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ON THE REPORTING OF MIRACLES

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DRAWN forth recently from our academic seclusion, popularly so called, into conflicting currents of the religious expression of the people, as manifested in a campaign of faith healing, I am minded to give utterance to a few reflections upon the subject of the reporting of miracles. I do not anticipate that this brief paper can set forth anything original or novel, nor greatly tax either your time or your attention; but I am hoping that it may give concrete illustration of ideas which, though familiar, may be still somewhat nebulous for some of us, and thus, by definite examples, assist us all to a clearer orientation in our historical study of miracles. So I venture to bring this report of things which have come under my own observation in this year of grace.

Early in the autumn of 1925 faith healing meetings were held in our city, and for a period of three weeks the large music festival auditorium was filled daily. The meetings were conducted somewhat after the manner of ordinary revival services; but the public interest centered in the work of healing. During the meetings nearly five thousand people came for healing, the number increasing steadily from some forty daily to more than six hundred on the closing day. These patients, so far as possible, came, or were brought by friends, unto the stage, where the healer anointed them with oil and uttered a brief prayer, after the manner prescribed in the epistle of James (James 5 14), now and then asking one or another to drop a crutch, or to say "Praise God!", or to give some other immediate demonstration of the cure.

I. My first observation upon the reporting of these phenomena would be that competent testimony in the matter of miracles

is rare and difficult to come at. In many different ways error creeps in. First, there is the tendency to assign an irrelevant cause for the recovery of the sufferer, quite overlooking the obvious and ordinary explanation. To parody Hamlet's phrase, "The miracle's the thing", and if a supernatural cause can possibly be assigned why consider the natural explanation? So, when a girl, long under treatment for tuberculosis of the hip, throws aside her cast and walks, it is deemed a miracle — no matter that the physician has ordered the removal of the cast next week, anyhow¹. When a deaf mute speaks (or mumbles half intelligibly), it is thought quite irrelevant that she has spent years in a school for the deaf². And when a dear old grandmother tells how the rheumatism which had almost completely crippled her was dispelled in an instant, it is by the merest chance that one discovers that she had not taken her medicine for a month previous to the event, because she had been feeling so much better³.

Again, there is a boundless capacity for self-deception. A young man with recurring attacks of heart trouble⁴, a man

The following cases are drawn mainly from the files of the committee appointed to investigate and review the tangible results of the healing campaign in Bangor, Maine, in September, 1925, and from my own observations while a member of that committee.

¹ A girl with tuberculosis of hip. The cast had once before been removed prematurely, and would soon have been removed by physician's orders in any event. The girl limps badly at present.

² A girl of 20. Had been for several years in school for deaf at Portland, but speaks, and reads lips, very poorly. Tested carefully by a member of the committee, she could not hear at all, and her speech was only partially intelligible.

³ A woman of 70. Had been badly crippled with rheumatism, and claimed to have been entirely blind in one eye. She described how her sight was instantaneously restored at the meeting. She was found to be now able-bodied and apparently had fair eyesight, though in need of glasses.

⁴ A young man, 25, who had endocarditis and myocarditis several years ago, with attacks recurring about twice a year since. Also a pleural condition which had necessitated tapping of the cavity three times. After last attack, in spring, he grew steadily weaker, and lost hope, till nearly bed-ridden. After meeting gained strength and courage, and went back to work. Lungs (and heart, apparently) remain the same.

with periodic granulation of the knee⁵, an old lady who has "fits" from time to time⁶, all assure one that at last they are cured completely because, forsooth, they have had no recurrence of the affliction since they were anointed and prayed for. Imaginary ailments, of course, disappear instantly. A woman proclaims loudly to her neighbor in the meeting, "I felt that goitre just sinking away, and see! it's gone! My husband never could see it, anyhow; but *I* knew it was there."⁷ And even the crowd at large is imposed upon: the dumb girl⁸ comes forward and mumbles aloud, a lame girl is carried across the stage, barely able to swing her shrunken limbs⁹, and the crowd accepts even these pitiful exhibitions as authentic miracles.

In such a soil of credulity rumors grow rank,—indeed, such wild and conflicting reports as grew out of the Bangor meetings have never before come within my ken. A crippled newsboy was healed, was back on his crutches, had been rebuked by the priest⁹, a tubercular girl was cured, was dead, was seen at church¹⁰—and so the stories ebbed and flowed, like waves upon the beach; but the tales of those who were disappointed were submerged and lost in the general cry of "Miracle", so that a presumption in favor of the extraordinary spread among the less intelligent all over the state, and even some of the educated clergy fell victims to it.

In addition to all of this, there is definite evidence of fraud on the part of those in charge of the healing campaign, and testimonials of the cure of goitre, cancer, paralysis, blindness, and total deafness give every evidence of forgery.¹¹

⁵ A man of middle age who had periodic granulation of knee joint, following a severe blow. Had worn bandage for three years, with no recurrence of symptoms. After being anointed he had removed bandage.

⁶ Elderly woman, with periodic attacks of vertigo and severe nausea. No attacks since the meetings.

⁷ Overheard at the meetings by Rev. W. L. Robison.

⁸ Reported by Mr. Norman S. Davis, at meeting of Nov. 18, 1925.

⁹ A common rumor on the streets about Sept. 15, 1925.

¹⁰ Reported by Rev. John S. Pendleton, who saw the girl at church.

¹¹ A paid advertisement of Sept. 18, 1925 carried fifteen testimonials, of which at least nine bore addresses unknown to the postal authorities, and only two had local addresses.

All of these elements—misinterpretation, self-deception, irresponsible rumor, and clear fraud—brought our investigating committee heartily to agree with the sentiment attributed to the Dean of St. Paul's, that "Only those who have tried to sift the evidence of a miraculous cure know the shifting and prevarication with which they are usually met"¹², and, one might well add, "the indignant resentment of any question whatever."

II. My second observation is that psychical factors played a large part in the impress which was made. There was, first, the hypnotic effect of the personality of the healer, a cheery, hearty woman in white, with complete self-assurance. This was reinforced by a large element of anticipation, fostered by large claims of past successes made from the platform by the healer herself, and by wide advertising of notable local "cures." To these were added a strong appeal to the patient's own volition and determination, by the demand made of many of the sufferers, after the anointing and prayer, that they declare themselves healed, and demonstrate the cure by throwing aside crutches or giving other appropriate proof.

The important part played by these psychic factors contributed greatly to the remarkable ease with which the delusion was deflated. An amusing illustration of their power was given by a woman¹³ accustomed to use a single crutch but able to get about to some extent without it who, after being anointed, went home and walked for a day or two without assistance. Then, her prejudice against the healer being raised by the interjection of the Ku Klux Klan issue, she took to her crutch once more. Asked about her "cure" she replied, "No, my lame leg didn't pain me a bit; but the other one ached all the time."

There were also some of the phenomena more specifically associated with abnormal psychical states. Many of those treated spoke of the feeling of exaltation which accompanied their experience. Some believed themselves healed while the exaltation

¹² As quoted by Dr. Edward S. Cowles, *Religion and Medicine in the Church*, New York, 1925, page 58.

¹³ A woman of middle age, with one shortened leg. Without a crutch she limps very badly.

lasted¹⁴. A few spoke of seeing a great flash of light. In particular one old woman³ who says she was nearly blind before, tells how the dazzling light broke upon her all at once with the restoration of the sight of her useless eye.

These phenomena are reminiscent of, and possibly conditioned by, some features of the Biblical narratives; but such psychical experiences are not unusual under similar circumstances.

III. My third observation is that there were some actual cures. In a group of fifty-seven test cases, one such was found¹⁵, a woman who suffered so greatly from lumbago that she could not bring herself to bend over, but who can now stoop to the floor with perfect ease. Other such cases came to our attention: a young man quite invalided by heart and pleural troubles who was restored to active work (though without any real improvement of his actual physical disabilities)⁴; an old woman almost completely crippled with rheumatism who is now doing her housework and knitting mittens⁵. These are veritable cures, and must be acknowledged as such, and others have been reported; but it should be carefully noted that in none of the cases which have yet come under our observation could the operation of supernatural causes be demonstrated. All real benefit that was received, so far as we have yet ascertained, has been due to the encouragement which the patient received and to his newly awakened determination to be well: there *were* cures, in some cases, but no miracles.

Finally, I should add the observation that the majority of those who received or sought healing were not closely connected with organized religion, but rather were folk of little knowledge and superficial experience in religion. That is to say, the whole delusion rested not on strong and intelligent religious experience, but upon a washed-out, second-hand faith which was little more than superstition.

¹⁴ For example, a young man with very poor vision returned from the meeting confident he could see much better. Two days later he stumbled over the curb stone and was quite badly injured.

¹⁵ An elderly woman who had several times been healed by faith. For some years she had not felt able to put on her own shoes, but was instantly healed at the meeting.

I may sum up these random observations in a single statement: there is no miracle recorded in the Biblical narratives which would not have received credence if reported to have been wrought by the healer. She did actually claim, as a matter of fact, that she had by prayer raised to life her dead sister—and the story was believed implicitly. But, so far as it has been possible to ascertain the facts, the number of cures wrought is disappointingly small—even tragically small—in comparison with the eager multitudes who sought healing.