Biblical Perspectives on Spiritual Warfare

Ancient myths die hard. They continue in disguise in popular culture long after they are rejected in orthodox religious thought. It is important, therefore, that we carefully examine our understanding of cosmic history.

One such story receiving considerable attention in North American Protestant churches today is "spiritual warfare." This coincides with the decline of the modern era with its faith in secular materialism and the emergence of the postmodern era with its emphasis on various types of "spirituality." It also coincides with a loss of confidence in human efforts to solve the world's problems and a widespread fear concerning the future.

Interest in spiritual matters must be both welcomed and tested. It must be welcomed because the church too often has bought into the worldview of a secular science that denies the reality of sin and spiritual realities. It must be tested because we are in danger of returning to the views of our pagan past.

This chapter first appeared in Mission Focus 20.3 (September 1992): 41–50. Used by permission.

1. The term myth is used in its technical, not popular, sense. In popular parlance, myth means fiction. In the social sciences, it means the big true story by which all other stories can be understood. In this sense, the Exodus in the Old Testament is both true history and the story by which Israel was to interpret their tribulations. Whenever they were in trouble, they reminded themselves that just as God had delivered them from Egypt, so he would deliver them from their present troubles.

2. Frank E. Peretti, This Present Darkness (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1986); idem, Piercing the Darkness (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989); C. Peter Wagner and F. Douglas Penney, Wrestling with Dark Angels: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Supernatural Forces in Spiritual Warfare (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1990); Timothy Warner, Spiritual Warfare: Victory over the Powers of This Dark World (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991).

As we will see, the pagan Indo-European myth of our ancestors is still alive in our North American fables, sports, movies, politics, and business. To what extent has our renewed interest in spiritual warfare been drawn from Indo-European mythology, and to what extent is it from the Bible?

The Indo-European Myth

Central to the Indo-European worldview is the myth of a cosmic spiritual war between good and evil. With the spread of the Indo-Europeans from inner-Asia to Europe, Mesopotamia, and South Asia, this myth in its various forms became the basis for the religions of Babylon, Sumer, Canaan, Greece, India, and Germany, to name a few. What worldview sustained this myth? Unfortunately, worldviews are largely implicit and difficult to examine. They are made up of the categories, values, and assumptions we use to examine our world, the cultural lenses that shape the way we see the world. Worldviews assure us that this is the way things really are.

A careful study of root myths and metaphors of Indo-European religions suggests the following worldview themes.

The Eternal Coexistence of Good and Evil

Fundamental to the Indo-European myth is the belief that good and evil are two independent entities in coexistence from eternity. In this dualism good and evil come from two different and opposing superhuman agencies. The classic example is found in ancient Persia in the battle between Ahura Mazda, the good divine being, and Ahriman, the equally eternal and powerful personification of evil. Human beings are nothing but puppets or pawns in their hands. As David Bosch points out, it is hardly coincidence that the game of chess was developed in Persia, and reflects the fundamental Indo-European view of reality. Omar Khayyam aptly expresses,

'Tis all a chequer-board of nights and days
Where destiny with men for pieces plays;


In this battle, the ultimate good is order and freedom, and to achieve this one side or the other must gain control. The ultimate evil is chaos and enslavement (see fig. 13.1).

The evil gods (Asag, Vritra, Tiamat, Ravana, and others) are autonomous beings in constant battle with the good gods (Ninurta, Indra, Marduk, Rama, and others) for the control of the world. Applied to the biblical narrative, this view sees Satan and the demons as autonomous beings. They may have been created by God in the beginning, but now they no longer depend on God for their continued existence. Creation was an act completed in the distant past.

Given this dualism, all reality is divided into two camps: God and Satan, angels and demons, good nations and evil ones, good humans and wicked ones. The good may be deceived or forced into doing bad things but, at heart, they are good. The evil have no redeeming qualities. They must by destroyed so that good may reign.

The line between the two camps is sharp. There are no shades between them. The result is a bounded-set view of reality (see chapter 6). Our dualism is seen in our American tendency to categorize in opposites: good-bad, big-small, sweet-sour, success-failure, and truth-falsehood. This duality colors our political views. Other nations are either developed or undeveloped.

Order and Control

In dualism the central issue is order. Two competing parties create a fundamental danger of chaos. Only when order is established can we...
speak of building a just society. Peace, love, righteousness, and harmonious relationships are secondary values.

To establish order, someone must be in control. Hierarchy, therefore, is essential to prevent the rise of chaos. In Indo-European mythology, the gods and demons live on one plane and rule over humans who live on another plane (fig. 13.1). The latter are hapless victims of cosmic affairs. The old adage says, “When the elephants fight, the mice are trampled.” Humans, therefore, live in fear of the spirits, both good and evil, for these control their destiny. Humans, for their part, seek to manipulate the gods to do their bidding. Magic and manipulation become the means.

The perennial question is: who is lord in the heavens? Lord here means one who controls the others and establishes order, by force if need be. It is the king who rules by might and commands the obedience of his vassals. Such a king should be strong, aloof, and proud.

**The Battle in the Cosmos**

The question of cosmic control is determined in Indo-European mythology by a battle between a good party and an evil one, in which power determines the outcome. The highest value is success. If good wins, righteousness, peace, and love can rule. If evil wins, then evil reigns. To win, therefore, is everything.

Morality in these power encounters is based on the notion of fairness and equal opportunity. To be “fair” the conflict must be between those thought to be more or less equal in might. In other words, the outcome of the battle must be uncertain. It is “unfair” to pit a seasoned gunner against a youngster, or the Los Angeles Rams against a high school football team. “Equal opportunity” means that both sides must be able to use the same means to gain victory. The good side cannot use evil means first, but if the evil side does, the good side can, too. In westerns, the sheriff cannot draw first, but when the outlaw does, the sheriff can gun him down without a trial. In Indo-European battles the good become like their enemies: they end up using violence, entering without warrants, lying, committing adultery, and killing without due process. All of this is justified in the name of victory. Righteousness and love reign only after victory is won.

In Indo-European mythology, land is important. Gods and humans battle for and rule different territories. Lesser spirits control the mountains, the rivers, the plains, and the seas. Earthly kings turn to their gods to give them victory in wars against their enemies and their enemies’ gods. If they lose, it is because their god is defeated. In this worldview, it is unthinkable that a god would let enemies win to bring judg-

ment on the people because they have sinned. Loyalty in battle is more important than righteousness.

Underlying the Indo-European worldview is the deep belief that relationships in the cosmos are based on competition, that competition is good, and that good will ultimately win. Success is proof that one is right. Consequently, warriors are the second class of society. They are considered noble and rank only below the priests.²

**Victory as the Goal**

After victory the gods can inaugurate a kingdom of justice and peace. Righteousness and relationships are secondary to order. Two dilemmas remain. First, if the gods use wicked means to win the battle, have they not become a party to evil? One answer, found in Hinduism and the New Age, is that good and evil are ultimately one, two sides of the same coin. Dualism is reduced to monism. A second answer, found in Zoroastranism, is that both coexist in an eternal, cosmic struggle. In both views no victory is final. Evil is never fully defeated; it rises again to challenge the good. Good must constantly be on guard against future attacks.

In the Indo-European worldview, the battle is the center of the story. When it is over, the story is done. The final words are “and they won (or were married) and lived happily ever after.” But there is no story worth telling about the “happily ever after.” The adventure and thrill is in the battle, and it is to this that we return again and again.

This fascination with battle is evident in our modern sports. People pay to see a football game. When the battle is over, everyone goes home and waits for the next battle. We see it in the reactions to the end of the Cold War. Francis Fukuyama, a policy planner in the U.S. State Department, perceives the end of the Cold War as “the end of history,” leaving the world with no master plot, only “centuries of boredom” stretching ahead like a superhighway to nowhere.¹⁰ We need an enemy to give meaning to our lives.

The Indo-European religions have died in the West, but as Walter Wink relates, the Indo-European cosmic myth dominates modern American thought.¹¹ It is the basis for our westerns, detective stories, murder mysteries, and science fiction. It is told in Superman, Spiderman, Super Chicken, Underdog, and most of our cartoons. It is recen-

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acted in "Star Wars" movies, dramatized in video games, and taught in the New Age movement. It is played out in football, basketball, and tennis. It is affirmed in theories of evolution and capitalism.

An Evaluation

The Scriptures speak of spiritual warfare (see Eph. 6:10–20; Rev. 19:19–20), but that warfare does not fit the Indo-European myth. First, the central issue in biblical warfare is not power but faithfulness. In the Old Testament both Israel’s victories and defeats are attributed to God. Their victories are due to their faithfulness to God and his laws; their defeats to God’s punishment when they forsake him (Judg. 4:1–2; 6:1; 10:7; 1 Sam. 28:17–19; 1 Kings 16:2–3; 20:28; 2 Kings 17:7–23). In no instance is their loss blamed on Yahweh’s defeat at the hands of other gods. In fact, the prophets declare that no other gods exist even to challenge him (Isa. 37:19; Jer. 2:11; 5:7). To put any other on the same level with God is itself idolatry (Exod. 20:4–5). The central issue is not power, but shalom. It is the relationship between people and God. This view of Israel’s defeat stands in sharp contrast to the views of the peoples around Israel (1 Kings 20:23). They attributed their defeat to the power of Yahweh, and their victories to the power of their gods.

Second, in contrast to the Indo-European myths in which humans are hapless victims of the cosmic battles of the gods, the Bible places the blame for suffering on humans themselves. They are sinners, co-conspirators with Satan and his host in rebellion against God. They turn from God. In contrast to Indo-European myths full of the activities of angels and demons, the Scriptures speak surprisingly little about them. The central story is the story of humans and their acts, and of God’s acts.

Third, the Scriptures are clear that the cross is the ultimate victory. This makes no sense in Indo-European terms. Christ should have taken up the challenge of his tormentors and come down from the cross with his angelic hosts. He should have defeated Satan when he met him in the desert. Scripture makes it clear that the cross itself was Satan’s defeat (1 Cor. 1:18–25). It was not an apparent loss saved at the last moment by the resurrection.

Fourth, righteousness and love are the ultimate end. It is in the fallen world that the lion eats the lamb (Isa. 11:6), and competition, not cooperation, works as a way of organizing society. This, however, is not God’s way, which is the way of caring for one another, loving one’s enemy, and seeking reconciliation and peace.

If this is not the biblical image of spiritual warfare, what is?

Biblical Images of Spiritual Warfare

The biblical images of spiritual realities differ radically from Indo-European mythology at several key points and give us a very different view of the cosmic spiritual warfare in which we are engaged.

Eternal Good, Contingent Evil

Good is eternal and evil is contingent. The Bible is clear: God and Satan, good and evil, are not eternal and coexistent. In the beginning was God, and God was good. Satan, sinners, and sin appear in creation. Moreover, God’s creation depends upon him for continued existence. God did not, at some point in the past, create a universe that exists independent of him. Satan and sinners, like all creation, are contingent on God’s sustaining power. Their very existence in their rebellion is testimony to God’s mercy and love (see fig. 13.2).

The central issue, therefore, is not one of brute power. God’s omnipotence is never questioned in Scripture. Even Satan and his hosts acknowledge this. The issue is holiness and evil, righteousness and sin. God is holy, light, love, life, and truth. Evil does not exist independently. It is the perversion of good. It is darkness, and deceitfulness, and the
source of death. It is broken relationships, idolatry and rebellion against God, alienation, and the worship of the self.

**Shalom and Holiness**

At the heart of the gospel's **shalom**. This begins with a right relationship with God involving worship, holiness, and obedience. Prayer in Indo-European thought is a means to control the gods; in biblical thought it is submission to God. In prayer we give God permission to use us and our resources to answer our prayer. It can, therefore, be costly.

Shalom also involves right relationships with humans. These are not characterized by hierarchy and exploitation, as in the Indo-European world, in which the strong lord it over the weak. Right relationships are expressed in love and care for one another as people fully created in the image of God, no matter how broken or flawed. Shalom means to be for the other, rather than for one's self and to commit one's self to the other, regardless of the other's response.

Shalom gives priority to building community over completing tasks. This demands that we give up our Western need to control people and situations around us. It means we accept corporate decision-making and accountability to the community.

How do love and shalom fit with such images as king, reign, and kingdom? In the Indo-European worldview these are antithetical. A king cannot show love to his enemy and destroy him. He cannot show intimacy with his subjects and rule them. In contrast, Scripture indicates that the ruler is to be a servant of the people, not to lord it over them (Luke 22:25-27; John 13:1-16), and all are to love, not hate, their enemies.

In the biblical worldview, not all chaos is evil. Evil chaos results in destruction and death. Creative chaos is the unformed potential from which spring creation and life. It is the unformed material out of which God created the universe (Gen. 1:2). It is the infant not yet grown to adulthood.

Creative chaos is inherent in genuine relationships. The birth of a child introduces turmoil into the routine of the home. Friendships and intimate marriages mean letting go of power and sharing decisions. Our Western need for order and control works against true communication and fellowship, because it is the passage through chaos that forms the basis for real communication and community.

The image of God as King is free of the Indo-European connotations of territorialism. Unlike the gods of the Canaanites, who are identified with a particular people, their lands, and their successes in battle, Jehovah is the God of the whole world and of all peoples. Moreover, he is responsible for the defeats of Israel as well as their victories. Israel's losses are not due to the triumphs of the gods of their enemies. The prophets make it clear that there is no real battle between the gods. Israel's defeats are due to the anger and discipline of their own God! He not only heals (Luke 4:40); he punishes (Acts 5:1-10; Rev. 19:11-21).

Where does power fit into this picture? Clearly, godly might in the Scriptures refers to the power of authority (Matt. 28:18) and rule (Rev. 19:11-16). Might does not make right, nor does battle make the victor legitimate. Rather, with legitimacy comes authority, and with authority comes power.

**The Battle in Human Hearts**

If the central message of the Bible is not that a cosmic struggle between God and Satan will determine who will rule, what is it about? The battle rages within the human heart, which God and Satan seek to win. Here two metaphors emerge. The first is the wayward son. The father lavishes his love on his son, but the son rebels and turns on his father. The father is not interested in defeating his son but in winning him back, so he reaches out in unconditional love. The son wants to provoke the father into hating him, and twists logic to justify his rebellion. But the father takes all the evil his son heaps on him and continues to love. Similarly, God is love, and loves no matter what his rebellious creations do (Matt. 5:44-45; Luke 6:35-36). If he does less, if he can be provoked to hate, he is less than the perfect God that he is.

It is clear that God continues to love sinful humans, but does that apply to Satan himself? Hard as this may seem, it is even harder to believe that God would hate his own creation. He hates Satan's rebellion and the destruction it has brought, but can he hate Satan, who is his own creation? If he does, he is no longer the perfect God of love. And if he defeats Satan by brute force apart from righteousness, he himself becomes evil.

What then is the nature of spiritual warfare in the Bible? Compared to Indo-European myths, there are few references to cosmic battles. The central story is about the battle for the spirits of human beings. In this, humans are not passive victims of battles fought on a cosmic plane. They are the central actors and the locus of the action. They are the rebels, and ever since the temptation of Adam, self-worship has been the basis of their idolatry.

Satan, too, is seeking their allegiance, but his methods are deceit and temptation. He and his demons possess those who yield themselves
fully to him. For these, salvation must include deliverance from demonic dominion. Jesus cast out the demons of those who came to him, but this was not his central ministry. He did this in passing as he went about preaching the kingdom. In the end it was not the demons that killed Jesus, but humans and their institutions—the Sanhedrin and the Roman government. Today, opposition on earth to God still centers in humans.

Our rebellion is both individual and corporate. As individuals we have turned against God. As groups we develop social and cultural systems that often keep people from coming to Christ. There is good in the cultures and societies humans create, but there is also evil. Individuals may want to follow God, but they become caught in the webs of family ties, religious structures, and sociocultural systems that prevent them from doing so on pain of persecution and death.

What about the battle in the heavens between God and Satan? Here a second metaphor found in Scripture is helpful, that of king and rebellious vassals or stewards (Matt. 21:33–43). At first the stewards are faithful, and their appointment gives them legitimate authority over part of the kingdom. Later they rebel and persecute the righteous. In Indo-European mythology the king must defeat the rebels by might and destroy them. In biblical cosmology the king must first seek reconciliation and demonstrate that the stewards are unrepentant or he can be accused of being selfish and arbitrary. He sends servants, who are mistreated. He sends his son, who is tried by the vassals’ court, found guilty, and punished by death. The case is appealed to the supreme court in heaven. There the judgment of the lower court is found to be unjust, so the verdict is overturned. Moreover, the court itself is found to be evil, so it is removed from power and sentenced to punishment. The central issue, then, is not one of power, but of legitimacy.

Given this imagery it is clear why the cross, not the resurrection, is the supreme victory, for there Satan and his supporters are shown to be evil. In the resurrection God overturns the judgment of the Jewish and Roman courts and frees the innocent victim. When the case was overturned, Satan had no more legitimate authority in heaven or on earth. He was therefore cast out.

The focus of the gospel is not battle but reconciliation. God judges those who reject him but reaches out to his enemies in love. He rejoices, not in their defeat, but in their return. His justice and love cannot be separated as they are in Indo-European lore.


God gives us the power to resist (1 Cor. 10:13). This does not mean that new converts may not be oppressed by Satan. The oppressed need to be freed by ministries of deliverance.

Third, Satan and his hosts can and do demonize people, but those with a demonic presence are to be pitied more than feared. The church needs teams of pastors, doctors, psychologists, and those with the gift of exorcism to minister to them. The real danger is found in people who coolly and rationally reject Christ and his rule in their lives, lead others astray (Eph. 4:14; 5:6; 2 Thess. 2:3), and build human societies and cultures that oppress people and keep them from coming to Christ. Idolatry, self-absorption, and spirit possession, is still at the heart of human rebellion.

Fourth, our focus as Christians should be on love, reconciliation, peace, and justice. If we focus too strongly on a war metaphor we are in danger of applying it in our relationship to the world and to our brothers and sisters in the faith. Satan likes nothing better than to have us fight among ourselves or to feel superior to non-Christians.

Fifth, the supreme event in spiritual warfare is the cross. There Christ died, even though he had but to utter one command and ten thousands of angels would have come to his rescue (Matt. 26:53). If our understanding of spiritual warfare does not make sense of the cross, it is wrong.

Sixth, we must avoid two extremes: a denial of the reality of Satan and the spiritual battle within and around us in which we are engaged and an undue fascination with, and fear of, Satan and his hosts. Our central focus is on Christ, not on Satan. We should see God's angels at work more than we see demons. Our message is one of victory, hope, joy, and freedom, for we have the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome evil. The cosmic battle is over. We are messengers to declare to the world that Christ is indeed the Lord of everything in the heavens and on earth. All authority has already been given to him (Matt. 28:18).

Our hidden myths profoundly affect the way we live our everyday lives: how we treat our spouses, organize our society, and fight our wars. We underestimate the extent to which enemies, battles, competition, self-interest, and greed are essential to our North American understanding of reality. We ignore the fact that these values have their roots in ancient Indo-European beliefs and form the dominant religion of our society.

Our conversion from our pagan past is not yet complete. We need to read the gospel again, this time with an awareness of our own worldview and how it shapes our interpretation of the Scriptures. In particular, we need to test current teachings about cosmic spiritual warfare to see whether they fit biblical teachings or reinforce a pagan religious worldview. Too often they seem to reflect the fascination with battle that dominates our society and not the love of holiness and shalom that fills the gospel. If we are not careful, we may become more involved in spiritual warfare and live less holy lives.
Healing and the Kingdom

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in miraculous experiences in the church. The Pentecostals emphasize tongues and prophecies as proofs of God's presence among his people. The charismatics look for such evidences in ecstatic experiences. Now, in many churches, on television, and in conferences, the focus has shifted to healing, exorcisms, and "words of knowledge."

What should our response be to this renewed interest in miracles? Norman Cohn observes that the issues involved are not new.\(^1\) Periodically in the life of the church leaders have called for miraculous demonstrations of God's power as signs of his presence among his people. St. Gregory, living in the sixth century, described in detail a preacher from Bourges who healed the sick and gathered a large following. A century and a half later, St. Boniface described another itinerant preacher, Aldebert, who claimed to perform miraculous cures and attracted large audiences. Other miracle-workers who followed claimed that the kingdom of God had come in its fullness for those who believed. The results of their ministries were mixed: sometimes the church experienced renewal, but often it was led astray and left in disarray and division. The same is true of revival movements that focused on current problems and miraculous solutions.

Today we hear many prophets claim new revelations and special relationships with God. We need to understand the times and to heed John's exhortation to test the messages against Scripture as it is interpreted within the community of believers.


Understanding the Times: The Rise of the Modern Worldview

The renewed interest in miracles in the Western church is due in large measure to changes taking place in the foundations of our ways of thinking, our Western worldview. Underlying every culture are basic assumptions about the nature of things. Someone who questions worldview assumptions is seen, not as wrong, but as foolish. For example, in the West if we were to argue that freedom is not inherently good for a society, people would not take us seriously. These assumptions are the lenses through which we view the world.

Currently the Western world is undergoing a radical change in its worldview. The old foundations that provided the basis for Western thought for centuries are crumbling, and no one set of new foundations has replaced them. In such times of uncertainty and fear, prophets often emerge, proclaiming new worldviews that they promise will guide people to a better life. There are a number of such prophets today, both in science and religion. Within this flux we must understand the movements of our day.

The modern worldview that has served the West for the past two centuries was deeply influenced by both the Reformation and the Renaissance. During the Middle Ages, the church regarded the physical world as essentially evil, a place in which Christians suffered on their way to heaven. Consequently, little emphasis was placed on the study of this world or on improving the conditions of life. The truly religious were expected to spend their time in worship, meditation, and prayer. Most common folk, however, were not primarily interested in salvation. They were concerned with the problems of their everyday lives: sickness, plagues, famine, wars, and uncertainty. To deal with these, many turned to Mary and the saints as intermediaries in the church, and to diviners, witch doctors, medicine men, and other practitioners from their pre-Christian past. Others, particularly those without social roots in stable communities, flocked to faith healers who promised them health and success.²

The Reformers rejected this wedding of animism and Christianity and stressed the active presence of God in the lives of people here and now.³ They preached a strong theology of providence—of God as Lord not only of cosmic history but also of human history and of personal biography.

However, the Renaissance distorted the Reformation worldview by reintroducing a Neoplatonic dualism into Western thought. Instead of the biblical worldview, in which the central distinction is between God the Creator and his creation, the Neoplatonic worldview drew a sharp line between spirit and matter (see fig. 14.1). God, angels, and demons were put together in the world of spiritual beings. Humans, animals, plants, and matter were seen as nature.

Modern Dualism

This shift at the worldview level led to a sharp line of distinction between the supernatural and the natural. The former has to do with otherworldly concerns, such as God, Satan, heaven, hell, sin, salvation, prayer, and miracles. Nature—the world of matter, space, and time—was increasingly seen as an autonomous realm operating according to natural laws that could be understood by scientists and used to solve human problems on this earth.

Scientists, working within a Christian worldview, at first saw God as the ultimate source and sustainer of the universe, but as science ex-

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2. Ibid., 281–86.
plained more and more in terms of natural law, many scientists believed they had no need for God to account for what they observed. The two worlds became divorced from each other and met only at creation, when God made matter and set the laws of nature in motion; and in miracles, when God intervened in nature and overrode natural laws. This had a powerful secularizing effect on Western thought.

By the twentieth century, there was little room for God in the Western worldview. The origins of the universe had been pushed back to a remote time, and scientists had other explanations for much that had been thought to be miraculous. God was needed only to account for what was unknown, and there was a widespread belief that, given time, science would be able to explain what was temporarily inexplicable.

Modern Dualism and Christianity

The modern Neoplatonic dualism left many Western Christians with a spiritual schizophrenia. They believed in God and the cosmic history of creation-fall-redemption-final judgment. This provided them with ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Yet they lived in an ordinary world explained in naturalistic terms, in which there was little room for God. They drove cars, used electricity, and ingested medicines—all products of scientific understandings that reinforced a scientific way of thinking.

This internal tension was increased when Christians read the Bible. They found God at work in human history with no sharp distinction made between natural and supernatural phenomena. The biblical worldview did not fit with modern secular explanations that denied spiritual realities, particularly in everyday experiences.

The consequences of this modern dualism were destructive in the church. Liberal theologians sought to reduce the tension by explaining the miracles of the Bible totally in naturalistic terms. Conservative theologians affirmed the reality of miracles but often accepted a naturalistic view of the world. Many of them drew a line between evangelism and the “social gospel,” thereby reinforcing the dualism that had led to the secularization of the West. For them, evangelism had to do with the supernatural salvation of the soul. The social gospel involved ministry to human bodily needs, such as food, medicine, and education. This they dismissed as of secondary importance.

The Deification of the Self

A second consequence of the modern worldview was the placing of humans at the top of nature. With God out of the picture, humans became the gods of the earth. During the Renaissance, Machiavelli took the next logical step and called people to forget about salvation, which by his day had lost much of its clarity and urgency. Rather, he said, they should focus on enjoying life here on earth, which is real and immediate. Personal health, comfort, and prosperity became the central goals of Western culture, and science was seen as the means to achieve them.

Left alone, however, modern humans faced a crisis of meaning. Now they were gods, but what kind of gods were they? Mechanistic science enabled humans to control nature, but it also gave them the power to destroy nature through violence, nuclear holocausts, chemical pollution, and deforestation. The same science, applied to humans themselves, saw them as animals ruled by needs and irrational drives (Freudian psychology), as stimulus-response machines (behavioral psychology), or as robots programmed by their societies and cultures (sociology and anthropology). God was gone, but so was the human soul. There was no real meaning left in human life.

To recover a sense of meaning, Western philosophers coined the term self to replace the concept of soul. It was assumed that people are autonomous selves and that, because they are now the gods, their individual well-being is the highest good. This view of humans as independent, self-reliant selves was a radical shift from the biblical and medieval view of them as created in the image of God and dependent upon God at every moment for their existence and meaning.

Replacing soul with self, however, did not solve the problem. The question now arose, what is this self? Some, such as Locke and Descartes, believed it to be reason. Humans are different from animals because they think. Using reason they can create a happy, peaceful, and meaningful world. Others, such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, disagreed. They believed that what makes humans different from animals, and their lives meaningful, is the ability to feel—to envision better worlds and to create them. Humans are culture builders. They are mortal beings who find meaning in realizing their dreams about themselves. Both groups, however, agreed on one thing: Meaning is to be found in self-fulfillment. In the good life here and now. The existential present, not eternity, is of primary importance.

The focus on the self here and now became the dominant theme in Western society during the last decade of the nineteenth century. The traditional Protestant values of salvation, morality, hard work, saving and sacrifice, civic responsibility, and self-denial for the good of others were replaced by a new set of values: personal realization, health, material comfort, immediate gratification, and periodic leisure. These, it

was believed, could be achieved through buying material goods (largely on credit) and accumulating wealth. The gospel of self-indulgence was preached by a host of advertisers. Marlboro cigarettes freed us from the drudgery of city life and put us out in Wyoming, with its clean air, stars, and the thrill of the range. Coke, we were told, was "the real thing."

This focus on the self was reinforced by Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, Carl Rogers, and other key figures in the fledgling field of humanistic psychology. They sought to restore human dignity by offering a psychology that glorified the self.

The result of this shift in the modern worldview was an almost obsessive concern with psychic and physical health. Life owed us comfort, health, happiness, success, prosperity, and intense, ecstatic experiences. Failure, loss of self-worth, and boredom, rather than sin, became the implacable enemies. Therapy, consumption, and miraculous cures were the means of salvation. A new Western religion emerged to offer us meaning based on self-realization, not forgiveness of personal sins and reconciliation with God and others. Self had become god and self-fulfillment our salvation. Personal biography replaced cosmic history as the framework on which human significance was to be found. The only story most North Americans felt a part of was their own.

The new gospel had a strong influence on Protestant Christianity, particularly the liberal wing. G. Stanley Hall asserted that the kingdom of God exalted "man here and now." Harry Emerson Fosdick and Norman Vincent Peale provided religious sanctions for the emerging value system. The starting point of Christianity, Fosdick claimed, was not an otherworldly faith, but a faith in human personality: "Not an outward temple, but the inward shrine of man's personality, with all its possibilities and powers... is... infinitely sacred."

Bruce Barton interpreted Jesus in the ideals of abundant vitality and intense experience. Barton's Jesus personified personal magnetism, vibrant health, and outdoor living. He was no weak Lamb of God. Women adored him, and he was the most popular dinner guest in Jeru-

7. Bloom, Closing.
8. Granville Stanley Hall, Jesus, the Christ, in the Light of Psychology (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1917).

salem. "He did not come to establish a theology but to lead a life," Barton wrote. "Living more healthfully than any of his contemporaries, he spread health wherever he went... He offered righteousness as the path to a happier, more satisfying way of living."11 Health was no longer seen, along with sickness and suffering, as part of the human condition within God's greater plan of salvation or as a means by which God works out his purposes. It had become an end in itself, cloaked with religious value, something humans could and should strive to achieve.

This emphasis on self and the present has led to a North American individualism and pragmatism that emphasizes short-term, personal problem-solving, rather than ultimate meaning and truth. Self-realization, in one form or another, has become the dominant religion of the West.

**Individualism and the Church**

The effects of self-centeredness on the Western church have been profound. Salvation increasingly has become a personal matter between the self and God that has little to do with the formation of a new community in Christ. Many churches have become little more than religious clubs, organized on the basis of voluntary association and common interests. The relationship between members is no longer seen as a sacrament (ordained of God) or covenant (commitment to a group) but as a contract (based on personal need for self-fulfillment). It should not surprise us, therefore, that Christians often do not find a congregation to be a true community and drift from church to church.

This deflation of self has made inroads into the church. We hear the good news that we can have health, wealth, and prosperity here and now, and receive a salvation in the life to come—without suffering, persecution, a cross, or a sense of sin. An example of this comes from Gene Ewing, in his introduction to his book If You Want Money, a Home in Heaven, Health and Happiness, Based on the Holy Bible, Do These Things. Ewing writes, "This book is designed to teach you about the power that you have within you which can lift you up from the midst of sickness, feeling down, failure, poverty and frustration, and set you on the exciting road to health, happiness, abundance and security. I have seen miraculous transformations take place in men and women from all walks of life when they begin releasing the power of faith that is within them and

sowing faith seeds." Titles of the first four chapters are: "You Can Have the Desires of Your Heart"; "God Wants You to Have Plenty of Money"; "God Wants to Heal You Everywhere You Hurt"; and "God Will Get You That Good Job You Desire."

This is an extreme statement of the health and prosperity gospel, but it illustrates the fundamental assumptions of this theology, which is increasingly heard in the media and in churches.

The Collapse of the Modern Worldview

Despite the physical well-being made possible by science, there is a growing doubt that this alone makes sense out of life or that science is the savior people once believed it would be. Even in the scientific world, many are beginning to reject the Neoplatonic dualism that divorces spiritual from material realities and ultimate concerns from those of this life. There are calls for a postmodern worldview characterized by some type of holism that integrates humans and the world and takes spiritual needs seriously. But what shape should it take? A number of worldviews compete for the postmodern mind.

The Return of Animism

Some leaders promote a return to the animistic beliefs that characterized much of the world before the rise of science—a world in which most things that happen are brought about, whimsically and arbitrarily, by spirits, ancestors, ghosts, magic, witchcraft, and the stars. It is a world in which God is distant and in which humans are at the mercy of good and evil powers and must defend themselves by prayers and chants, charms, medicines, and incantations. Power, not truth, is the central human concern in this worldview.

Such beliefs, suppressed during the reign of science, had never fully left the Western mind. Below the level of orthodox Christianity, an assortment of folk religious beliefs persisted, handed down by word of mouth, despite the opposition of church leaders and the ridicule of scientists. Samples of this folk religion can be seen in the tabloid publications sold in supermarkets and in the stories of ghosts, witchcraft, evil eye curses, and fulfilled prophecies. Such printed or oral stories titillate the imagination when passed along as gossip.

This resurgence of interest in the animistic worldview extends into mainstream North America. The Saturday morning children’s cartoons are full of super men, witches, little people of various sorts, magic, curses, and transformations. From movies to TV “sitcoms,” plot lines commonly work in exorcisms, black magic, spirits, and resurrections. Similar themes appear in such games as “Dungeons and Dragons” and in rock music. These ideas may be presented as fiction, satire, humor, or horror, but to those without a clear conceptual framework by which to test reality, the very presence of these ideas opens the door to the acceptance of their reality.

Most disturbing is the resurgence of serious pagan and occult practices in the West. As the Christian belief that humans are created in the image of God fades from Western thought, there has been a revival of pre-Christian paganism that puts humans in the same category with other natural phenomena. All beings exist at the mercy of capricious, invisible spirits and forces. The only human defense is to gain power over these spirits and forces by rituals and magic. Fertility rites, white witchcraft, divination, palmistry, fortune-telling, and astrology are gaining credibility and acceptance in cities. Many bookshops now have sections set aside for the occult.

At the center of animism is the shaman, the religious practitioner who is a master of ecstasy, healing, prophecy, and dealing with the spirit world. The shaman seeks power through a personal encounter with a spirit. Through trances, in which the shaman visualizes hidden realities and uses guided imagery, he or she transforms these realities with invisible personalized energy. The shaman performs miraculous cures and predicts future events.

This resurgence of animistic thinking also has influenced some in the church. The earlier denial of Satan and demons by some Christians has been replaced by teachings that evil spirits and spirit possessions account for much of what happens to Christians and non-Christians alike. The indirect source of many of these teachings is Kabala, the syncretistic Jewish folk religion that arose during the exile in Babylonia.

There is a two-fold danger in this return to an animistic worldview. First, it assigns too much power and authority to unseen spirits and forces in this world and implicitly denies the power and presence of God in everyday affairs, particularly in the lives of Christians. Humans must live in constant fear of capricious beings. However, when compared to

pagan mythologies, such as the Babylonian creation myths, the Scriptures are remarkably secular. They speak of a divinely ordained and maintained natural order. They affirm the reality of angels and demons but deny that humans are puppets of capricious supernatural whims. The real focus of the Bible is the story of humans and their response to God. Moreover, in the end, it was normal human beings and their religious systems that crucified Christ, not the demon-possessed. The universal testimony of animists who have responded to the gospel is that Christ has delivered them from their fear of demons.

Second, the animistic worldview rejects the insights of science. While modern scientists often reject God, science itself emerged within the context of a Christian worldview. Many early scientists were Christians seeking to understand the order God placed in his creation (Gen. 1:1–2:4). To deny this order is to deny that the world and its history have meaning.

Birth of the New Age Movement

A second response to the collapse of Greek dualism in Western thought is the rise of the new age movement. This is a collection of cults and teachings such as extra-sensory perception (ESP), transcendental meditation, Church of Religious Science, Hari Krishna and other neo-Hindu religions, the new physics, New Age politics, and New Age versions of Christianity. Among its prophets are Shirley MacLaine, John Denver, Teilhard de Chardin, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Fritjof Capra, and Carlos Castaneda.

As diverse as these people and movements are, underlying them all is a convergence of teachings rooted in Eastern mysticism. First, they affirm that “all is one.” Ultimately, there is no difference between spirit and matter, God and creation, good and evil, and one person and another. All belong to one interrelated, interdependent, and interpenetrating reality that has no boundaries and no ultimate divisions. This is radically at odds with a Christian view of reality that affirms the difference

16. The term demon possession is used in its popular sense. Some argue that we should use the term demonized to avoid the idea that Christians can be inhabited by evil spirits. We must then also get rid of the term exorcism, which carries the same idea. There is a danger in limiting demon possession or demonized to people who show aberrant behavior, speak in strange voices, and manifest extraordinary power. They are less dangerous to the church than normal, rational persons who are vehemently set against Christ. They, too, are “demonized,” just as Christians in everyday life can be “Christ-possessed,” and “filled with the Holy Spirit,” even though they manifest no extraordinary behavior.


between God and his creation, between sin and righteousness, and between facts and figments of human imagination.

Second, New Age teachers affirm that all is God. This is a short step from declaring that all is one. If all is God, then God is no longer a person in relationship to other beings and things. God is an impersonal energy, force, or consciousness—an “it.” This, of course, denies the personal nature of God as Creator and Lord.

A third unified New Age teaching is that we are gods. If God is all and all is God, then we too are part of divinity. We are not sinners in need of salvation; we are ignorant of our true selves and need enlightenment. We must discover that we ourselves are God by experiencing a new consciousness of cosmic reality. Self and self-realization become the measure and goal of religious experience. Self-realization can be achieved by exercising the hidden powers within us, the same powers that underlie the universe. Gone are the biblical teachings of sin and salvation; of love, reconciliation, fellowship, and self-sacrifice; and of worship and submission to God.

A fourth belief shared by New Age movements is that reality is governed by spiritual forces we can control once we are enlightened. Reality, therefore, is not governed by God, nor by natural forces he has created. We control our own destiny. By imaging, mind control, and faith we can make things happen. But we must experience the consciousness that enables us to see things as they really are. This altered state of consciousness can be reached through transcendental meditation, chanting, dancing, yoga, self-hypnotism, internal visualization, biofeedback, or even sexual intercourse. Only then will we be freed from the tyranny of Western rationalism and materialism.

A fifth New Age affirmation is that all religions are one and all lead to the truth. Jesus, Buddha, Lao-Tse, Krishna, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and others are enlightened gurus who can lead us to experience our oneness with each other and with the universe. Christ is not the only way, and there is no place for evangelism. Salvation lies within each of us.

Central to New Age teaching is the promise of holistic health. If the mind can control reality, there is no need for anyone to be sick, poor, or unsuccessful. The solution to our problems lies within us, in our minds, in our faith. New Age practitioners claim to move beyond the sickness to treat the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—by meditation, visualization, biofeedback, psychic healing, transpersonal psychology, and guidance from a “spirit guide,” and often folk healers. Death itself is viewed as a transition to another state of consciousness.

19. Grothus, Unmasking, 57–70.
A Theology of God's Work in Our Everyday Lives

What alternative do we as Christians have to the worldviews offered by consumerism, anism, and New Age theology, all of which deify the self? What criteria do we use to test the current emphasis on healing and exorcism and similar movements, so as not to become captive to the spirit of our times? Such captivity has happened to Christians so often in the past. It is important that Christianity stand in prophetic critique of the times in which we live, that we not allow our faith to become just another version of the West's preoccupation with success, health, and the present. To guard against this we must formulate clear theological guidelines rooted in Scripture. To chart a course through the turbulent seas of our times we need a theology of healing, exorcism, provision, and guidance. Such a theology, dealing with God's work in our daily lives, must be part of our wider theological understandings of God, creation, sin, the cross, judgment, and redemption. Furthermore, in such a theology we must reject the old dualism that confines God's work to otherworldly concerns and leaves him a place for only an occasional miracle in our everyday lives. What theological guidelines can help us discover again how God wants to work in our personal lives?

A Trinitarian Theology

A theology of God's work in human affairs must begin with an understanding of God himself—as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see fig. 14.2). Often new movements in the church focus their attention on one person in the Godhead and lose sight of the work of the others.

A trinitarian theology takes into account the providence of the Father. Throughout the Scriptures it is clear that God is sovereign over theubb and flow of history. From creation to final judgment, God is in control. This does not deny humans their freedom to make choices. It does, however, mean that God directs the overall course of history according to his purposes. Moreover, the Scriptures show a God who is concerned about the life of each person, including life's smallest details.

awareness of God's superintending presence faded, and the doctrine of providence became largely a theological postulate.

The most significant weakness in many of the movements now stressing health and wealth for all Christians is their failure to appreciate the sovereignty of God and its implications. There is little recognition that it may be God's will for a Christian to be sick or suffer or that God can use these for their good. They do not recognize that illnesses are often the body's warning to stop living an unhealthy lifestyle. There is little acknowledgment that Christians and non-Christians share in the common lot of fallen humanity, which includes earthquakes, famines, plagues, and ordinary human sickness. This does not mean that God is uninterested in the lot of Christians. It does mean that he loves both the saved and the lost and that he is working out his purposes within a fallen world and will one day deliver his people from it.

Today we need to recover the doctrine of providence as a living reality, for it is the encompassing frame within which we must understand all human experiences. God is the God of history—of Russia, China, and India as well as of North America and Europe. And God is the God of our lives: of sickness, pain, failure, oppression, and death, as well as of healing, joy, and success. He uses all these for our ultimate good (Rom. 8:28). In times of difficulty we may doubt God's providence. We do not always feel his hand in ours. But later, in retrospect, we realize that God was closest to us during times of trial.

A trinitarian theology takes into account the presence of the Son. Within this bigger frame we need to experience the presence of the living Christ with us. As noted above, we live in a world that suffers the consequences of the fall. Plagues, famines, wars, suffering, and death are part of human experience (Rom. 8:19-23). As Christians in a fallen world, we expect hardships, poverty, and persecution (1 Cor. 4:10-13; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12-18). Moreover, we are called to take up our cross and follow Christ (Matt. 10:38-39; 16:24-26). The good news is that in all of these experiences Christ is with us (Matt. 28:20).

This presence first manifests itself in our salvation. It was Christ whose death and resurrection made salvation possible. That salvation is at work in us today; Christ has saved us (2 Tim. 1:9), and is saving us from the power and judgment of sin (Heb. 13:21).

This presence invisibly at work among us is the Master who once walked the lanes of Galilee. Nothing can separate us from his love and care (Rom. 8:35-39). The Father answers our prayers because Christ pleads for us (Heb. 7:25). And Christ provides us with the grace and strength to live with "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities" (2 Cor. 12:10).

Healing and the Kingdom

This presence is seen in the reality of the church, which is Christ's body. As John Bright points out, "It is a pitiful and helpless minority composed, for the most part, of people of no account (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-28), the scoffing and disbelieved." Nevertheless, it has turned the world upside-down.

Finally, this presence empowers the hope of our future resurrection—a hope founded on the resurrection of Christ and promised to us who believe (1 Corinthians 15).

This was the message of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, with their emphasis on living moment by moment in fellowship and obedience to Christ. Later, when the Reformation doctrine of providence was reduced to scholastic debates, it became the message of the Pietists. Today it is the message of the East African revival, whose emphasis on "living in the light" has sustained the church in Uganda through some of the most terrible persecutions in history. It is a message we must recover.

A trinitarian theology takes into account the power of the Spirit. The Pentecostals and charismatics remind us that, within the care of the Father and the presence of Christ, we need to experience the power of the Holy Spirit. This power was demonstrated in the life of Christ and in the early church through signs and wonders. But, as Paul, Peter, John, and the other writers of the New Testament point out in their theological reflections, such demonstrations are secondary to the power of the Holy Spirit within humans as the Spirit leads them to salvation and to a victorious life in Christ.

First, the power of the Holy Spirit is at work to convict people of their sins and woo them to faith in Christ. Without the Spirit there can be no faith. Yet we receive the Spirit when we respond in faith to the gospel. To be more specific than this only leads to endless quibbling about the order of Christian experience. J. Denney notes,

The faith which abandons itself to Christ is at the same time a receiving of the Spirit of Christ. . . . There are not two things here but one, though it can be represented in the two relations which the words faith and Spirit suggest. Where human responsibility is to be emphasized, it is naturally faith which is put to the front (Gal. 3:2); where the gracious help of God is the main point, prominence is given to the Spirit.

Not only does the Holy Spirit play an important role in bringing us to

salvation, but he also gives us the assurance of that salvation (Rom. 8:16; 1 John 3:24).

Second, the Holy Spirit leads us into the truth (John 16:13). Without his ongoing work in us, we cannot comprehend the mysteries of the gospel. Before his departure, Jesus promised to send to his followers the Spirit of Truth (John 14:16–19; 16:13–15). He also referred to the Spirit as the Counselor who would convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment (John 15:26; 16:7–8).

Third, the Spirit transforms our lives (2 Cor. 3:18). He enables us to have victory over sin (Eph. 6:17). He helps us in our weaknesses (Rom. 8:26). He sensitizes our consciences (Rom. 9:1). He sanctifies us and makes us holy (1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Peter 1:2). He strengthens us and comes to our aid in moments of crisis (Eph. 3:16; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12). And the Spirit will resurrect our mortal bodies from death just as he raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 8:11).

Fourth, the power of the Holy Spirit is manifest in the preaching and persuasive power of the gospel. Christ himself was anointed by the Spirit to preach the Good News (Luke 4:18–19). Paul repeatedly connects pneuma (Spirit) and dynamis (power) in contexts dealing with the missionary preaching of the apostles. He writes, "For our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction... For you received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:5–6 RSV).

There is a danger here of equating "power" with "miracles." The power of the Holy Spirit is manifest in the gospel itself, which is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16), and in the cross, which is foolishness to the world (1 Cor. 1:18). Paul reminds us that "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom. 10:17 RSV).

A trinitarian theology takes into account the whole work of God. The activities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three separate works. They are the work of one God. We are often most aware of the Holy Spirit in our lives here and now, for it is his task to lead us day by day. The task of the Holy Spirit (who is also called the Spirit of Christ in Rom. 8:9) is to point us to Jesus Christ and to not himself (John 14:26; 16:13–15). He is God at work within us, leading us to glorify and obey Christ as Lord.

Christ's work is to reveal to us the Father and to glorify him on earth (John 17:1–8). It is in Christ that we humans see the definitive revelation of the nature and being of God the Father (John 14:9–11). The Father's work is to send the Spirit and to exalt Christ, so that at his name every knee shall bow, in heaven, on earth and under the earth (Phil. 2:10–11).
inforce the Neoplatonic dualism that underlies modern thought. Only as we bring God back into the very center of history and science will we root out the secularism that has plagued our age.

It is not easy for us, however, to return to such a holistic theology. Many of our words in English contain an implicit Neoplatonic dualistic worldview. For example, we speak of supernatural, in contrast to natural, and miracle, in contrast to ordinary or normal, but these reflect a nonbiblical worldview. The term nature, which implies an autonomous, self-sustained universe, is not found in Hebrew thought. Rather, the word used for his word and its order is berith (created). The term, in fact, is a verb and implies an origin in, and continued dependence upon, God. To us, some events may seem ordinary and others extraordinary, but all are due to the active, sustaining hand of God. In the biblical sense, no birth of a child is "natural," nor any divine healing "unnatural" in the sense of being contrary to the divinely created order.

1. We first need to see all healing as God's work. If we place too much emphasis on "miraculous" healing, we are in danger of reinforcing secularism. To overstress the miraculous implies that what is not miraculous is natural and can be explained without God. It puts what the church does through prayer in opposition to what humans do by modern scientific medicine in hospitals. To non-Christians the latter far outweighs what the church can show. Christians often turn to medicine when their prayers fail. The dichotomy is false to begin with. God works through both ordinary and extraordinary means.

Second, a focus on miracles as the key evidence of God at work in our lives leaves us essentially with a "God-of-the-gaps." We use him to account for what science cannot. But as science makes new discoveries, it often explains in ordinary terms what we once reserved for the miraculous. For instance, Christians once prayed for protection from lighting; now they put up lightning rods and no longer pray. The error is to see God chiefly at work in the miraculous. We must see his hand as involved in what we think we understand as it is in what we do not.

Third, as we will see below, miracles are reported in all religions. Scripture itself warns us that Satan will perform them (2 Thess. 2:9). In other words, miracles are not self-authenticating; they themselves must be tested in order to determine their source.

When we are new to the faith, it is natural for us to look for visible evidences of God's existence, such as healings and material blessings. As we grow in faith, we root our faith in God's revelation of himself through the Scriptures and in our personal walk with him. We begin to see his hand in the miracle of a child or a tree as well as in a vision, in the ordinary recovery of the body tended by a doctor as well as in a dramatic "extraordinary" healing.

Healing and the Kingdom

A Theology of the Kingdom of God

Within a theology of creation, we need a theology of the kingdom of God, particularly as this has to do with God's work in the world after the fall. Sickness, suffering, starvation, and death—these are the consequences of sin. Christ's response was to come as a human in order to establish and proclaim his kingdom as the new work of God on earth. This is what he preached (Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:14). The message of salvation includes good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). But how does the kingdom of God relate to our experiences as we continue to live in the kingdoms of this world with famine, oppression, poverty, suffering, disease, and death?

Down through history prophets claimed that the kingdom of God had already come in its fullness for God's people. Christians, they said, need not be sick or poor or failures or sinners—or even die. This, in fact, was a heresy in Paul's day, when some claimed that the resurrection had already taken place (2 Tim. 2:18). In recent years we have seen a resurgence of this message, which fits well with our Western cultural emphasis on the self and our health, wealth, success, and denial of death. Despite such preaching, sincere, devout, praying Christians remain poor and broken. They become sick and die.

The kingdom of God has come to us in the person of Christ. It is found wherever God's people are obedient to the King. But the kingdom will come in its fullness only with Christ's return (Rev. 12:10). Until then, we live, as it were, between two worlds. We are people of this sinful world: we are tempted and we sin, we are weak and we fail, the processes of degeneration and death are at work in us from the moment of our birth. But we are also people of the kingdom: though we sin, in God's sight we are sinless; though we face death, we have eternal life; though we see a decaying world around us, we also see the signs of a heavenly kingdom in the transformed lives of God's people.

"Signs and wonders" is the phrase used in Scripture for self-authenticating demonstrations of supernatural power. The phrase, however, is ambiguous. At times it points to the acts of God (Acts 2:22, 43). At other times it refers to the works of false prophets. Bright notes,

In the language of the Synoptic Gospels, at least, the miracles of Christ are never spoken of as "signs and wonders" (se-meia kai terata), i.e., self-

24. Cohn, Pursuit.
authenticating exhibitions of divine power designed to prove the claims of Jesus in the eyes of the people. Indeed, such “signs” (i.e., marvels) were precisely the sort of thing Christ refused to perform (e.g., Mark 8:11–12; Matt. 12:38–40). False messiahs are the ones who show off with “signs and wonders” (Mark 13:22; Matt. 24:24), and for Jesus to have done likewise would have been, from that point of view at least, the flat disproof of his claim to be the true Messiah. On the contrary, his miracles are “mighty works” (“powers,” dunaméis) of the kingdom of God. 26

There are a number of misunderstandings about these terms against which we must guard. First, signs and wonders should not be simply equated with miracles. The terms refer to anything that reminds us that God is with us, miraculous or not. The rainbow is the sign of God’s covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:12), circumcision the sign of his covenant with Israel (Gen. 17:11), Moses’ mighty works signs of God’s deliverance of his oppressed people (Exod. 4:17), and the Sabbath a sign of God’s covenant with his people (Exod. 31:13, 17). Isaiah walked barefoot as a sign of God’s judgment on Egypt and Ethiopia (Isa. 10:23), and the sun went back ten “steps” as a sign of God’s healing of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:9–11). Similarly, in the New Testament, the fact that Christ was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger was a sign to the shepherds that this was the Messiah (Luke 2:12), and Judas’s kiss a sign that this man was Jesus (Matt. 26:48).

Nor should signs and wonders be associated only with God. Pharaoh’s magicians did signs (Exod. 7:10–22), and so do Satan (2 Thess. 2:9) and false prophets (Matt. 24:24). They are not proofs of God’s presence—they themselves need to be tested for their source. A sign is anything that reminds us of something else, an event that points beyond itself.

Also, signs and wonders that come from God should not be equated with the coming of the kingdom in its fullness. Rather, they are promises, reassuring us that the kingdom will indeed come (Rom. 8:22–25; 2 Cor. 5:1–5). They themselves are not that kingdom—they point to it and show us something of its nature. From time to time God does heal our physical diseases to enable us to do his work and to show us the nature of the kingdom, but the fullness of health will come only with our new bodies beyond death. To claim that Christians should never be ill or that when they are sick God will always heal them is to declare that the kingdom of God has come to us in its fullness. But this denies that death is still at work within them and settles for much too little. In the kingdom yet to come we will not just have our present bodies, healthy and strong—we will have new bodies that transcend anything we can imagine.

Finally, signs and wonders are not ends in themselves. They convey God’s message to us. As David Hubbard notes, “The primary motive for divine intervention is not compassion but revelation”—or, one might say, God’s mighty works are a revelation of divine compassion (see Psalm 107). Throughout Scripture God performs miracles at critical junctures in history and in the lives of his people. He delivered Israel from Egypt, he defeated their enemies when they were outnumbered, and he spoke to them by messages and miracles through Elijah and Elisha when they had forgotten him. He announced by signs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Christ. Today some turn to God because of a special work he has performed in their lives at their moment of decision. Others experience his presence in particular ways in moments of crisis and despair.

One temptation is to focus on the signs themselves rather than on the message they bear (see John 6:26; Luke 23:8–9). Many people want healing, but they are not willing to give up all to follow Christ. Like the rich young ruler, they want the blessings of living with Christ, but they do not want to hear him say, “Sell what you have, and give to the poor, and . . . follow me” (Mark 10:21 rsv) or “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:25 rsv). Nor are they happy when Paul reminds them that Christians often are called to bear persecution, including beatings, mutilations, and other physical wounds and that this suffering is an honor (Phil. 1:29). These are not words they want to hear in an age of self-fulfillment. The kingdom of God comes in signs, but one of these signs is suffering for the sake of Christ.

Another temptation is to confuse the sign with the reality. Those who do this are like the man on his way to San Francisco who saw a sign pointing the way and camped under it, thinking he had arrived.

A Theology of Power

Today in the church we hear calls for demonstrations of power. This should not surprise us, for power is the central concern of our day. Nor should it surprise us that some see divine power as the key to prosperity, to health, to overcoming opposition, and, above all, to controlling their own lives.

The Scriptures have much to say about power. God is the God Almighty (El Shaddai, Gen. 17:1), who created and sustains all things by his power (Genesis 1), who defeated Satan and his hosts (John 16:33), and who will bring all things into subjection to himself (Eph. 1:22). Moreover, by his might he saved us and gave us the power to become
like him in our lives and bear witness of his greatness. All this we must affirm.

Scripture also has much to say about the ways in which power is to be used. Unfortunately, many Christians think of power as the world around them thinks of it—as demonstrations of might that overcome the resistance of the opposition. Consequently, Christians seek to show the world God’s superiority in power encounters that demonstrate his ability to heal and cast out demons, confident that when non-Christians see these, they will believe.

This, however, is not the picture we find in Scripture, nor in history. There are demonstrations of God’s power in preliminary confrontations with evil. Elijah called down fire from heaven, Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons, Peter and John healed the lame man at the temple gate, and Stephen, full of grace and power, did many signs and wonders among the people. These demonstrations, however, were not followed by mass conversions. Some believed, but then the opposition arose. Elijah fled to the desert and wrestled with depression as Jezebel appointed new prophets for Baal. Jesus and Stephen were arrested and killed. Peter and John were thrown into jail.

The history of such “power encounters” is that, after the preliminary confrontation, “the powers” mobilize in opposition. These powers are Satan and his hosts. They are also human organizations—insinuations, governments, and societies—such as those that crucified Christ and persecuted the early church. Ever since Babel, the center of the opposition to the kingdom of God has been the organized systems of sane people in corporate rebellion with Satan against God. Our first sin as humans was self-deficication. We wanted neither God nor Satan to rule over us; we wanted to be our own gods. And the same is still true today.

God’s supreme victory over Satan took place at the cross and the resurrection. Satan used his full might, seeking to destroy Christ or to provoke him to use his divine might in response. Either would have meant defeat for Christ, the first because Satan would have overcome him and the second because it would have destroyed God’s plan of salvation. Godly power is always rooted in love, not pride; it is rooted in redemption, not conquest; and it is rooted in concern for the other, not the self. It is humble, not proud, and inviting, not rejecting. Its symbol is the cross, not the sword. This is why it is seen as weakness by the world (1 Cor. 1:23–27).

As Christians, and as churches, we must affirm the power of God to heal, deliver, guide, and bless in the everyday lives of people. These are very real experiences in the lives of God’s people, and in the evangelistic outreach of the church.

Healing and the Kingdom

Even more, we are in desperate need of showing God’s power in transformed lives and in a Christlike confrontation of evil wherever we find it, whether demonic or systemic. We need also to guard against distortions of a biblical view of power. We must not look at power in worldly terms. Furthermore, we must not divorce power from truth. What we need, some say, is demonstrations of power, not theological reflection. But power is not self-authenticating—it must be tested to unveil its source. Moreover, demonstrations of power seldom lead people to truth and salvation. Jesus healed many, but few of them became his disciples. Of the ten lepers he healed, one returned and then only to give thanks.

Finally, we must guard against temptations to control power ourselves and so to make ourselves gods. The power God gives is never our own. We are simply stewards called to be faithful in using that power to the glory of God, not for our own honor or advancement.

A Theology of Discernment

In dealing with divine healing and provision, we need a theology of discernment. Signs and wonders are not confined to Christianity. Miraculous healings, speaking in tongues, prophecies, resurrections, and other extraordinary experiences are reported in all major religions. For example, Baba Farid, a Pakistani Muslim saint, is said to have cured incurable diseases, raised a dying man to life, converted dried dates into gold nuggets, and covered vast distances in a moment.” Hundreds of thousands flock each year to the Hindu temple of Venkateswara at Tirupathi, south India, many of them fulfilling vows because they claim the god healed them when they prayed to him during their illnesses. Similar reports come from Buddhist temples in Southeast Asia and spiritist shrines in Latin America. Yogis claim that they can rise from the dead and shamans report trips into heaven. Upwards of fifteen thousand people claim healing each year at Lourdes, and many more at the Virgin of Guadalupe near Mexico City. Healing is also central to Christian Science, and testimonies of miraculous healings are reported in every issue of the Christian Science Sentinel. One man wrote that he was healed of astigmatism after applying the principles taught by Mary Baker Eddy in Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures. Another wrote,

I had two healings after I had attended the Sunday school for some time. One was a large birthmark on my forehead. The other was a severe skin condition. . . . Some later healings came quickly; others took longer and

involved more study on my part, sometimes with help from a Christian Science practitioner. But I was always healed.  

No phenomenon in itself proves God's presence.

How are we to respond to all this? Scripture itself is clear that Satan performs signs and wonders, counterfeiting God's work. It warns us to guard against being led astray (Matt. 7:15–16; 2 Thess. 2:9–10; 1 Tim. 4:1; 7; 2 Tim. 3:1–4:5). Nowhere are we encouraged to leave our minds go blank in order to let the Holy Spirit come in. That is a technique commonly found in cults. Rather, we are to seek the wisdom that enables us to test the spirits to see whether or not they come from God (1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Thess. 5:20–21; 1 John 4:1–6). In this our attitude should not be one of skepticism but of openness to hearing the voice of God when he truly speaks to us.

What are the signs that enable us to discern the work of God and differentiate it from the work of self or Satan? It is too simple to say that what God's people do is of God (see Matt. 7:21–23) or that what non-Christians do is of Satan (see Numbers 22–24).

Nor are physical phenomena the test of the work of the Holy Spirit. Many today appeal to warm sensations, fluttering eyelids, involuntary muscle movements, and feelings of "energy" coming into the body as proof that God is at work. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones warns us that such experiences are common in other religions. He writes,

You will find in the case of spiritist healing that there is always emphasis on the physical element. People will testify to a feeling of heat as the hand of the healer came upon them, or of a sensation like an electric shock, or something like that—the physical is always very prominent. . . . There is nothing corresponding to that in the New Testament. . . . They do talk much about their physical sensations but about the Lord and his love for them, and their love for him.

Our experiences must themselves be tested, for they are not self-authenticating. We need to avoid reading our experiences into Scripture and focusing on them rather than on the Scripture itself.

Similarly, the "words of knowledge" widely used in healing services need to be tested. God warned Israel not to take prophesying lightly, for those who speak claim to speak for God (Deuteronomy 13). Those whose prophecies did not come true were to be stoned. Those whose prophecies did come true but who led the people away from God were also condemned. Paul issues the same warning (1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Thess. 5:20–21). Luke commends the church in Berea for testing Paul's teachings (Acts 17:11).

The Bible provides us with other tests:

- First, does the teaching, practice, or movement give glory to God rather than to humans (John 7:18; 8:50; 12:27–28; 17:4)? Unfortunately, in extremely individualistic, culturally diverse societies, such as we have in North America, people tend to follow strong personalities. Little other social cohesion brings them together into groups. We must be aware, therefore, of the particular temptation in our society to defy strong leaders.

- Second, does it recognize the lordship of Christ (1 John 2:3–5; 5:3; James 2:14–19)? The test here is primarily not one of orthodoxy, but of obedience. The question is not whether the leader and movement affirm the truth that Jesus is Lord or even that they feel a great love for him. The question is one of submission to Christ. In other words, there must be an attitude of humility, learning, and willingness to obey.

- Third, does a teaching, practice, or movement conform to scriptural teaching? Are those involved willing to submit their lives and teachings to the instruction of the Scriptures and to the leading of the Holy Spirit? This must be an ongoing process, for the Scriptures provide the norm against which we must examine all doctrine.

- Fourth, are the leaders of a movement accountable to others in the church? The interpretation of Scripture is, ultimately, not a personal matter but a concern of the church as a hermeneutical community. We must test our understandings with others who are in leadership (Gal. 2:1–2) and with the teachings of the saints down through history. In an age of extreme individualism and a focus on great personalities, this test has particular importance.

- Fifth, do those involved manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–25)? Is there love or self-centeredness? Joy or only excitement? Peace or frenzy and tension? Patience or short tempers? Gentleness or arrogance? Goodness or intrigue? Faith in God, or dependence on human planning? Meekness or arrogance? Moderation or excesses? Luther pointed out that the difference between Christians and pagan miracle workers is not the kinds of miracles they do, but in transformations that take place in their lives. The power of God transforms us into the likeness of Christ; the powers of self and the world do not.

- Sixth, does the teaching and practice lead us toward spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:11–15)? Some things are characteristic of spiritual immaturity,
such as a dependence on miracles to reassure us that God indeed exists and is with us. As we grow spiritually mature, we leave these things behind and root our faith in God himself (1 Cor. 13:11; Col. 2:6–7), in his self-revelation to us through Scripture and in a personal walk with him.

Seventh, is the truth kept in balance with other truths (Matt. 23:23–24)? There are many teachings that are true, but to over- or underemphasize them is error. It is wrong to make secondary truth primary. For example, we can so emphasize peace or justice or healing or exorcisms or even salvation that in practice they become the whole of our gospel. It is Christ who is the center of the gospel, and when he is at the center, the many facets of kingdom teaching find their proper place.

Eighth, does the teaching lead us to seek the unity of the body of Christ, or is it divisive (John 17:11; 1 John 2:9–11; 5:1–2)? Love for one another is the hallmark of the church (John 13:35). This does not mean that divisions will not occur. It does mean that teachings that lead us to a sense of spiritual superiority have led us astray. We must work for fellowship and continued relationships with Christians who disagree with us and weep when they reject us or go astray.

A Theology of Suffering and Death

Finally, we need a theology of sickness, injury, suffering, and death. These consequences of sin cannot be divorced from each other. The processes of aging and death are at work in humans from the moment of their conception. The side effects of these processes are sickness and bodily suffering. While God often does heal us by natural and occasionally by extraordinary means, our full deliverance occurs only after death, when we receive our new body. For Christians, death is the final release, for we would not want to live forever in our present world, even in perfect health.

Some today argue that it is God’s nature to heal, not to teach us through sickness. To reconcile their position with scriptural teaching regarding suffering, they divorce sickness from bodily injuries suffered in persecution and from death, for the Bible makes clear that the latter are the lot of those who follow Christ (Gal. 5:11; 2 Tim. 3:12; Heb. 11:35–38).

The denial that God can and does use sickness to teach us is hard to maintain on biblical grounds. Paul speaks of his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7). Most Bible scholars agree that this was some normal bodily affliction or disease. Moreover, Paul refers to colleagues who were not healed (Phil. 2:25–27; 2 Tim. 4:20). Job too was sick, but God used everything that befell him to bring him to a deeper and more mature faith (Job 42:5–6).

Healing and the Kingdom

That God does not use sickness is also hard to maintain from Christian experience. Many Christians testify to the fact that it was in times of sickness and suffering that they were drawn closest to Christ and learned important lessons of faith. They are times when people realize their own vulnerability and their dependence on God. Furthermore, it is hard to believe that God is more concerned about the illness of Christians in ordinary life than in the wounds and injuries of those who are suffering for the sake of Christ. Why should he heal the former and ignore the latter? Unfortunately, a theology that rejects sickness and suffering fits well into our age, with its denial of death and emphasis on positive thinking.

Dangers

Like most movements in the church, the current emphasis on healing, prophecy, and exorcism has both positive and negative sides. It reminds us of the need to take seriously the work of the Holy Spirit in meeting daily human needs. It is in danger, however, of placing primary emphasis on what is of secondary importance in Scripture. It also presents a danger of bending the gospel to fit the spirit of our times. Satan often tempts us at the point of our greatest strengths. His method is not to sell us rank heresy, but to take the good we have and distort it by appealing to our self-interests (see Genesis 3). What are some of the dangers in the current emphasis on healing and exorcism against which we must guard?

Basing Theology on Experience

Living as we do in a culture based on pragmatism, it is easy for us to base our theology on experience. The test of truth is success. The sign of spiritual life and vital worship is feelings of excitement. The measure of our methods is growth and size. In his evaluation of the great revivals in the 1700s of which he was a part, Jonathan Edwards cautioned against using experience to validate theology. Specifically, he listed twelve results that should not be viewed as signs (for or against) that a religious excitement was a work of God. Among them are:

- Great religious experiences in themselves are no sign of their validity or that necessarily they are from God.
- Religious experiences which have great effect upon the body are not necessarily valid.

Reflections on Spiritual Encounters

- Multiplied religious experiences, accompanying one another, are not evidence that the experience is necessarily saving or divine.
- Spiritual experiences which stimulate the spending of much time in religious activity and zealous participation in the externals of worship are not necessarily saving experiences.
- Religious experiences which cause men and women to praise and glorify God with their mouths are not necessarily saving and divine.  

In worship and in ministry we must test our human experiences against a theology based on biblical revelation and beware lest we use those experiences to determine our theology.

**Self-Centeredness**

We live in a modern society that places the self at the center of life. In such a setting, we need to guard against a theology that mirrors our times by focusing on ourselves and not on God and his agenda. The danger here is two-fold,

*First, it is dangerously easy to institutionalize immaturity.* New believers do indeed generally come to Christ with their own interests in mind— their salvation, their health, their well-being. God begins with them where they are. The church must do the same. But God calls us to spiritual growth, in which our obsession with ourselves gives way to a love for God and others. Christian maturity imitates Christ who lived for others. While ministering to seekers at their points of need, the primary focus should be on more mature expressions of worship and ministry.

Unfortunately, many Christians have bought into the Western cultural emphasis on personal health and prosperity as ultimate ends. As a result, we focus on ourselves while millions around the world are dying of poverty, oppression, and violence. Health in Scripture is defined, not in terms of personal well-being, but as shalom in loving relationships. It begins when we are reconciled to God and our enemies. It manifests itself in our mutual submission to one another in the church and our self-sacrificing service to others in need. Its fruit is physical and psychological health. To focus on personal well-being and prosperity, rather than on shalom, is to preach a gospel that treats the symptoms but does not cure the illness.

*Second, it is a small but dangerous step from self-centeredness to self-deification.* Ever since the Garden of Eden, this has been the first and most fundamental of human sins. Satan did not tempt Adam and Eve to worship him but to worship themselves—their own freedom, their rights, their potential for becoming gods. Self-absorption, not demon possession, is the greatest danger in Western societies.

The results of this self-centeredness in the church can be devastating. It leads to spiritual pride, the feeling among those involved in a movement that they are spiritually superior to those who are not and a judgmental attitude towards those who disagree with them. It also leads to competition for power, and divisions in the church. Christ-centeredness leads to humility, a desire for the unity of the church, and a willingness to speak as Romans 15:1–2; 1 Corinthians 10:12).

**Confusion between Reports and Reality**

Those who emphasize miraculous healings often base their claims on personal testimonies of those who have experienced healings. Because such testimonies, and the experiences on which they are based, are powerful and immediate, many people take them to be self-validating. But feelings of well-being, important as they are, are not by themselves measures of health. Mansell Pattison and his associates found that most of those who claimed miraculous healing returned to medical doctors within a week or two of the experience.

Feelings of well-being are influenced by a great many factors. People naturally feel better when others gather around them and make them the focus of attention. Moreover, God has created processes in the body that work toward health. Christian honesty requires that claims of miraculous healing be delayed until careful examinations are made over periods of time by impartial investigators. The lack of such testing for objective reality is one of my strong concerns about the current emphasis on healing in the church.

In contrast to many of the healings claimed today, those performed by Christ were instant, dramatic, and durable. Those crippled for life walked. Those blind from birth saw and recognized what they saw. Lazarus, who was dead for three days, was brought back to life.

Christian honesty also requires that we report our failures as loudly as we proclaim our successes. Lewis B. Smedes notes,

To the extent that we are eager to sustain people’s interests, hopes and expectations, we are tempted to exaggerate successes and disguise failures. . . . Honesty in a crooked world is not as spectacular as healing in a hurting world, but in the long run it is a stronger sign of God’s power.


One requirement of honesty in a public ministry of healing is full and accurate reporting, both to the faithful and to the world-at-large. The minister who engages in healing should publicize his or her failures as loudly as the successes.\(^{34}\)

Finally, we need to test the source of those healings that do occur. Scripture warns us that not all miracles come from God (Acts 8:9–24; 2 Thess. 2:3–12), and the voice we hear within us may be our own desires (James 4:1–3; 2 Peter 2:15).

Influenced by the spirit of the times, many today take success as a test of what is good and of God. Success in human terms, however, does not necessarily correspond with success in the kingdom of God. Many movements are successful, even though they do not proclaim the truth. We must test all ideas and movements in the light of Scripture. Unfortunately, such tests are often seen as evidence of unbelief, rather than as attempts to obey the biblical mandate to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1).

**A New Christian Magic**

One danger is that healings, miracles, success, and prosperity may become a new Christian magic. This is one of the fundamental tendencies we have as sinful humans, for magic makes us feel like gods. We feel we are supreme, for we can carry out our will by controlling nature, supernatural powers, or even God himself.

Magic is the opposite of religion. In magic we are in control, in religion we are in submission to God and his will. The difference between the two is not one of practice—it shows itself in our attitudes.\(^{34}\)

One sign of magic is a formulaic approach. We believe our prayers will be answered if we say the right things and act in certain ways. Scripture instructs us to pray “in the name of Jesus,” but if we think that our prayers have power only when we utter these words, worship has become magic. To pray in Jesus’ name is to pray for what he will in a given situation (James 4:3; 1 John 5:14–15).

and ever more spectacular miracles to reassure us that God is with us. The net effect of this escalation is the secularization of our thought. We do not see God at work in ordinary, natural processes. As miracles become commonplace they no longer remind us of God. The quest for ever newer demonstrations of God's presence breaks down in the end, and we are left in a totally secularized world in which there are few ways for God to speak to us.

The answer lies neither in seeking miracles, nor in denying them. The answer is to reject this dichotomy altogether, to see the naturalness of God's extraordinary healings and the miraculous nature of his ordinary ones. We must avoid treating the former, whether explicitly or implicitly, as greater signs of God's presence and making them the center of our church's attention and ministry.

Imbalance

Christian maturity calls for a balanced concern for provision, health, peace, justice, and righteousness—a balance that can be maintained only as Christ, rather than a particular cause, is at the center. When we rediscover a forgotten truth, we frequently overaccentuate it. The problem is not new. As James Aiken points out, "The church in Corinth overemphasized the miraculous, specifically the gift of tongues. Paul wrote not to frown on gifts, but to pursue balance in exercising them." The same caution against overemphasis needs to be made regarding the current focus on healing.

We must avoid focusing more attention on immediate needs than on ultimate realities. When we become obsessed with needs, the result is a new, subtle form of the social gospel. With a renewed emphasis on God's special work in everyday life, we must be on guard lest we lose sight of the greater importance of dealing with sin and proclaiming divine judgment.

This focus on the now is accentuated by our modern Western emphasis on personal needs fulfillment and on theories of psychology that arrange these needs along a continuum from the physical to the psychological, social, and ultimately spiritual. According to these theories, we can deal with higher-level problems only after we have solved more pressing needs. We can spend so much time on human needs that we have little time left for dealing with sin and righteousness, or for focusing our attention on God. The amount of time we spend on something reflects its importance in our thinking, no matter what we say to the contrary.


Healing and the Kingdom

The call of the Scriptures is clear: We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Discipleship, not present well-being, is our central message.

A second danger is to emphasize healing, particularly physical healing, and to forget provision, justice, peace, and equality. All of these belong to the kingdom of God (Luke 4:18–19). Feeding the hungry and healing the sick were among Jesus' first acts. In a sense, they were easy to carry out and raised little opposition. Far more costly was his condemnation of oppression, injustice, and violence, for this, in the end, led political and religious leaders of his day to seek his death.

We too need to emphasize the whole gospel, including those parts that demand suffering and sacrifice on our part. The temptation is to emphasize those parts that benefit us personally, or to focus our attention on only one aspect—whether this be healing, peace, or justice. When we do so, however, we are in danger of shifting the center from Christ to ourselves or to a cause. Christ then is on the periphery, and we use him mainly to justify the gospel we preach.

Increasing the Burden

We rejoice when God heals in answer to prayer, and we should do so publicly, but what about those whom God, in his will and foreknowledge, chooses not to heal? What do we say to them, for they are in the greatest need of ministry? If we teach healing but have no answer for those who remain sick or face death, we generate a false sense of guilt and despair in those who are not healed.

To attribute sickness and death to a lack of faith or to spiritual defeat is too simple an answer (see Job; John 9:2; 2 Cor. 12:7–9). Even more than a theology of healing, we need a theology of suffering and death—one that does not see these as failures but as part of God's greater redemptive work. We also need the grace of godly dying, in which our passing is marked by a God-given serenity, anticipation, and hope.

Exalting the Leader

We have already noted that in highly individualistic, culturally pluralistic societies, such as in North America, there is a strong tendency to focus on personalities and to exalt leaders. Few strong social groups hold people together; no dominant set of shared ideas and values unites people in thought. People are left to fend for themselves, and often they are attracted to a "big leader" who claims to know the way. This is true
in our modern world of business, politics, entertainment, and even the church.

This model of leadership creates a number of problems within the church. It encourages most Christians to be followers, prone to uncritically trust what their leaders say. It gives rise to leaders who are not themselves in submission and accountable to others. Throughout church history, this exaltation of leaders has been most common in movements centered around healing, exorcism, and the meeting of everyday human concerns. Few are tempted to say that the preacher saves the sinner. Many, however, attribute healings to the faith of a particular leader. When others fail, it is to him or her that they take the sick for special prayer.

Healing in the church belongs to the congregation. Some may have the particular gift of praying for the sick, but they do so as members of the body rather than as leaders. Moreover, this is a secondary gift that must be subordinate to worship and the ministry of the Word (1 Cor. 12:27–31).

Healing Ministries in the Church

What significance does all this have for healing ministries in the church? Certainly Scripture commands us to pray for the sick and to take those prayers seriously (James 5:14–15). This should be part of ordinary church life along with prayer for the destitute, the jobless, the homeless, the oppressed, and, above all, the lost. Moreover, prayer for the sick should be a part of the evangelistic outreach of the church. What we need is discernment on how to be faithful to Scripture and to guard against fads. Principles regarding pastoral, teaching, and prophetic ministries are found in Scripture.

A Pastoral Ministry

At the heart of the ministry of the church is a pastoral heart—a love for people and a willingness to share in their struggles and to help bear their burdens. A church must be concerned with the everyday needs of human life and should minister to these needs in both personal and corporate ways.

There needs to be a ministry to the sick. This is particularly true in urban settings, where people have lost the normal support groups of relatives, neighbors, and friends. Pattison, Lapius, and Doerr found that for many who sought prayer for healing, the important thing was not that they were physically healed (many were not), but that they felt the support of others in their times of difficulty. As humans we need the spiritual healing that comes from being loved, even more than we need physical well-being.

There also needs to be a ministry to the oppressed—those who are poor, battered, or jobless. They are all around us. They are in our churches, often unseen. And there needs to be a ministry to those whom society tends to consider marginal—those who are lonely, single, older, have mental or physical disabilities, or work as migrants. One key measure of the godliness of a society or a church is the way it treats the oppressed and the marginalized. For its own advantage the world takes care of the successful, the powerful, and the wealthy. The church, however, is entrusted with the care of the poor, the widows, the orphans, the sick, the oppressed, the wayward, the spiritually immature, and the lost. It exists for others. It is not a gathering of the spiritually strong but a community of broken sinners who have experienced the grace of God and who now minister to others who are broken and lost.

These ministries can take many forms. Special times of prayer can be set aside for those in need—the sick, the jobless, the sinner seeking forgiveness, the lonely and sad. In the City Terrace Mennonite Brethren Church these are invited to come to the front for special prayer during worship once or twice a month. In other churches, this ministry is given to Sunday school classes or to evening services.

Care must be taken, however, not to promise that all will be healed. The expectations of the average Christian are frequently too low with regard to what God will do, but to raise them too high can be destructive to those God chooses not to heal at that moment. Moreover, particular care must be given to those who continue to suffer, for they are in the greatest need of ministry. We need to pay special attention to those whom God chooses not to heal, those who face death, those caught in difficult marriages, and others with ongoing problems. For them the church needs a ministry of hope, assurance, and hospitality.

A Teaching Ministry

Teaching is vital ministry in the church, particularly as it has to do with other ministries, such as healing. The older, more mature Chris-

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tians should be examples and teachers at heart. They must begin where young believers are in their faith, but they must not be content with leaving the immature at this level. They should instruct, encourage, rebuke, and model a godly life and do so with a firm but gentle spirit. They should seek to settle disputes and strive for unity and harmony in the congregation, balancing the needs of the members as individuals with the needs of the congregation as a whole. They are to avoid empty disputes over words and senseless controversies that breed quarrels (2 Tim. 2:14, 23), teach with kindness and forbearance, correct opponents with gentleness (2 Tim. 2:24–25), and endure criticisms and slander patiently (1 Peter 2:20).

Paul himself was an example of this. When a movement of ecstasy swept through the church in Corinth, causing some members to exalt speaking in tongues, healing, and other visible manifestations of God’s Spirit, Paul took a strong stand for order and unity in the church. He did not reject the spiritually young for their excesses and their pursuit of the spectacular. Rather, he instructed them in love and firmness to work as one body and to guard lest their behavior bring offense to the gospel in the world around them. And he showed them the higher way of Christian maturity—love and mutual submission.

Applying these principles to the current emphasis on healing, we should pray freely for the illnesses and other needs of seekers and new believers, knowing that God often works in special ways in the lives of those at the point of deciding for or against Christ. Then, however, we must lead them from the elementary to the deeper things of faith—discipleship, holiness, witnessing, and suffering for the sake of the gospel. We must help young believers move from a focus on themselves and their immediate needs to a concern for the lost and suffering world.

We should also seek a balance in our church services. There are times when prayer for healing is appropriate. At the same time, prayers should also minister to those who remain sick. In both, we must pray in faith and submit ourselves to the sovereignty of God. The central expectation, however, must be that in prayer we are addressing an omnipotent God. Confession of sin, worship, and response to God’s call to ministry and mission are important parts of a full-orbed relationship with God.

A Prophetic Ministry

Finally, the church has a prophetic calling. It must discern the setting in which God has placed it and speak out against evil. It must also

beware lest the church itself become a servant to the spirit of the culture and time in which it lives.

The criteria for making these judgments are not the values of the world, nor even the majority votes of all who call themselves Christian. The standard must be the Word of God, understood and applied by communities of committed believers. Particular responsibility is placed on the leaders (1 Tim. 3:2–7; Titus 1:6–9), who help their congregations discern what God is saying to them. They guard the church lest it be deceived (1 Tim. 4:1–7; 2 Tim. 3:1–4:5).

With regard to the current emphasis on healing, the church must test against Scripture the teachings or manner of spirit at work in the body. The church must also challenge the values of our day: the obsession with the self, with the present, and with health, success, and personal fulfillment. It must guard against popular and pragmatic methods that provide immediate solutions but in the end subvert the gospel. Satan did not challenge God’s goal for humans. He simply offered them an instant, easy means to get there.

We who live in the end-times face great opportunities and great dangers. In the last days the gospel will be preached to the ends of the earth. There will also be a great falling away, as many—including Christians—are deceived. It is important, therefore, that we listen to God as he speaks to us through his Spirit and that we test the voices we hear to make certain that they are, indeed, from God. God has given us his Word to keep and proclaim. May we be found faithful to that trust.