

Should the Health and Healing Ministry of the Christian Church Engage in Complementary Therapies?

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This topic is one that has intrigued me for many years. Working in the tertiary sector I have seen many topics on complementary therapies included in the undergraduate curriculum. I have examined the philosophies that underpin these healing modalities and found some of them occultic in nature. Yet as a nurse I am also extremely skeptical about many of the reductionist methods used in modern medicine which depersonalize care and objectify humans. I believe it is deficient to use a singularly chemical interventionist approach to mental illness that ignores the person's spiritual dimension. There is no doubt that ill people benefit from compassionate care, which focuses on the whole person. This was one of the key reasons for commencing faith community nursing in Australia! I know many Christians in Australia use vitamins, herbs and homeopathic medicines, and engage naturopaths and chiropractors when they have health needs. So why are Christians so reluctant to engage in discussion about the use of complementary healing modalities in health ministry? This article presents a few of the reasons I have gleaned from resources provided by Harold Taylor of the 'Community of Hope' [Ph (03) 5964 4219], a group of Christians involved in outreach amongst 'New Age' seekers. I hope it will stimulate you to further personal study and engagement in this important debate!

Our post modern shift in thinking has put a question mark behind the absolute certainty of reproducible science and reasoned logic as the only framework for healing advances. This is evident in the number of researchers looking into the links between body, mind and spirit in health and healing. Institutes have commenced at major universities in the USA such as Harvard, where they are investigating the effects of the mind and spirit on health. There is a plethora of conferences, journals and self help books, many of which have hit the best seller lists in the past twenty years. People are hungry for information that will help them to not just cope, but thrive in this world. God created humans with a spirit and that human spirit must have its needs satisfied, so people continue to search for (and many find), acceptable pluralist and comfortable spirituality in the New Age movement. I have found the mere mention of complementary therapies, or alternative healing to Christians usually gets one of these responses; rapid change of subject, or loud paroxysms of fear over the entry of the occult, satanic and demonic forces into the church, or they remain totally silent avoiding the subject. Occasionally you get someone who will say they use them, and that they ask God to protect them and use whatever means God wills to make them well. They state the complementary therapy is working, therefore it must be OK. You seldom get a well thought through and educated debate based on biblical and theological reasoning. Hence the need for this article, so AFCNA members can start considering their responses. What should the FCNs response be when people ask about the use of complementary therapies in their illness? Have you got a response?

Most of the therapies creating controversy are based on the assumption that there is a 'universal energy' or 'life force' everywhere, permeating the cosmos and that humans are in essence nothing more than amassed energy fields. It is important to realise these therapies are often interwoven with a philosophical worldview, or religious ideology that makes sense of the therapy in a cultural manner. Healing then is about connecting with the 'life force' or manipulating energy to points that need healing. Kinesiology, Reiki, acupuncture, therapeutic touch are some common examples. Many of the articles I have read on these therapies use the new paradigm of quantum physics to validate the premise that all life is 'matter' and that energy never 'disappears' it simply changes form. Therapists use this discovery to lend credence to the manipulating and harmonising of energy fields to effect healing.

So how can we as Christians create a Biblical framework by which we can make sound judgments about the use of complementary therapies as 'OK' or 'better left alone'? Philip Johnson (1999) the Director of Global Apologetics and Mission based in Sydney has written a very helpful article titled 'Energy Healing: A Christian Theological Appraisal'. The following theological arguments are edited

from his work to provide you with a basis on which to commence your deliberations.

The starting point must commence with the sovereignty of God as creator of all life, human, animal, vegetable and mineral (Gen. 1). We see God's 'ruach' or spirit, hover over creation and maintain and uphold the creation in its entirety, and continuing that work for all eternity (Gen. 1:2, 6:3; Num. 16:22 & 27; Ps. 104:30). God breathed his spirit into humans in Gen. 2:7 and his spirit gave life. It is in God alone that each person has their being (Acts 17:24-28). In the New Testament this life giving work continues with Jesus Christ as the creator, and the one who upholds everything by His word (Hebrews 1:3; Col. 1:16-17). We also note the redemptive work of Jesus was not just for the salvation of humanity, but for the renewal and restoration of the whole of creation (Is. 65:17-25, Rom. 8:22, 2 Peter 3:13, Rev. 21).

We then need to look at the nature of God as Healer. In the Old Testament we see God healing various individuals (Gen. 20:17; 2 Chron. 30:20) and in the New Testament we see Jesus' extensive healing ministry (Matt 4:24; 8:8-16; 12:15; Lk. 6:17, 9:11 13:14, 22:51). Grange (1995) notes Jesus felt 'energy' leaving him when the bleeding woman touched him (Luke 8:45-46, Mark 5:30) and Jesus also stated the he needed to build up his energy with prayer and fasting before he attempted to heal difficult cases (Mark 9:28-29). Grange continues that Jesus was clearly able to use some form of energy to change climatic conditions and shoal fish for the purposes of fulfilling his ministry. The apostles were also Christ's agents of healing (Acts 3:11, 4:14, 5:16, 8:7, 14:9, 28:8-9) and continuing this work is recommended to all Christians in James 5:16. So we can clearly discover that healing activity is inherent in God's nature, and part of his plan for the upholding of his creation. God sustains all life for believers and non believers (2 Kin. 5; Lk. 17:12-17) and so healing can come from Christian and non Christian sources alike, but all are a part of God's provision for the needs of all humans. Christians will happily take a therapy invented, or offered by an atheist doctor, yet we question complementary therapies... Why? Johnson believes it may be more to do with our understanding of what is considered to be acceptable science. We can usually prove medicine works, but we can't always prove mystical therapies work. This causes alarm bells to ring in my mind, because I know the scientific method is not academically neutral, nor free of bias. I suggest we keep a healthy skepticism and a critical stance, but allow room for progress to research beyond what is real and provable. After all, astronomy had its foundations in Astrology, and chemistry's roots were in the ancient spiritual alchemists' search for the 'elixir of life'. There is still so much to discover and so much we don't know.

Because energy healing is beyond absolute scientific validation does it necessarily follow that the source must be Satan? Matthew 24 states there will signs and wonders committed by false prophets and that people need to be aware lest they are deceived. Johnson discusses apologists Barnett's view that Jesus' remarks were for the context of that day, referring to the Jewish community and the emergence of false prophets from inside their faith. Between Pentecost and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD various false prophets emanated from among the Jews (Acts 5:34-37 tells of two aborted movements) however, there are no references to people beyond the Jewish community executing counterfeit miracles. Paul also speaks of false prophets and false teachings in 2 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians, but neither passage refer expressly to gifts of healing, and in both passages the false teachers arise from within Jewish culture or the Church, not a place where any 'New Age' therapies have commenced to date. Johnson adds the Bible affirms that God heals people, but nowhere does it expressly say that healing is something done by Satan, devils, or demons. Indeed Johnson points out that God uses pagan means to reveal himself to pagan people groups. For example, God gave the Pharaoh a dream because in Egyptian religion dreams were the revelatory vehicle of the gods. Later in Babylon, Daniel is made chief of the Magi (Dan 2:48) and in Hosea (14:8) God uses pagan imagery to draw the Jewish people back to the covenant. In the New Testament we see several references to pagan philosophers such as the Athenians commended by Paul for their religious search. In fact the Christians in Corinth were uncertain about whether they were allowed to buy food which had first been dedicated to an idol and Paul used creation theology to OK that practice (1 Cor. 8:4, 11:25, 26; Psalm 24:1).

Johnson asserts that a creation theology provides complementary practitioners with a real base on

which to build their practice and claim it for Christ:

1. God is the ultimate source of all healing and omnipresent in creation;
2. the Holy Spirit is at work throughout creation to effect healing for all;
3. God's divine 'energy' resonates throughout all creation (see Habakkuk);
4. Christ's presence in the world resonates His power to heal throughout the world;
5. then we can finally claim the therapy for Christ and give God the glory for His healing power.

Currently God does not receive the glory for much of the healing, because many complementary therapy practitioners make sense of the healing phenomenon via alternative spiritual constructs. Some would argue that using creation theology to underpin these practices is a form of theological syncretism whereby you mix a true teaching with a questionable one, to make it more palatable. Johnson argues this position only becomes a problem when Christ is not at the centre stage of one's personal theology. The New Age therapies are open for exploration and missionary effort.

To use Aromatherapy as an example: The essential oils and essences used to promote rest, relaxation and healing are a part of God's creation to be used for the wellbeing of others. They are part of God's great kindness and provision for the world and should be received with thanksgiving. We are to use the gifts God provides according to the principles given to us in His word the Bible. There is in fact a Biblical precedent for anointing with oils. Specifically mentioned were myrrh and frankincense in Song of Songs (1:13,3:6, 4:6, 14,5:1, 5, 13), and as gifts the Magi brought to Jesus. Jesus was anointed with precious oil at Bethany prior to his arrest and crucifixion (Matt. 26:6-13). Anointing was in fact symbolic of being chosen and separated out, to be used by God. The essences and oils have a specific spiritual purpose, and to use them to bring glory to God, is what God desires. The power in the oils are derived from the Spirit at work in this world. So we can demonstrably claim Aromatherapy for Christ. The question remains 'Can we claim other complementary therapies for Christ?' We need more practitioners with a sound Christian theology to start engaging in this discussion, so we can have an appropriate response to the movement.

Taylor (1998) suggests there are several questions Christians should ask and issues they must consider when using complementary therapies. Firstly, you need to discern when a therapist uses treatment practices that may be considered occult such as spiritist, sorcery, witchcraft, fortune telling, transcendental meditation, astral projection and induced psychic experiences. He suggests being guided by Matthew 7:20 "By their fruits will they be known" for the basis of your examination of any therapy. Ask yourself 'What is the aim of the therapy?' Is it to draw you away from Jesus, or can it bring you closer to him? Does the therapist's life back up what they practice? You should ask the therapist: what is her/his training, qualifications, what is the background of the therapy, how does it work, what accountability standards does the therapist have, and try to discover if he/she is involved in occult practices.

Taylor (1998) highlights four key problem areas in 'New Age' therapies which Christian writers critique. They include:

- a) Energy healing is based on pantheistic views... ie everything is a manifestation of the divine... 'the God within'. This is refuted in scripture because God made humans in God's image to live in relationship with God (Gen1:26-28) as creator and creature.
- b) Energy healing positions God as matter or 'life force', but the Bible tells us God is a personal, loving and compassionate father (parent), who suffers with and for his children, and acts continually to transform and restore people to himself (Micah 7:18-20, John 14:9, Hebrews 2:14-18).
- c) In energy healing people have taken one of God's natural gifts in creation and reinterpreted it in occultic and pantheistic understandings (Rom 1:20,23,25,28). God's 'ruach' is not just a universal life force, but God is a personal, relational divine being. It is at this point where many therapies may become deceptive, as the practitioner attributes the healing to spiritual forces other than God. This reinterpretation allows the healing gifts to come under Satan's spiritual powers (Eph. 2:2, 1 John 5:19, 2 Cor. 4:4, 2 Thess. 2:7) and enables them to be used to move people away from God, instead of bringing them toward him.

All of us need to take seriously the power of deception that Satan uses because the Bible makes it

very clear that Satan is real, and the demonic spiritual realm is real. Avoid any therapy that uses occultic practices. I believe the only true way forward is with prayer and a very good understanding of Scripture. Taylor gives several questions you should ask, some include: Is the therapy based on a biblical worldview of God, or is God an impersonal force? Does it acknowledge human's sin and need for forgiveness and salvation, or does it see everyone as a good creation, even essentially divine? Does the therapy include or encourage dependence on occultic practices (see Deut. 18:9-13 for list). How has the therapy been validated? If so, how and by whom? Is the therapy able to be reclaimed for Christ? If I use the therapy and recommend it to others, am I opening them to 'New Age' philosophy and ignoring their need for Jesus Christ, the source of all healing?

We have the source of all healing in Jesus. In understanding who Jesus is as revealed in Scripture, we can pray with certainty, knowing that God will answer us and that God wants to heal us. We must continue to be aware that healing does not always include physical curing, rather it is being made whole through Christ and brought to a place of peace. Our views on healing may need to shift, but God keeps his promises, what we have to do is claim them. God will help each person find their personal pathway to healing, which *may* include traditional medicine, surgery, complementary therapies, but it *must* always include prayer. I believe we must carefully and prayerfully examine the possibilities of underpinning these therapies with a theology based on God's word, so we can use them in the Christian healing ministry, giving God the glory as we bring people to the source of all healing Jesus Christ.

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