, for instance, Sam Page, one-time head of the Pentecostal Holiness Church reported that he had been “saved and healed for 27 years.” In the first church I pastored in Virginia, there was an elderly lady of 94 years, Sister Gayle, who testified that she had “trusted God for her body for 50 years.” One preacher W. J. Noble said, after promising not to take any medicine or see a doctor “until death,” testified:

¹⁴ William J. Seymour, “Salvation and Healing,” *Apostolic Faith* (Azusa Street), December 1906, p. 2.

¹⁵ William J. Seymour, “Questions and Answers,” *Apostolic Faith* (Azusa Street), January 1908, pp. 2, 4.

He has healed me of many diseases such as broken bones, tonsillitis, lagniappe, influenza, indigestion, diphtheria, ingrown toenails, cancer, and tuberculosis in the last stage.¹⁶

Theirs was indeed a heroic faith.

If there were any sick among them, most Pentecostals said that there was sin in the body, or the person lacked the faith to be healed. If anyone suffered from depression or any other mental or emotional disorder, they were generally thought to be demon possessed. Instead of psychiatry or psychoanalysis, exorcisms were the order of the day for those who were “oppressed of the devil.” In any case, the sick often lay in their beds in a darkened sickroom for weeks praying for a healing touch often enduring agonies of pain while refusing any kind of medicines or visits from physicians. In this case, Jesus and Jesus alone was the caregiver and healer.

5. Confusion and Schism over “Remedies”

For several decades Pentecostals made news in many communities over extreme views and practices on divine healing. In the period from Azusa Street to World War II, some Pentecostal preachers were not only arrested for “practicing medicine without a license,” but were accused of murder for allowing family members to die without medical aid. Some even looked on this as a mark of distinction and suffering for the faith. Francis Marion Britton of the Pentecostal Holiness Church allowed his first wife to die “unaided” although fifty neighbors threatened to have him tried for “murder” because of a lack of medical attention. Not only did his wife die “without drugs” but also two of their children.¹⁷

In the Church of God, Walter Barney, a pastor in Wytheville Virginia, was tried and convicted of “manslaughter” in 1915 for refusing medical care for a daughter who later died. His conviction was later overturned with a pardon by the governor of Virginia. To many Pentecostals, people like Britton and Barney were heroes of healing who were gladly persecuted for their faith. But to other Pentecostals they were fanatics who gave Pentecostalism a bad name.¹⁸

¹⁶ Vinson Synan, *The Old-Time Power: A History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Franklin Springs, GA: Advocate, 1973), pp. 166-71.

¹⁷ Synan, *Old-Time Power*, p. 166.

¹⁸ *Church of God Evangel*, Dec. 1, 1910, pp. 1-2; Jan.23, 1915, p. 2.

The only schism over the use of medicine divided the Pentecostal Holiness Church, when in 1919 a furor erupted in the church when a Georgia preacher Hugh Bowling wrote in the church paper *The Advocate* that it was no sin at all to take “remedies” and that going to a doctor implied no lack of faith in the patient. To some leaders this position seemed to be a compromise on the heroic stand for divine healing that many had taken over the years. One letter to the editor exhorted,

Beloved, let us never lower the standard, for if we fail to preach this wonderful truth, we are a fallen church, and if our ministers advocate drugs and doctors, something is wrong...you are not preaching the full gospel.¹⁹

After this, a great struggle ensued with charges and counter-charges on each side. In a later article in *The Advocate* Bowling said,

I do not believe that those who get sick and use no remedies and drag around for weeks and after so long a time get well, are divinely healed, but that nature alone restored them.... I do not believe in lying about divine healing. I do not believe that sickness is evidence of unbelief. I do not believe that healing is paralleled with salvation in the atonement.²⁰

This was the last straw! Leaders of the denomination made charges against Bowling and his friend Watson Sorrow. In the end, Bowling was given his day in an ecclesiastical court, but was expelled from the church when he failed to appear for the hearing. He and some friends thereafter organized the Congregational Holiness Church in 1921. In time the controversy was largely forgotten, but in time, the very men who criticized Bowling for advocating medicine themselves died in hospitals using the best doctors and medicines available.²¹

6. Oral Roberts and the City of Faith

The famous healing evangelist Oral Roberts was only three years old in Oklahoma when his denomination was torn with controversy over

¹⁹ Synan, *Old-Time Power*, p. 167.

²⁰ Synan, *Old-Time Power*, p. 168.

²¹ Synan, *Old-Time Power*, pp. 169-71.

divine healing. In fact, in some places divine healing almost faded from the life of the churches. In his book, *Expect a Miracle*, Roberts says that faith for healing was at a low ebb in the Pentecostal Holiness Churches where his father and mother served as pastors. His miraculous healing from tuberculosis as a sixteen-year-old boy, however, was destined to change his life and the life of the American church in the decades to come. After his healing, young Roberts answered the call to preach. The first years of his ministry saw Roberts struggling as a traveling evangelist and pastor of small churches.²²

In 1947, while pastoring a small church in Toccoa, Georgia, Roberts saw a man instantly healed after a motor fell on his foot crushing it to the bone. Impressed with this unexpected miracle, Roberts began to fast and pray for the gift of healing to be released in his ministry. After returning to Oklahoma, he pastored other churches while studying in Phillips University and helping to found Southwestern College in Oklahoma City.²³

During a time of fasting and prayer in Enid, Oklahoma, Roberts heard the Lord commission him to bring God's healing power to his generation. His first healing crusade in his hometown of Ada, Oklahoma in 1948 was so successful that he immediately launched a tent-healing crusade ministry that eventually made him a household name throughout the world. A major breakthrough came in 1953 when he began televising his healing lines on national television. This brought divine healing into the very living rooms of the nation. In doing this, Roberts created a new media genre: that of the televangelist. The income generated by his television ministry ultimately led Roberts to found his own university in 1965 in Tulsa. Here, he planned to train young people to take divine healing to the furthestmost nations and peoples of the world.²⁴

On top of his sensational and wildly successful healing ministry, in 1980 Roberts dedicated his 77-story hospital in Tulsa which he dubbed the "City of Faith." Here, he said, would be celebrated a "marriage between prayer and medicine, the supernatural and the natural, in the treatment of the whole person." The hospital included plans for a medical

²² Of the many autobiographies of Oral Roberts, the best and most recent one is, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry - Oral Roberts, an Autobiography* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

²³ David Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1985), p. 61.

²⁴ Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, pp. 103-92.

school where future doctors could minister healing through medicine and prayer. After an initial period of euphoria and success, however, the dream of a Pentecostal hospital ran aground on the rocks of financial disaster. Although his partners gave tens of millions of dollars to the project, few were willing to travel to Tulsa for treatment, even after the City of Faith hospital offered free plane tickets to anyone who would come. By 1990 it was clear that even Roberts' staunchest supporters would rather trust in his prayers for healing than come to his hospital.²⁵

With the closing of the City of Faith in 1989, the circle was complete. The healing movement had begun in the 1860s with Charles Cullis ministering prayer in a public hospital in Boston. Afterwards the "healing home" movement saw people abandoning hospitals in favor of entering healing homes for rest and prayer. Then, in the most radical phase, the Dowie era, people denounced all "doctors, drugs and devils" in favor of prayer alone. By the 1990s, Pentecostals and Charismatics generally settled on a position in which a sick person would still ask for prayer first and trust God for healing, and then go to the doctors for regular medical care. If they got well, whether with medical treatment or without it, they claimed their healing to be a miracle from God.

In the end, most Pentecostals would agree with the final position of Oral Roberts on the question of healing. After laying hands on over one million sick folk in his crusades, he concluded that all healing comes from God, whether from natural processes, as the result of prayer or through the ministry of doctors and medicine. Gone were the days when children were left to die in agony "without drugs or doctors" although as the century came to an end, there were still those faith teachers like Kenneth Hagin who could say, "I took my last aspirin in 1934 when I had my last headache." He made a point that he had received no medicine or medical care in the 63 years since. That, by the way, was the year in which I was born.²⁶

7. In Summary

The story of healing in the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement came down to the question of who was in the sickroom. Before Cullis, the only

²⁵ Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, pp. 251-302.

²⁶ Vinson Synan, "The Faith of Kenneth Hagin," *Charisma and Christian Life* (June, 1990), pp. 63-70.

healer in the house was the medical doctor. In his first healing homes, there were now two healers in the house, the doctor and Jesus. In his later years, there was only one healer, Jesus, while medical doctors and drugs were not allowed in the room.

Under Dowie, doctors and drugs were not only totally excluded, they were demonized. Later, under such Pentecostal evangelists as Aimee Semple McPherson and Oral Roberts, the healing homes were abandoned in favor of evangelistic healing crusades under tents and in large city auditoriums.

With the creation of the City of Faith, prayer and medicine were again joined together. Now, Jesus and the doctor were in the same room ministering to the sick and giving God the glory for any healing that took place, whether from natural processes, from medicine or surgery, or from prayer.

In the end, the long term effect of Pentecostal/Charismatic caregiving was to invite Jesus back into the sickroom where he could add his healing touch to that of the doctors and nurses.

And indeed, by the 1990s medical science was confirming the fact that religious faith and prayer made a measurable difference in the healing process. In 1998, for example, the Templeton Foundation was sponsoring classes on religion, healing and prayer in the major medical schools of the nation.