

the sign of circumcision ; in the New Covenant the promise of Salvation, Sonship and the Gift of the Holy Spirit, was made first of all at the Cross, and is sealed to individuals by the outward sign of Baptism. In each case the essential faith is that which follows the outward sign, whereby the individual enters into the spiritual possibilities of which the sign spoke.

Just as under the Old Covenant, the promise was valid when made to children who, though "unconscious" at the time, had every possibility of being brought up "into faith", so now "the promise is to you, and to your children" (Acts ii. 39), and of those who come to Baptism there is required not a contemporary declaration of faith but "faith whereby they stedfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that Sacrament" (Church Catechism). That which the Sacrament seals to the child is the Promise of God ; that to which the Sacrament looks forward is a life of faith in which this promise will be inherited.

## Miraculous Healing: A Pathologist's Comments

BY A. P. WATERSON, M.D., M.R.C.P.

**C**LAIMS of miraculous cures are nothing new in the history of the Church, but the rising tide of them in the last few years calls for an enquiry into their validity, for they are often bold and sweeping. For example, a recent writer has stated, "Most of the miracles of the New Testament have been happening again in recent years where the words of the New Testament are being acted upon".<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is upon grounds of Scripture that many base their expectation of miraculous healing, as well as on grounds of Church history and of present-day experience. The arguments from Scripture hang upon surprisingly few verses, and do not take account of the Biblical teaching on God's overruling of sickness for spiritual good, nor of the Biblical view of miracles as unusual, extraordinary, events, whose greatest significance was their evidential value. The view of sickness, crystallized by Robins,<sup>2</sup> that, "God's will is for our health. That comes first and is fundamental. Everything turns on that cardinal fact," is scarcely a Scriptural one.

The evidence of Church history is not, as is often supposed, that miraculous healing persisted for the first three centuries, and then was allowed to lapse by neglect. On the contrary, as J. S. McEwen<sup>3</sup> has shown, the writers of this period (he quotes Justin Martyr, Irenæus, Tertullian and Origen) were already looking wistfully back to the miracles of Apostolic times. The evidence for the occurrence of miraculous healing, and of raising from the dead, after the end of the first century is very poor. In the fourth, and particularly the fifth and later, centuries accounts of such miracles became more frequent

rather than less, they became increasingly posthumous, increasingly exotic, and increasingly devoid of any spiritual significance. It may be that this turning to the magical was related to the decline in the spirituality of the Church in the fourth century, for, as Sir Clifford Allbutt put it, "When divine fervour is cooling the heart seeks warmth in the thrills of witchery".<sup>4</sup> However that may be, the experiences of the present-day are susceptible of more careful scrutiny and a more detailed and critical assessment. However, there is a confusion in nomenclature that must be cleared away first, namely the precise meaning of the words "healing" and "miracle".

The word "healing" is used intransitively of diseased or injured parts of the body returning to normal, completely or with scarring. It is also used transitively of the interference by doctors for the better in the course of an illness which might otherwise have been expected to have terminated less favourably. For example, the surgeon who removes an inflamed appendix, or the physician who successfully treats with penicillin a patient with streptococcal septicæmia, may justly claim to have "healed" the patient, because it is reasonable to suppose that the outcome would probably have been fatal in the first case, and almost certainly in the second, but for their interference. Confusion arises when the word is used in one of two other senses. First, it is used metaphorically and as an illustration. Because spiritual disorder in a person is in some ways analogous to ill-health of the body, spiritual restoration has been compared to physical healing. The spiritual re-orientation which may come in a time of physical illness may result in a fresh integration and "wholeness" of the patient's character, but this may be entirely independent of any physical improvement. Again, conversion to Christianity may result in a new and hitherto unknown unification of a person's desires and energies, but this is a psychological phenomenon, secondary to, and consequent upon, the spiritual event of conversion, and is not in any sense a miraculous "healing". It is true that a patient is one indivisible personality, but it is also true that someone may be in need independently either of physical aid, or of psychiatric advice or of spiritual counsel. To avoid confusion, "healing" will here be taken to mean the healing of physical illness in the sense used above, that is, the interference for the better in the course of an illness.

The word "miracle" is an overworked word to-day, in an age of startling technical achievement and of thirst for the sensational. It has been defined by E. L. Mascall<sup>5</sup> as "a striking interposition of divine power by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended or modified". At the present time, many cases are being reported in which cure is attributed to the direct intervention of God in a way which appears to defy natural laws. (Of course, all healing, using the word transitively or intransitively, comes from God in the sense that He is the "Author and Giver of all good things".) These cases are alleged to be similar to those which occurred in our Lord's day at His hands, and afterwards through the Apostles; if so, they are things to be marvelled at—"miracula" in the true sense.

There are four common misuses of the word "miracle" with

reference to sickness and health. (1) It is used for a recovery from an illness which is surprising, but none the less not in any sense beyond known natural law. (2) The striking therapeutic successes of some modern treatments have, as we say, "worked wonders," but these are in fact the outcome of an informed and intelligent manipulation of natural phenomena. (3) The miraculous in healing has been equated with the inexplicable. Sometimes, very rarely indeed, events occur which appear, if correctly reported, to be paradoxical. But this does not mark them as miraculous, unless we use the word in what Professor Grensted\* has called "that stupid sense of the word which identifies the miraculous with the unpredictable, arbitrary and irrational . . . Miracles of such a kind do not bear witness to the God of Christianity, but to a sheer and terrifying disorder at the heart of things. At the best they display a God Sultanic in character. . . ." (4) It has been suggested that the miraculous occurs when new and hitherto almost unknown laws are acted upon by man to release new and hitherto almost untapped sources of divine power, so that miraculous healing should become as regular an occurrence as television or the wireless is to-day, marvellous though these inventions would have seemed to our ancestors. But this conception robs the miraculous of two essentials; it puts God's power at man's beck and call, whereas the Biblical miracles are presented as manifestations of God's power as *He* wills. Moreover, it neglects the fact that the Biblical miracles of healing were events whose religious significance was, as Mascall puts it, "the claim that it is an *ad hoc* interposition of God's power in such a way as to supersede the ordinary course of nature".

Using "healing" and "miracle" in the senses defined, Christ's miracles of healing will be compared with those of the present-day healers. Christ's miracles are reported in the Gospels both as groups and as single isolated instances. Demon possession is clearly distinguished in the gospels from other illness (Mark i. 32-34) and will not be discussed here. Large numbers of patients with all kinds of diseases were brought to Him (Matt. iv. 23, 24), and He healed them all (Luke iv. 40). It appears that there was no kind of sickness which could not respond miraculously to His power, even the restoration of a severed part of the body (Luke xxii. 50, 51), and raising from the dead. In the individual case-reports the diseases concerned are for the most part not difficult to recognize with reasonable certainty, and they are surprisingly organic (as opposed to psychiatric or psychosomatic) in their character. They are such as would not be expected to respond to suggestion or similar psychotherapy; they must stand or fall as they are. Doubtless there were cases of true psychiatric disorder among the multitudes that were healed, but it is significant that the cases singled out for mention were ones with frank and indisputable physical manifestations (except in the cases of demon possession). A professor of surgery has commented on the healing miracles, ". . . What medical practitioner, even with all modern resources available, would be pleased to see in his consulting room one evening several blind people including one blind from infancy, a dumb epileptic, a woman with severe curvature of the spine, a man with old infantile paralysis causing wasting of one arm, two or three persons stone deaf,

a paralytic of thirty-eight years' standing, several lepers, and a couple of raving lunatics? Could a more unhopeful collection be found?'" Moreover, healing was practically instantaneous (except in the case of the blind man who saw "men as trees walking" for a short time (Mark viii. 22-26)), it was apparently complete, and it was in the absence of any effective therapy. Indeed, there was practically no effective therapy for any disease in those days. (The good Samaritan was probably at least as helpful, pouring in his wine and oil, and possibly less positively dangerous, than many professional medical men of his day.)

These are all medical facts about the healing miracles. Most striking of all is the fact that their uniqueness lies in their religious significance. They occurred through a Person and a group of persons unique in the history of the world. B. B. Warfield writes of "the inseparable connection of miracles with revelation, as its mark and credential; or, more narrowly, of the summing up of all revelation, finally, in Jesus Christ. Miracles do not appear on the page of Scripture vagrantly, here, there, and elsewhere indifferently, without assignable reason. They belong to revelation periods. . . ." They were frequent at the time of the Exodus, and again in the time of Elijah and Elisha. Christ's miracles are spoken of as fulfilling Messianic prophecy (Matt. viii. 17, quoting Isaiah liii. 4), and He referred to them Himself as attesting the validity of His Messiahship (Luke vii. 22, John ix. 3, x. 37, 38).

The marvels which are claimed to be instances of miraculous healing, from the fourth century to the present day, have some striking differences from the New Testament miracles. For example, compared with the numbers coming for healing, the cases of miraculous cure claimed are surprisingly few. The chairman of the Medical Committee of Lourdes stated in 1954 that the number of authenticated healings at Lourdes since its very first use is only forty-nine.<sup>8</sup> Commenting on these figures, Balint writes, "The reported cases belong roughly to these three classes: (a) psychosomatic illness; (b) slowly growing tumours; or (c) chronic incapacitating states. As is well known in medicine, these three types of illness may show sudden physical changes under normal medical treatment, or even spontaneously."<sup>9</sup>

The kinds of disease treated are, on the whole, those whose manifestations are subjective and internal, rather than those whose symptoms and signs are frankly objective and external. For example, reports of cures of patients with chronic abdominal complaints of rather uncertain diagnosis and with rather ill-defined nervous complaints abound, whereas the restoration of lost parts of the body is never, and the instantaneous healing of some obvious part of the body, rarely, reported. There seems to be a boundary between the type of case which responds to spiritual healing, and the type which does not, and in those cases where genuine benefit appears to have been gained, there seems to be a striking similarity to those cases which respond to suggestion in some form or other.

It is when individual cases are examined that the most difficulty

occurs. Professor B. B. Warfield, in his valuable and scholarly work on the subject, writes, "It seems to be the experience of every one who has made a serious attempt to sift the evidence for miraculous healing that this evidence melts away before his eyes".<sup>10</sup> When the committee appointed by the Lambeth Conference of 1920 published its report in 1924, the members stated their lack of conviction that they could find any cases of miraculous healing: "Our committee has so far found no evidence of any cases of healing which cannot be paralleled by similar cures wrought by psychotherapy without religion, and by instances of spontaneous healing which often occur even in the gravest cases in ordinary medical practice".<sup>11</sup>

To attempt to assess cases critically and intelligently, it is necessary to bring to bear upon them some fundamentals of modern medical knowledge. (1) *The natural history of disease.* The natural history of most diseases is a tendency to recovery, whatever is done. Many chronic conditions have relapses and remissions, irrespective of the treatment applied. Certainly, doctors probably gain as much credit for events *post hoc* as they do for those *propter hoc*. (2) *The effectiveness of modern therapy* for some diseases. Except in the last hundred years, and especially the last fifty, there have been comparatively very few effective treatments for the great majority of diseases. For some groups of diseases the position has changed strikingly since then, so that recoveries which a generation or two ago would have been deemed "miraculous" (in the loose sense) are now everyday occurrences. This does not imply the miraculous, in the strict sense, but simply the increased ability and knowledge of the medical profession. Many cases claimed by faith-healers as miraculous cures have in fact been in patients under orthodox treatment at the time. (3) *The power of suggestion.* In its mildest form this is what is known as "the bedside manner", while its most developed technique is hypnotism. There are many degrees in between. The accounts of miraculous healings are often subjective ones by the patient, emotionally charged, and exaggerating the severity of the symptoms before the "healing" and the relief obtained after it, in fact, such as give reason to suppose that the main force at work was suggestion. (4) *The uncertainty of exact diagnosis in many cases.* This applies especially to malignant disease, where certainty is impossible without a histological examination of part of the growth, and not always even then. The diagnosis is often accepted unquestioningly in case-reports, and often given in such vague terms (e.g., "anæmia," "severe nerve trouble") that it is impossible not only to form any clear conception of the underlying pathology, but even to be convinced that there was any organic disease present.

(5) *The uncertainty of prognosis.* It is rarely possible to be absolutely sure of the outcome of an illness, though there are many where it follows an expected course. Even cancer (using the term to include the classical forms of malignant disease) is now known not to be so uniformly fatal, even if untreated, as was formerly thought, and latent cancerous growths are discovered as incidental findings at post-mortem with increasing frequency when they are searched for carefully enough

by special techniques.<sup>12</sup> The spontaneous regression of even advanced malignant disease is not so rare an event as is generally supposed.<sup>13</sup> (6) *The difficulty of proving a causal relationship between treatment and cure.* In the realm of orthodox medicine, the difficulty of proving the effectiveness of a new remedy has to be experienced to be believed. The statistical pitfalls, the uncertainties of prognosis, and the difficulty of measuring and assessing improvement all combine to beggar any planned observations unless the most stringent controls are incorporated in the experiment, and a large number of patients studied. The only exception is in the case of a disease which is almost uniformly fatal, such as tuberculous meningitis before the advent of streptomycin; here, even one cure, or a small number, supplies adequate evidence that there has been a causal relationship between the procedure applied and the cure effected, because the course of events is so strikingly different from what would otherwise have been expected. In the same way, the very striking healing of the frankly organic illnesses in the New Testament miracles is good evidence that the healing was truly miraculous. The fact that large numbers of patients were so healed by Christ divides these miracles sharply from those claimed to-day, for the reports of present-day healers present only a handful of reports in which there is even a *prima facie* case for supposing that healing was miraculous. To be honestly critical and reserved over the cures reported is not to deny that God can, nor to deny that He ever does, so heal; it is merely to state that, on the evidence available, it appears that miraculous healing as it was seen in New Testament times is to-day a very rare phenomenon, indeed that this very rarity makes it uncertain that it ever occurs.

It has already been stated that it is no new thing in the Church to claim miraculous cures; nor is it to question them. In the *Contra Celsum* Origen is perplexed because what were accepted as miraculous cures were performed upon bad as well as on good men.<sup>14</sup> In the eighteenth century John Douglas, Bishop of Salisbury, published a book with the uncompromising title "*The Criterion; or rules by which the true miracles recorded in the New Testament are distinguished from the spurious miracles of pagans and papists*".<sup>15</sup> He pointed out, with examples, that from patristic times this kind of miracle had been posthumously imposed upon men, while those of Christ and the Apostles, including the miracle of the Resurrection, were mentioned at the time at which they occurred, and were promulgated in the face of hostile authorities who had no wish to believe them. He criticizes the recorders of medieval miracles as credulous and suggestible, and desirous of seeing miracles done. He suggests that the pretensions of such phenomena should be examined critically before their acceptance, and says, "Whenever natural causes sufficient to account for an event can be assigned, it would be folly and superstition to have recourse to supernatural ones". It is the impossibility of explaining away the New Testament miracles which makes them outstandingly different. A more colourful, if more sceptical, attack is that of Conyers Middleton, sometime librarian of Cambridge University. After some preliminary skirmishing he published in December, 1748,

*“ A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian church from the earliest ages through several successive centuries. By which it is shown that we have no sufficient reason to believe, upon the authority of the primitive fathers, that any such powers were continued to the church, after the days of the Apostles ”.*<sup>18</sup> Sometimes bitterly sarcastic, but always ruthlessly logical, he found in the claims of miraculous cures one of the few proper objects for his scepticism. Most important of all, he pointed out that cases of recovery ascribed to divine intervention could be paralleled by “ Knaves and Impostors, of all sects and nations ; by Heathens, Jews, and Heretics ”. He attributes most of the reported cases to the vagaries of the natural history of disease. “ Every man’s experience has taught him, that diseases thought fatal and desperate, are often surprisingly healed of themselves, by some secret and sudden effect of nature, impenetrable to the skill of man : but to ascribe this presently to a miracle, as weak and superstitious minds are apt to do, . . . is what neither sound reason, nor true religion will justify ”. Perhaps his outspoken words on faith healers themselves contain the key to much of the matter, for there are claims exactly similar in their content made by members of most, though not quite all, shades of Christian persuasion, reputable and not so reputable, and also by those who are frankly non-Christian, such as spiritualists and Christian Scientists, too. Such a spectrum of “ healers ” implies one or other, or both, of two explanations ; that the results are explicable along the lines detailed above, or that there is a common feature in many of them, namely the power of suggestion, in whatever religious or quasi-religious context it is applied.

It is tempting to suppose that the healing miracles of Apostolic times occurred because of the greater faith and spirituality of the Church at that time, and that a greater faith and spirituality in the Church to-day would see the restoration of miraculous healing as the norm rather than the exception. However, this view does not take account of the fact that the time of the incarnate life of Christ, and of the Apostles, was one unique in the world’s history, and a time when the miraculous might well be expected. The exact situation has never since been reproduced, though in lands where the gospel is making headway in the face of strong opposition, in virgin soil, a situation comparable with that in Apostolic times may be said to recur, and it is interesting, and possibly significant, that the most convincing modern reports of demon-possession have come from parts of China where such conditions obtained.

But the most convincing argument against the view that the failure to see miraculous healing is connected with a lack of spiritual power in the Church is that in all ages there have been great men of God, and that the ministry of these giants of faith has not been characterized by miraculous healings of disease. There have always been the Bunyans, the Wesleys and the David Livingstones, but their message has been one of spiritual redemption rather than of physical restoration. That very similar cures are claimed by those of most religious affiliations, or of none, raises suspicions that the present vogue for the miraculous healing of physical disease is a spurious and even magical

phenomenon. The mark of the Christian is not his capacity to reproduce the miracles of Christ, but his effectiveness in expressing, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the character of Christ. "What is the example of Christ that we are to follow? Is it that we should raise the dead? Is it that we should walk on the surface of the sea? Not at all; but that we should be meek and humble of heart, and should love not only our friends but also our enemies."<sup>17</sup>

Such a view of the significance of the healing miracles of the New Testament does not in any way minimize the special responsibility of the Church to those who are sick in body or mind, or both, nor does it question the power of the Christian gospel to cleanse and make whole the spirit and the personality. Most of all, it does not deny the sovereignty of God to allow affliction if He sees fit, nor the grace of God to sustain spiritually in the fiercest trials of faith which intractable pain, irreversible injury or incurable disease can allow, for the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is also the God of Job and of Paul.

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- <sup>6</sup> Grensted, L. W., *Psychology and God* (Bampton Lectures, 1930), p. 99.
- <sup>7</sup> A. Rendle Short, *The Bible and modern medicine* (1953), p. 103.
- <sup>8</sup> Dr. Leuret (Chairman of Medical Committee of Lourdes). Address at International Conference on Unorthodox Healings, 1954, quoted by Balint (9).
- <sup>9</sup> M. Balint, *International Journal of Psycho-analysis*, 36, 1-5 (1955).
- <sup>10</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Miracles: yesterday and to-day. True and false* (1954), p. 191 (reprint of *Counterfeit Miracles* (1918)).
- <sup>11</sup> *The Ministry of Healing* (S.P.C.K., 1924). Report of committee set up by Resolution 63 of Lambeth Conference, 1920.
- <sup>12</sup> Franks, L. M., *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, 15, 236-249 (1954).
- <sup>13</sup> Rohdenburg, G. L., *Journal of Cancer Research*, 3, 193 (1918).
- <sup>14</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 3, 25.
- <sup>15</sup> J. Douglas, *The Criterion, etc.* First published, 1752. New edition, London, 1807, p. 149.
- <sup>16</sup> Conyers Middleton, *A Free Inquiry, etc.*, 1748, pp. 79, 80.
- <sup>17</sup> Cæsarius of Arles. Quoted by B. B. Warfield (10), p. 66.

## Correspondence

Sir,

I am engaged in the preparation of a biography of the late Eric H. Liddell, the world-famous Scottish athlete and missionary, and write to ask if any of your readers who have material which might be of interest would be good enough to communicate with me. I am particularly anxious to get in touch with those on whom Liddell's personality and character told decisively, and with any who were with him in the internment camp in China in which he died.

I am, Sir,

Yours, etc.

Barnoak, Crieff, Perthshire.

D. P. THOMSON