

When Doctors Bow to Christ's Healing Power

Since the beginning of time, healing from illness has preoccupied countless numbers of people. Faith and religious practice brought a response to this concern. For thousands of years—whether for themselves, friends or loved ones—humans have prayed for healing.

Sacred history overflows with stories of inexplicable recoveries from sickness and disease. Yet the unbelievable nature of these accounts, which rely on faith rather than reason, have created considerable conflict between science and religion. Public scorn for the other camp characterizes their exchanges.

Despite this situation, it appears that those upholding each view are on the cusp of finding common ground. An increasing number of scientists are demonstrating interest in cures that medicine does not—or cannot—explain, in hopes of unraveling the mystery. Outside of extraordinary cases, does religious practice bring certain health benefits? All around the world, and particularly in the United States, scientists are conducting a multiplying number of scientific studies to analyze the benefits of spirituality to healing.

Scientists Explore Power of Healing Prayer

Once practiced almost exclusively by Pentecostal Christians, healing prayer is attracting increasing interest. Only a few decades ago, it was common to hear certain preachers assert that God “permitted” us to be stricken by some illness in order to test or chastise us. Yet nothing in Scripture allows for such an idea!

Relating a few isolated passages to illness, or the idea that physical suffering permits our ascension to heaven, is an

abuse of sound scriptural interpretation. Explore the New Testament and you will see that Jesus went about healing everyone He touched. Examples span from blind Bartimaeus to the woman with an issue of blood, from the daughter of Jairus (the ruler of the synagogue) to the Roman centurion's servant. Scripture indicates that He healed all kinds of sicknesses and diseases (Matt. 4:23).

After Jesus ascended to heaven, His disciples put His word into practice, buoyed by this promise: "He who believes in Me will do the works that I do also. And he will do greater works than these, because I am going to My Father" (John 14:12). In that vein, Peter and John healed a lame man at the gate of the temple of Jerusalem (Acts 3). In Samaria, Philip performed miracles and healed many paralyzed and lame persons (Acts 8:7-8). Not surprisingly, this resulted in great joy among the people.

Paul taught the Roman Christians that the kingdom of God is not found in eating and drinking but in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). Indeed, what is more wrongful than an illness? What threatens peace and joy more than serious health problems? Healing from sickness restores peace and righteousness and produces joy, as Philip's adventures in Samaria proved.

A closer look at the book of Acts shows that prior to healing, all the apostles announced the gospel and proclaimed the salvation and remission of sins in Jesus Christ. Such preaching stirred numerous miraculous signs, including healing.

Combating a Cessationist Mindset

Contrary to the idea pushed by cessationists who teach that miracles disappeared after the death of the first apostles, miraculous healings carried on within the early church and later, most notably through the Desert Fathers. These hermits

lived in the deserts of Egypt and the Middle East in the third century and perpetuated the apostolic tradition. However, little by little, the purity of this tradition became perverted through magic or superstitious practices. While lack of sound teaching had something to do with this, it also stemmed from the institutionalization of the church.

Sadly, unethical spiritual leaders used their position to pressure and manipulate the gullible masses. As early as the beginning of the Middle Ages, questionable and corruptible practices supplanted the veritable ministry of healing in the institutional church. A few centuries later, the disappearance of the healing gift benefited such supporters of “enlightened” rationalism as the French philosopher Voltaire. Ironically, although Protestants took an opposite approach to the institutionalized church, reformers such as Luther and John Calvin contributed to this disconnect of God from people’s daily lives by rejecting any “supernatural” aspects of His activity.

Yet the Bible illustrates a God who wants to heal our illnesses. This is why He sent His Son to be our supreme physician. “Humanity needed a doctor and a surgeon whose skill was proportionate to the importance of its illnesses and of its wounds,” wrote Jean Climaque, a Syrian monk in the sixth and seventh centuries.

A respected theologian in the early church, Cyril of Jerusalem also pointed out that the name of Jesus means “Savior,” but that in Greek, it also means “doctor”: “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

Separation of Church and Medicine

In the West, medicine and religion were closely aligned until the end of the Middle Ages. Religious orders founded hospices (often called “hostels of God”), often building them in the

shadow of cathedrals or monasteries. Hence the church pervaded the practice of medicine. Doctors and nurses usually came from the ranks of the clergy, as did the herbalists who cultivated and prescribed medicinal plants.

Yet the scientific revolution, initiated in the 17th century, spelled the end of this marriage of love and reason. "Rational thinkers" steered Western medicine toward what it has become today. In biology, as in physics, Descartes stood against the idea of hidden forces in nature. As so many Enlightenment thinkers did, he reasoned that everything can be explained through space and movement. There is nothing more to living than in the automaton he observed in the king's gardens.

Born in 1709, Dr. Julien Offray de La Mettrie appropriated and amplified Descartes' ideas. An atheist and libertine, Mettrie expounded on the idea of a radical materialism. In 1745, he wrote *L'histoire naturelle de l'âme* (*The Natural History of the Soul*), in which he promoted his thesis that the mind must be recognized as a consequence of the sophisticated organization of the human brain. Man is thus only a superior animal.

The scientific revolution that sprang first from Nicolaus Copernicus (who preceded Descartes by a century) and then Descartes' ideas continues to this day. The majority of Western doctors are trained in this school of thought. While allowing for remarkable advances, it has reached its human limits. These practitioners are led to reason only in respect to that which is observable, measurable and reproducible in laboratory situations. The problem is how this philosophy reduces the complex human being to a simple collection of organs.

The predictable result is that most modern doctors restrict their interest to the physical body and ailments expressed through clinical or biological symptoms. Then they treat the abnormality, all the while overlooking the spiritual causes or

implications of the ailment. The care of the soul is left to the specialists of the psyche—psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists. Like all doctors, they search for physical symptoms and ignore spiritual ones. This unbalanced situation leaves out the fathers, pastors, priests and counselors who care for the spirit.

The Rebirth of Spirituality in Medicine

In 2008, former-surgeon-turned-psychotherapist Thierry Janssen posed the question of whether sickness has meaning: “It’s a question that concerns all of us. Even though medicine no longer poses it to itself. Indeed, it tends to the body without being concerned about the entirety of the human person. By prioritizing the understanding of details, it forgets the ties which unite the patients of the world in which we live.”

If we are called to search for the real meaning of sickness and its multiple factors, logic says we are also called to think about the real meaning of healing. Could it be considered simply as the restoration of health? The only problem with this is that a state of absolute health does not exist. All complex biological organisms experience structural problems, stemming from various dysfunctions.

Healing, then, should not be considered the restoration of absolute health, but a return to an “optimum” physiological state. This can occur through several factors, be they natural (the body’s own defenses), medical (medications and medical/surgical procedures) or spiritual (personal beliefs and communities of faith). This third element of healing forces us to examine whether there is a relationship between spiritual factors and other forms of healing.

If we can believe in divine healing from a theological point of view, what are the implications for a scientific point of view? If we apply the methods of investigation behind

evidence-based medicine to prayer and spirituality, we are able to bring forth a clear, objective response—in the affirmative.

At the time of this writing, specialists in functional neuroimaging were taking a passionate interest in the topic. (Techniques such as functional MRI allow them to literally “see” brain functioning.) Such experts publish scientific papers on the modifications of cerebral functioning during prayer or on the benefits of meditation in terms of improving cognitive functions.

In the Dec. 12, 2007, issue of *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Dr. Burr Eichelman wrote, “Are we training our profession sufficiently in the language and concepts of religion and spirituality?” He was referring to an investigation published in that edition that highlighted that psychiatrists—similar to other medical doctors—were unanimous in recognizing the benefits of religion and spirituality on health.

Among other voices that recognize such benefits is Dr. Dale Matthews, who practices general internal medicine in McLean, Virginia, and is a staff physician in the Primary Care Division of the Virginia Hospital Center Physician Group, based in Arlington, Virginia. He is the author of a four-volume research work titled *The Faith Factor: An Annotated Bibliography of Clinical Research on Spiritual Subjects*, which gathered studies published on this topic.

They had been published in such prestigious medical journals as *The American Journal of Public Health*, *Cancer*, *The American Journal of Psychiatry* and many others. The spiritual implications of this exhaustive analysis are astonishing. While such factors as socio-economic levels, eating habits and physical activity play important roles in health, the spiritual dimension—this famous faith factor—appears to far exceed others. Its benefits appear to extend to all ages and

all aspects of health, from disease prevention to healing.

Science Absolutely Proves the Faith Link

In 1999, Dr. Matthews released the general public version of *The Faith Factor*. In it, he noted spirituality is an important element in his medical practice: “It began to make logical sense to me that, as a proponent of true, whole-person medicine and as a person of faith seeking to live out my faith in a life of service to others, I should, and could, address all my patients’ principal needs—physical, psychological, social and spiritual.”

Certain patients seek help from Dr. Matthews because of his stance on faith—in addition to his excellent professional reputation. During initial conversations with patients, he asks about their relationship with God. If a patient is a churchgoer, he may ask more about that. When he prescribes a medication, he will add an appropriate Bible verse and offer to pray. However, if the patient is not receptive, he doesn’t insist.

Dr. Harold Koenig, who has written 18 books about the relationship between religion and health, sees three fundamental explanations for the medical profession’s interest in this topic.

First, there is a growing role of religion and spirituality in people’s lives. Against all odds and despite the fact that we live in an increasingly secular society, one is indeed witness to a revival of faith—even among young people. A primary reason is how the modern world’s materialistic and hedonistic values fail to speak to individuals’ deep spiritual longings and aspirations, nor do they offer suitable responses to the world’s increasingly perplexing problems.

Consider the phenomenal worldwide success of material like the Alpha course or books such as Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life*, which sold more than 30 million copies, or *The Shack* by

William Paul Young, a novel originally self-published and so successful the author sold the publishing rights to an international firm. Despite the problems confronting religious institutions in a changing world, as we progress into the 21st century, we are witnessing a widespread return of religious sentiment. This has consequences for the health of countless numbers of people.

Second, the economic and demographic trends driving health expenditures are higher. At a time when the age pyramid is in the middle of turning on its head due to aging demographics, active spirituality could help prevent the onset of chronic conditions and mental illnesses and reduce costs associated with medical expenditures and lost work hours. Furthermore, community involvement makes it possible to overcome isolation and maintain social cohesiveness in our fragmented societies.

Third, there's an ongoing crisis in medicine itself. Modern medicine's overspecialized approach created a shortage of general practitioners. Not only does this make access to health care increasingly difficult, but an overall reduction in government and insurance reimbursements has forced people to delay necessary treatment or prescriptions. Such trends combine to create a sense of malaise among patients—the feeling they are little more than “one more body” in the system or that their identity has been reduced to a set of symptoms.

I notice this daily in my medical practice: Patients need us to talk with them, to explain our jargon in terms they can understand and to show them empathy. They crave a doctor who looks beneath the surface symptoms that brought them to our office. The introduction of a spiritual dimension in the doctor-patient relationship will allow for a holistic approach that treats the whole person.

Sadly, for much of the profession, it is incongruous to discuss incorporating faith into a medical practice, let alone

propose a doctor consider praying for a patient. Too many doctors are anchored to a mechanistic tradition of health and healing, the roots of which only go back a few centuries. It is time to shed our enlightened outlook and admit the truth that the body and spirit are one. In the past, the two had been considered as such and deserved to be treated as a whole. In the end, our patients will be healthier—and happier.

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More information

In *The Faith Link: Scientific Proof That Your Belief Determines Your Health*, Dr. Max Fleury shows how the best way to maintain physical and emotional health is as simple as following Jesus. Find this resource on [Amazon](#), or wherever Christian books are sold.