

The Issues in Charismatic Theology

Miracles

Gerry Andersen

Valley Bible Church, Lancaster, California

www.valleybible.net

1. Introduction

God's activity in the world is normally providential, working through natural means and choices of people. These seem routine, unspectacular and pass usually unnoticed by man. Much more significant from a human standpoint is when God acts in a supernatural, unexpected fashion where natural laws are suspended. These are theologically known as miracles. These are acts of God, not acts of man. They are not just uncommon or completely unexpected events, but are acts where God does what is impossible apart from His supernatural work..

Miracles can be divided into two categories: That which God does supernaturally through the agency of a person, and that which God does supernaturally apart from a person. The first is a special giftedness to an individual, such as Jesus throughout His public ministry, to the apostles (Acts 2:43) and to certain others who were so empowered (1 Corinthians 12:10). Many miracles in the Bible do not occur by God working through a person but by God working through an event.

Our last class covered the relationship between the working of miracles through individuals and their role in validating God's revelation. The purpose of these signs and wonders through people were to validate the messenger and his message (Acts 2:22; Romans 15:18-19; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Hebrews 2:4). This ended with the completion of God's revelation to man with the close of the New Testament at the end of the first century. This does not mean that God is either unable or unwilling to intercede in this world supernaturally, only the means by which He works is no longer through spiritual gifts that were for the explicit purpose of confirming the prophetic word.

One other distinction with regard to the miracles of God in the Scripture is that some are miracles of blessing and some are miracles of judgment. While miracles of judgment were far more common in the Old Testament than in the New Testament, we still see the death of Ananias and Sapphira. Charismatic leaders speak of alleged modern day miracles only in reference to blessing.

As such, the type of miracles that Charismatic leaders reference almost exclusively in their contemporary ministry is physical healing. While healing is distinguished from miracles in 1 Corinthians 12:9-10, it is still a subset of the miraculous work of God. Due to the claims of Charismatic Theology, we will focus on this type of miracle.

2. The nature of healing

Healing was uncommon until the time of Jesus. While the Old Testament records many miracles, miracles of healing were rare among them. The Old Testament details Elijah raising a widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-23), Elisha raising the Shunammite's son from the dead (2 Kings 4:19-37) and the cleansing of Namaan of leprosy (2 Kings 5:10-15). The healings done by Jesus were a sudden shift in the miraculous work of God on earth in bringing blessing more than judgment to man.

The healing ministry of Jesus was clearly dramatic. Well over half of Christ's recorded miracles involved healing. The apostles likewise healed many and often. It is because of the high profile of healing in the New Testament and because of the claims of many Charismatics today, the topic of healing deserves special attention among Christ's miracles.

Much of Charismatic teaching is that it is God's will for us to be healed in similar miraculous ways. This is certainly true of those in the Prosperity movement but its influences and the spread of Pentecostalism has led most Charismatics to give significant emphasis on God's healing power. The openness to those claiming to have the gift of healing has led to the spread of this view.

As we investigate the topic of healing, the question is not "can God heal?" but rather "will God heal?" and more specifically, "will God heal miraculously through men?" The answers to these questions extend beyond God's ability and involve God's revealed practice. Simply because God is able to do something does not mean He will. For example, God has demonstrated that He is able to flood the earth but He will not according to Genesis 9:11. There are times when God chooses not to do something that He has the power to do.

While God does heal, He has chosen to limit His healing power through certain individuals. Along with other types of miracles, God healed through select people and during three major historical eras. This does not mean that God is unable to heal through men at other times, but only that He has chosen to limit this type of healing ministry to periods of new revelation.

Also, this does not mean that God has chosen to no longer directly intervene to bring unexpected and dramatic healing apart from the ministry of select individuals. God's direct healing does not violate His revealed will. However, God's healing through the ministry of people was done for the specific purpose of confirming the revelation of God through His messenger.

As we examine further modern claims of healing, we will see that not only is the purpose of God's healing ministry through people not met today, but the nature of God's healing ministry is not met today either. The healing claims of today pale in comparison with the miraculous healing ministry we see in the Bible.

3. God's promise of physical healing

a. The physical healing that God promises

Many in the Charismatic Movement teach that it is God's will that we be healed. If we are ill, then it is due to a lack of faith on our part. As we will see later, this teaching is flawed, yet there is an aspect of physical healing that God does promise. All believers will be relieved of their pain and suffering when we leave behind our mortal bodies and receive immortality. The redemption of our body still awaits us (Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:50-54) for one day there will be no more pain and suffering (Revelation 21:4). This total physical healing is just not in this lifetime. This eventual healing follows the spiritual healing we receive positionally.

b. The physical healing that God does not promise

God does not promise that our physical problems will necessarily be healed in our lifetime. No passage of Scripture teaches present physical healing will be definitely granted to us and there is nothing we can do that can guarantee physical healing. The example of the church in the New Testament proves this. Paul was ill (Galatians 4:13), associates of Paul were ill (Philippians 2:27; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20), all the apostles died, and the entire early church died. If physical healing were promised this would not have occurred. If physical healing were conditional upon faith, then we must conclude that everyone lacked faith and that Paul misled Timothy by telling him to take wine for his stomach instead of to have more faith (1 Timothy 5:23).

4. Healing in the Old Testament

Healings in the Old Testament were rare. There are far more incidents of God afflicting people in the Old Testament than there are of God healing people. While people quickly seek healing, they conveniently forget God's supernatural acts of judgment.

The methods of healing in the Old Testament varied. God did not favor a technique or pattern. The healing methods ranged from God's direct intervention, to answered prayer, to strange cases of touching the bones of Elisha (2 Kings 13:20-21).

Faith in God was not a direct issue in the healings of the Old Testament. God even healed unbelievers, such as a Syrian general (2 Kings 5:1-14) and a Babylonian king (Daniel 4:28-37).

5. The healing by Jesus

In light of the healing in the Old Testament, the healing ministry of Jesus was clearly unprecedented. In the three years leading up to Christ's death, Jesus directly healed a countless, overwhelming number of people.

Below is a summary of the nature of Christ's healing ministry:

a. The healings of Jesus had a purpose

Jesus healed in order to authenticate Himself as the true Messiah, and thus His message (John 10:25; Acts 2:22). He did not heal to draw a crowd or even merely for the physical benefit, for He did not heal everyone (John 5:3-5) and He did not heal upon request (Matthew 12:38-40).

b. The healings of Jesus were immediate and complete

All of Christ's many healings were instantaneous, with three exceptions (Mark 8:22-26; Luke 17:11-19; John 9:1-7). These three delays involved only minutes and the men were totally healed. The miracles were also complete, with no reference to any relapse of the affliction.

c. The healings of Jesus were abundant

Jesus healed as a normal course of His travels. He heal in large numbers. He was not restricted to times, locations or people. His disciples never selected out some of the crowd to be healed. Jesus frequently healed everyone who came to Him, without limits. Christ's healings were so abundant that He is often described healing the multitudes. John alludes to more miracles that were never recorded (John 20:30).

d. The healings of Jesus did not require His physical presence

A centurion's slave (Matthew 8:5-13), a Canaanite's daughter (Matthew 15:21-28) and the son of an official in Capernaum (John 4:49-53) were all healed without Jesus needing to even be there.

e. The healings of Jesus were undeniable

Everyone, even Christ's enemies, stood amazed for they were unable to deny or discredit the miracles. No medical examinations were necessary, for the healings were clearly evident to all. The validity of the healings were not based on one person's testimony but what was observable by many.

f. The healings of Jesus were never prearranged

Jesus healed people from the outset of His public ministry (Matthew 4:23-25) to its conclusion (John 11:1-44). He healed those He came to and those who came to Him. The healings were not done under special circumstances but through the course of His daily ministry.

g. The healings of Jesus varied in their method

Jesus did not have a favorite healing custom. He touched (Matthew 8:15), spoke (John 5:8-9), was touched (Matthew 9:20-22), spit (Mark 8:22-26) and used clay (John 9:6). Christ's healings were not dependent upon a technique.

h. The healings of Jesus did not depend on a person's faith

Healing proponents commonly claim that great faith is necessary in order to be healed by God. If healing does not take place, the blame can then be placed on the individual's lack of faith rather than on the healer's lack of ability.

In the Bible, faith is never described quantitatively. There is no unit of measure for faith. While Jesus rebuked men for "little faith" (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20), this type of faith does not fall short in amount but rather in nature. Littleness of faith is a figure of speech to mean no faith at all. This can be clearly seen in Matthew 17:20, "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'move from here to there,' and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you."

It is not the *size* of our faith that is essential, for a mustard seed was the smallest seed in Palestine, but rather it is the *object* of our faith that is essential. If our faith is in God we have great faith that can move mountains. Nowhere in the Scripture is anyone admonished to measure faith, since faith is truly an either/or proposition. How much faith does it take to be saved? There is no amount; either a person believes or not. Just as there are no degrees of faith in salvation (i.e., "believe just a little harder and you will be saved"), there are no degrees of faith in healing.

In addition, not only is the amount of faith not an issue in healing, faith is not even a requirement at all for God to heal. A common passage that is used to say that faith is essential for healing is Mark 6:5 (cf. Matthew 13:58), that says that Jesus could not do many miracles because of the lack of faith on the part of the people. However, this must be understood *not as an inability of Jesus' power but rather as a choice that Jesus made to not turn His ministry into a healing sideshow for people who had already rejected His message*. Jesus raised people from the dead who obviously had no faith. In addition to the dead (incapable of displaying faith) that Jesus raised to life (Matthew 9, Luke 7, John 11), Jesus healed ten lepers in Luke 17. Of the ten who were healed, only one had faith (Luke 17:17-19). Faith was not essential for Jesus to heal.

Sometimes the faith that existed was displayed by someone other than the person afflicted (cf. Luke 5:20). In Matthew 17:19-20, Jesus rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith in curing a demoniac. If modern healers are going to introduce faith as an issue in their supposed healing ministry, perhaps they ought to be discussing their own faith rather than the faith of those they are proposing to heal.

i. The healings of Jesus involved organic diseases

An organic disease is where an organ of the body is somehow physically impaired, through maiming, defect, disease, etc. Examples are broken bones, infections, heart attacks, hernias, gallstones, slipped discs, cancer, deformities, lacerations and amputated limbs. With an organic disease, something is actually wrong with the organ. The body is able to heal some organic diseases without help, such as minor sprains and abrasions.

In contrast, a functional disease is the dysfunction of a perfectly good organ of the body. Many people suffer from pain or from organs that do not function properly but with no damage to the organ. The organ itself is sound, but for some reason it does not function properly. These types of healings are difficult to document and result from any number of cures. It is important to note that the Scripture never describes Jesus healing a functional disease. All of His healings involved organic problems, such as blindness, crippled legs, withered hands, an ear that had been sliced off, etc. These types of healings are undeniable and dramatic.

The alleged healings of today do not begin to match these types of serious organic diseases. This is the Achilles' heel of the belief that God heals through men today in the same way that He healed in the New Testament. The healings that are claimed today are not of the same category and leave open the question of their direct cause or even if a healing had occurred at all.

6. The healing of the apostles and their associates

The apostles and their associates followed the same pattern of healing ministry of their Lord.

a. The healings of the apostles had a purpose

God used healing as a sign to authenticate the apostles and their ministry (Romans 5:18-19; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:4). Their healing ministry, and on occasion the healing ministry of their associates (Stephen in Acts 6:8, Philip in Acts 8:7 and Barnabas in Acts 14:3), served to validate them as vessels of God's revelation. If non-apostolic Christians throughout the centuries could also perform these works of healing, then the works could not have served the purpose of being a sign of apostleship (2 Corinthians 12:12). These healings were equal to those done by Jesus in order to attest to their words as being as authoritative as the words of Jesus, who had chosen them as His spokesman (Matthew 10:11-15; 1 Corinthians 14:37).

b. The healings of the apostles were immediate and complete

All of the apostles' healings were instantaneous and total, with no need for a period for recuperation. No one needed to claim their healing by faith, since they were healed on the spot. There was never a relapse.

c. The healings of the apostles were undeniable

Even the strongest opponents of the apostles, the Jewish rulers and Sanhedrin, could not dispute the healings of the apostles since they were public and spectacular (Acts 4:16-17).

d. The healings of the apostles varied in their method

Like Jesus, the apostles did not have a favorite healing custom. They healed by command (Acts 3:6), with their shadow (Acts 5:15), through a cloth from their body (Acts 19:11-12), and by the laying of their hands and praying (Acts 28:8-9). The apostles' healings were not dependent upon a technique. Like Jesus, they did not prearrange their healing ministry and did not have to be present (Acts 19:11-12).

e. The healings of the apostles did not depend on a person's faith

At times the faith of the person afflicted was praised (Acts 3:16), yet personal faith was not a prerequisite for healing (Acts 8:6-7; 9:34). A commendation is not the same thing as a condition.

f. The healings of the apostles involved organic diseases

Like the healing ministry of Jesus, the apostles healed people of organic disease, not merely functional problems. Peter healed a man in his forties who had been lame from birth (Acts 3:1-10, 22), as did Paul (Acts 14:8-10). Both Peter and Paul each raised someone from the dead (Acts 9:36-43; Acts 20:7-12).

In summary, in order to claim that any healing ministry today is on par with the healing ministry of Jesus and the apostles, and thus qualified as a genuine healing miracle to validate new revelation, the following criteria must be met:

- The disease must not be the kind that normally heals itself over time.
- The healing must be immediate, complete and total.
- The healing must be of an organic disease.
- The healing must be of a disease that neither the medical community nor the human body can heal instantly or absolutely.
- The healing must take place in the absence of any medical treatment that might normally be expected to affect the disease.
- There must be adequate reason to believe that the disease was present before the application of the means used to bring about the healing miracle.
- There must be adequate reason to believe that the disease was not present after the application of the means used to bring about the healing miracle.
- The healing must be completely convincing, even to skeptics.
- The healing must be done in public without elaborate services.
- The healer must not use the lack of faith of the afflicted as an excuse for a failure.

These criteria were clearly the pattern of the healing ministry of Jesus and the apostles followed Christ's pattern. Healing proponents are not able to follow Christ's pattern for the simple reason that God is no longer providing individuals with the divine power to perform healing miracles, since there is no longer any new revelation to authenticate. Because they do not have the power of God to heal as Jesus and the apostles did, they are left to try to convince the unsuspecting that what they are doing is similar. As we can see, there is no comparison between the healings of Christ and the apostles and what is being passed off among us today.

7. Explanations of claims of healing today

Reports of healing are common, particularly among our charismatic brethren. If gifted healers are indeed limited to the periods of new revelation, then how can we explain these testimonials? Below are several reasons that may account for these reports:

a. Through direct healing by God

A legitimate explanation is that God worked sovereignly to restore a person to health. It is in fact accurate to say that healing is from God, since every good thing bestowed is from above (James 1:17). He commonly does this in many ways, but certainly one possibility is that God could directly intervene to restore a person to immediate health. We even have an example to follow of prayer for the good health of others (3 John 2). This healing is not through a person who acts as an agent of the healing.

b. Through the natural healing capacity of the body

God has designed our bodies with a built-in ability to heal themselves of many physical problems. Sometimes the best treatment is no treatment at all. This may be the most common explanation for reported healings.

c. Through medical treatment

Most people who claim to be healed have been to doctors, received treatment, altered their diets and sometimes even had operations. Yet prior medical care can be easily overlooked, particularly when there is a negative view of the medical profession. Professed healers today are among those who malign doctors. One worldly tactic to build ourselves up is to unnecessarily degrade another. Jesus and the apostles affirmed the role of physicians and medicine (a physician even wrote two New Testament books).

d. Through an emotional change which affects the physical body

One standard medical text estimates that fifty to eighty percent of all diseases have their origin in stress. While not all emotionally induced illnesses are reversible, there is no doubt that improving our peace of mind will improve our physical health. It is in this sense that a simple belief that healing had occurred may produce relief in some cases of functional diseases.

e. Through a psychosomatic cure

Psychosomatic illnesses differ from emotionally induced illnesses in that psychosomatic illnesses falsely register an apparent physical infirmity in the mind. Emotionally induced illnesses are actual physical problems brought on by our state of mind. In both cases however, a change of mind can bring a change in physical well-being.

f. Through the placebo effect

The placebo effect is an improvement that occurs as a result of medical treatment that has no known documented medical value. Placebos are used in testing new drugs to determine their medical value. One group of patients receive the actual medication and another group, without their knowledge, receives the placebo. Not uncommonly, the placebo group improves as much as, if not better than, those who received the actual medication.

Professed healers are often no more than spiritual “placebos.” One factor that accounts for certain testimonies of healing today is some people when they think they are receiving something that will help them, are in fact helped by it, even though what they are receiving has nothing to do with their improvement.

g. Through misdiagnosis

An illness can be wrongly diagnosed. As a result the treatment prescribed is ineffective. The patient may seek out a healer who supposedly heals a disease that the person never really had in the first place. During April of 1991, the University of California in San Francisco surveyed the most serious errors of 114 internal medicine residents at three major U.S. medical centers. Thirty-eight of the residents named “diagnostic error.” Interestingly, while healing proponents too often malign the practice of medicine, they are content to hold the diagnostic ability of the very same doctors in high regard.

h. Through a misleading report of the case

Often an alleged healing is embraced by people because of a convincing but misleading report of the facts of the case. As more data is gathered the testimony becomes less and less sure. It sounds much better without the detailed facts of the case. This type of misleading report can be the result of either simple ignorance or of outright manipulative deceit. Most people are willing to pass along secondhand reports of what seemed to have happened or jump to conclusions regarding the nature of a healing. However, there are certainly more people than we would like to admit who are willing to use deliberate deceit to fool the public. Sadly, it is often the secular media that brings these manipulations to light while believers in Christ hesitate to challenge the manipulators. Far better if the church would seek to discipline its own.

i. Through the power of Satan

Can Satan copy God's work? To a certain degree he can. The magicians of Egypt were able to copy some of the miracles of Moses (Exodus 7:11; 7:22; 8:7). Unbelievers will claim at the judgment that they performed many miracles (Matthew 7:22-23). Second Thessalonians 2:9 tells us that the man of lawlessness will come with the activity of Satan and perform signs and false wonders. The beast and the false prophet will perform miracles (Revelation 13:14; 16:14; 19:20). The healings that are claimed today are not uncommon among other religions.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 teaches us that Satan and his servants disguise themselves as angels of light. While it does not appear that Satan has the power to create (such as healing a withered arm), there is no doubt he is skilled at deceiving people into believing that healings are being performed when in reality they are not. This deception accomplishes the satanic goal of confusing the glory of God while never needing to actually help someone.

j. Spontaneous remission

The medical field recognizes an unusual spontaneous regression in some diseases for no apparent medical reason. The most common illness in which this phenomenon occurs is cancer. We should acknowledge a certain variability among certain diseases.

8. Conclusion

Christians are no more or less prone to illness and death than non-Christians. Those of great faith do not have a greater life span than those of no faith apart from wisdom in behavioral choices. While certain wise practices may produce greater health and certain foolish practices may cause our health to deteriorate, healthy living is not promised to believers and should not be expected by Christians. It is the spirit of Matthew 6:11, "Give us this day our daily bread," that should bring thankfulness for the blessing of life that we enjoy.

God has blessed us with healing in many ways:

- Through the natural healing process of our body
- Through the practice of medicine (1 Timothy 5:23)
- Through confession of sin and wise living (Proverbs 3:7-8; 4:20-22)
- Through answering our prayers (3 John 2)
- Through direct divine intervention

Ultimately, we will be completely delivered from all pain and death in heaven (Revelation 21:4). As we long for the day, we recognize that healing in this present life is not promised, nor necessarily to be expected.

God's will in sickness is also clearly revealed. His purposes for illness include:

- His glory (John 9:3; 11:4)
- Our spiritual maturity (James 1:2-4)
- The fulfillment of God's will (1 Peter 3:17; 4:19)
- Understanding our dependence on God (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
- Enabling us to encourage others (2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Hebrews 12:1)
- Authenticating our faith (1 Peter 1:6-7)
- Disciplining our sin (1 Corinthians 11:20-22; 29-30)
- Accomplishing God's unrevealed purposes (Deuteronomy 29:29; Isaiah 55:8-9)

It would be a serious mistake to assume that sickness is always a bad thing. God is able to work through difficulties such as our sickness for good, according to His purposes. Our hope for physical deliverance is in the life to come, not in this present life.

Since there are no miraculous gifts of healing being performed by individuals in the biblical pattern, we can conclude that there is no additional revelation from God being entrusted to man today. Conversely, since God's purpose in empowering people with a healing ministry was to confirm His messenger, we can conclude that the absence of revelation results in a corresponding absence of the sign gift of healing.