

Christian prayer for healing

Andrew Fergusson considers recent events at Lakeland

Most of us heard about the supernatural phenomena claimed at Lakeland, Florida earlier this year at events organised by Fresh Fire Ministries, and led by Todd Bentley, the flamboyant, tattooed Canadian evangelist. It was said people were healed of all sorts of diseases and disabilities, and it was even being suggested that people were being raised from the dead. Was this a wonderful revival? Or was it a mixture of the good, the bad and the ugly?

Those questions may partly be answered now because Todd Bentley has stepped down from ministry after an 'unhealthy relationship',¹ and things seem to have gone quiet, but this article will review the Lakeland phenomenon before moving to a wider consideration of prayer for healing.

early comments from the Evangelical Alliance

CMF is a member body of the UK Evangelical Alliance and was consulted about an appropriate response to the early reports from Lakeland. We endorse what General Director Joel Edwards wrote in an open letter on 10 June:²

I suspect that many of you have watched with interest the recent developments in Lakeland, Florida. Unusual things have been taking place in Todd Bentley's church, and they now seem to be spreading to other parts of the world, including the UK.

I've spoken to a number of our members who are overjoyed at what they perceive to be the latest outpouring of God's spirit. Others, though, have expressed their concern at what is happening and particularly the kind of appeals that have been made on TV and the internet.

Inevitably, all of this reminds me of the struggles we all had at the Alliance at the time of Toronto. And I simply don't yet know how I feel about all that is going on in Florida. There are aspects that make me rejoice, and others that make me uneasy. However, at the time of Toronto, I drew up the following list of principles that it seems to me have enduring relevance. I share them again with you now so that together we can remain united around our one common cause: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- 1. Evangelicals should make every effort to measure all spiritual phenomena by biblical criteria. In every case, the devotional hallmarks of holiness, prayer and witness provide reliable indicators of authentic moves of God.*
- 2. We also acknowledge that the current phenomenon is not new. During the 18th, 19th*



and early 20th centuries revivals associated with respected figures such as Jonathan Edwards, Wesley, Whitefield and the Jeffreys were also characterised by unusual events which attracted controversy and blessings.

3. We rejoice with those who testify to a deeper level of commitment and joy as a result of their experience but would equally urge them to avoid excessive behaviour which may discredit the gospel or distance those who genuinely seek an encounter with God.
4. Whilst we would caution against indiscriminate enthusiasm, we would equally urge evangelicals to avoid preclusive or condemnatory behaviour which dismisses all unusual events out of hand.
5. Finally, we would advocate the Gamaliel principle; if the phenomenon is genuinely of God it will certainly bear lasting fruit.

another gospel?

Edwards shows twin concerns for truth and for unity. Internationally respected evangelical leader RT Kendall was prepared to risk the latter in his concern for the primacy of truth, as this extract from an

article (written before Bentley's departure) shows:³

What complicated things most of all was that people were apparently being healed. At last count there were 37 resurrections from the dead. If only one of them had a coroner's death certificate it would be a very serious matter to say that what was going on there was not of God. The fact that ABC news could find no documentary evidence of a miracle was not enough to sway me one way or the other. I was even prepared - for a while - to overlook the claim that the angel Emma is the secret explanation for the special revelations and miracles. I believe in angels. What if Emma were a part of the 'yuk' factor?

But a funny thing kept gripping me. It would take even more courage to say that the Lakeland phenomenon is not of God. Did I have the courage to say this? After all, I was reluctantly coming to the conclusion that it was not of God, but would I say it?

Yes. It comes to one thing at the end of the day: is the Bible true or not?

The article continued with a critique of what was not happening at the meetings, as

well as a critique of what was, and it all led Kendall to conclude 'I can only call this "another gospel" as in Galatians 1'.

The retrospectoscope is a very useful instrument - it is always easier to make diagnoses with hindsight! But credit to these two leaders for their wise foresight and for the courage of their convictions.

Christian prayer for healing

As we - probably - put Lakeland behind us, we should still conclude that Christians, including and perhaps especially Christians in medicine, should pray for healing. The rest of this article will analyse that whole issue, with much summarised from my CMF book *Hard Questions about Health and Healing*.

healing miracles in the Bible – a medical perspective

Decades ago, Dr Peter May analysed the characteristics of Christ's miracles of healing and of the others seen in the Bible and concluded:⁴

- The conditions were obvious examples of gross physical disease

- They were at that time incurable and most remain so today
- Jesus almost never used physical means
- The cures were immediate
- Restoration was complete and therefore obvious
- There were no recorded relapses
- Miracles regularly elicited faith

These seven characteristics give us a New Testament gold standard for defining healing miracles. Contemporary claims for miraculous healing can be evaluated against this gold standard.

do healing miracles happen today?

Later in the book,⁵ I describe an objective approach for Christian doctors to use in evaluating claims for miraculous healing.

First line questions include:

- What was the medical version of the story?
- What was the precise nature of the diagnosis?
- At what time did recovery take place?
- Were any treatments being given at the same time?

Depending on the answers to these, a second level of questions may be needed.

For example, concerning the diagnosis:

- On what basis was the diagnosis made?
- How reliable were the tests performed?
- How reliable were the observers conducting the tests?
- Have experts checked the results?
- Could there be other explanations for the results?

During controversies about healing miracles in the early 1990s, I was one of three CMF members (each then at different positions on the 'charismatic' spectrum) who reviewed current claims, and concluded '...between us, we did not find a single case that unequivocally satisfied our strict criteria for a...miracle of healing'.⁶

But each of us had exciting personal stories of answers to prayer for healing (and the least 'charismatic' of us had the best stories!). We christened them 'Tales of the Unexpected' after a TV programme popular at the time, and they led us to conclude that, yes, Christians should pray for healing.

Before I turn to the question of how we do that, it will be

helpful to list some of the categories that account for the different interpretations that both medical and non-medical Christians may hold:⁷

- Was the diagnosis wrong?
- Was there spontaneous remission?
- Could the diagnosis have been hysteria or psychosomatic illness?
- Was there just a genuine misunderstanding?
- Is it a case of exaggeration, half truth, or frank lie?

how should Christians pray for healing?

I stated above that although we longed to see a genuine New Testament, gold standard example of a healing miracle we had not done so. For me at least, five years later that remains true. But my response is not to assume therefore that God doesn't do miracles today. One of the dangers there is creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: God does not do healing miracles; therefore I will not pray for them; therefore exciting answers to prayer for healing (or even miracles) are less likely to happen; therefore my doubt is reinforced; therefore I will not pray...!

Rather, I am stimulated to pray more. I believe that prayer for healing is no different from other prayers. However, we should be particularly sensitive about how we provide it. The Bible gives us vital help in James 5:13-16:

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

There is no space to do other than summarise the principles this passage reveals. Christian healing:⁸

- Is available for all
- Should be patient centred
- Should be practised responsibly
- Involves prayer
- May involve symbols
- Is associated with faith
- Is associated with forgiveness of sin

Application of these principles in church contexts will obviously depend on the traditions and practice there. I believe they can also be applied, occasionally and very carefully and sensitively, in the health professional context, but with these vital emphases:⁹

- The doctor must clearly change role
- The patient must give consent
- That consent must truly be fully informed
- The doctor should reassure that the prayer is not solely because of despair
- Touch is unnecessary and inappropriate
- The doctor should return to role before the consultation ends

the Gamaliel principle

Following that brief consideration of aspects of Christian prayer for healing, let me return to a media enquiry about whether we believed people were being raised from the dead at Lakeland. My response was: 'Yes, God can do anything - but show us the evidence'.

To the Evangelical Alliance, we and others advocated the Gamaliel principle mentioned

above. In Acts 5 we read that because of healing miracles performed daily through Peter and the apostles, they were brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. One of the Pharisees, Gamaliel, 'who was honoured by all the people', gave us this immortal principle, which helps us to value evidence while believing in a God who does miracles:

Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.¹⁰

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6. *Ibid*:87
7. *Ibid*:88-91
8. *Ibid*:133-136
9. *Ibid*:140,141
10. Acts 5:38,39