
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND HEALING

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[This article is research in progress, which will form part of a wider study of the Watch Tower Society, to be entitled *Jehovah's Witnesses: Continuity and Change*, to be published by Ashgate (UK) in 2014. Biblical quotations are from the New World Translation (revised 2013), which is the Jehovah's Witnesses' own version.]

Since Jehovah's Witnesses believe in the inerrancy of scripture, and seek to revive a form of first century Christianity that was lost through apostasy, one might have expected Jehovah's Witnesses to attempt to revive miracles and miraculous healings, as are found in the Bible. This presentation aims to explore the reasons why they do not.

Jehovah's Witnesses teach that suffering, disease and illness entered the world as a result of the Fall. They hold that Satan was originally created as a perfect being, but fell from grace and came to Earth, where he successfully tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Other angelic beings joined Satan's rebellion and became known as demons, of whom Satan is the chief. Sickness can be caused directly by Satan or by evil spirits: Job's afflictions were due to Satan's direct activity, and the gospels recount numerous incidents in which Jesus drove out demons. (Watch Tower 1951; 1953; 2008)¹.

According to Watch Tower teaching Jehovah can directly inflict illness as a punishment for sin on occasions. For example, Moses' sister Miriam contracts leprosy as a consequence of her rebellion against Moses, although she is miraculously cured (Numbers 12:10-15). Not so fortunate is Jehoram, who contracts a prolonged and painful bowel disorder for his unfaithfulness, which turns out to be incurable (2 Chronicles 21:18-19). More commonly, suffering is the result of human imperfection, with its selfish desires, and particularly as a consequence of living within the last days before Armageddon. False religion can also be a cause: as a recent *Watchtower* article explains, liberal mainstream clergy often condone illicit sex, which leads to disease (Watch Tower 2013: 4). Wicked spirits can also create suffering through occultist practices, such as astrology, magic and sorcery. Sometimes Witnesses express concern at households who display images of "false gods", for example ornamental buddhas.

Jehovah's Witnesses have no doubt that miraculous events occurred in the Bible, and indeed that Jesus commanded his disciples to perform signs and wonders (John 14:12). However, the Watch Tower organisation espouses the doctrine known as cessationism – a teaching that is little discussed in mainstream theology or in the study of new religious

movements, but surfaces in some conservative Protestant circles. Cessationism is the view that a number of gifts of the spirit² died out with the first generation of apostles, and contrasts with continuationism, the belief that wonder-working powers have either endured through the centuries, or can be revived in modern times.

Jehovah's Witnesses frequently point to 1 Corinthians 13:8 where Paul says:

But if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away with; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away with. (1 Corinthians 13:8, NWT; Watch Tower 1988d: 693.)

It should be noted that cessationists do not hold that all the gifts of the spirit die out. Elsewhere Paul states that “the fruitage of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, mildness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23), and of course in the famous Corinthians chapter cited above he affirms that faith, hope, and love will all endure (1 Corinthians 13:13). What will vanish away are the signs and wonders, and in particular the gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healing. When Jesus tells his disciples that they will drive out demons, speak in tongues, handle snakes, drink poison with impunity, and heal the sick (Mark 16:17-18), the Watch Tower Society points out that this final passage – the “long ending” – in Mark's gospel does not appear in the most ancient manuscripts, and is probably a later addition. Hence Jehovah's Witnesses are not involved in snake handling or deliverance ministries (Watch Tower 1973: 6). No one speaks in tongues at a Kingdom Hall meeting, there are no healing services, and although the Watch Tower Society has a keen interest in prophecy, it does not itself have any prophets or new prophecies.

Cessationism is not a modern theory. In his *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* Martin Luther explained:

But after that the Church was gathered together and confirmed with those miracles, it was not necessary that this visible sending of the Holy Ghost should continue any longer. (Luther 1535/1961: 360).

And John Calvin wrote,

The gift of healing, like the rest of the miracles which the Lord willed to be brought forth for a time, has vanished away in order to make the preaching of the gospel marvelous forever.” (*Institutes*, IV:19, 18).

The doctrine is particularly associated with Protestantism, and the notion of the preaching of the word. It was subsequently espoused by the preachers Jonathan Edwards and C. H. Spurgeon, and by writers such as B. B. Warfield (1919), Richard B. Gaffin (1979), and Jon Ruthven (1993). (Pennington 2013).

One can detect in cessationism an implicit critique of the Roman Catholic cults of shrines, saint veneration, apparitions, and pilgrimages for healing – none of which feature in

Watch Tower spirituality. Although founder-leader Charles Taze Russell was writing only two decades after Saint Bernadette's first vision at Lourdes in 1858, he only makes one mention of the shrine, although more recent Watch Tower literature has featured articles about apparitions within Roman Catholicism (Russell 1905:3501; Watch Tower 1988f; 1989: 3-8). Particular disapproval is expressed concerning their focus on the Virgin Mary and the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception; and the claim that the first experience of the apparition of Our Lady of Fatima included a vision of hell understandably has proved unattractive to Jehovah's Witnesses (Watch Tower 1989).

The Watch Tower Society's antipathy to spiritual healing raises a number of questions. Why were these spiritual gifts withdrawn? What view does the Society take about healing and about prayer for healing? And might we expect these gifts to be restored in the coming New World? I shall address each of these questions in turn.

One might have expected that the withdrawal of spiritual gifts is linked to the apostasy that Jehovah's Witnesses claim to have followed upon the death of the early apostles. Although some cessationists have connected the withdrawal of these gifts with spiritual degeneration, the Watch Tower Society rejects any such connection. Jehovah's Witnesses hold that Jesus and the early apostles had laid a foundation for the continuation of the Christian faith, which was already complete, and further generations with the same spiritual powers were no longer needed. Everything that is needed in order to receive the truth is already here. The healing miracles were signs, authenticating the authority of these early leaders, rather than promoting their aggrandisement (Watch Tower 1988c). While acknowledging that Jesus performed exorcisms to overcome demon possession, such methods of dealing with troublesome paranormal phenomena are forcefully discouraged, since they themselves involve resorting to the occult (Watch Tower 1988e: 1029).

Illness is to be treated, then, by natural rather than supernatural means. This involves recourse to traditional medicine, although in the past Jehovah's Witnesses have had some reluctance to accept innovations such as germ theory and inoculations.³ Positive cultivation of health was reckoned to be important, and Witnesses continue to be open to the use of alternative therapies (Watch Tower 2000).

Health was a particular concern in Watch Tower literature during the 1930s and 1940s. The magazine *The Golden Age*, the precursor of the present-day *Awake!* magazine, published between 1919 and 1939 under the editorship of Clayton J. Woodworth, questioned the view that germs caused disease, opposed vaccination, recommended various foods as being particularly nutritious (such as spinach and goats' milk), and repeatedly issued grave warnings against the use of aluminium cooking utensils (Watch Tower 1924; 1936). Woodworth appears to have been particularly impressed by a device invented by Albert Abrams (1863–1924), a US doctor who marketed a number of remarkable electrical devices that purportedly effected amazing cures, allegedly by means of electro-magnetism and radio waves. The theory behind his devices was that everything vibrates and is effectively a broadcasting station. Disease is wrong vibration, and its vibration can be detected by means of placing a small sample of the patient's blood on an electrode, and detecting how it vibrated. The vibration would infallibly identify the disease, and the machine would also

modify the vibration, thus restoring the patient to health. The device was reckoned to have a 100 percent success rate at both for diagnosis and for cure. Even the patient's signature could sometimes be used in place of a blood sample, and therapists who use the machine could therefore detect the diseases from which famous figures of the past had died. Samuel Pepys evidently had contracted congenital syphilis, as had Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe. Samuel Johnson had additionally acquired tuberculosis! The favourite diseases for diagnosis were syphilis, tuberculosis, cancer and sarcoma. (Museum of Questionable Medical Devices 2013). A *Golden Age* article extolled the virtues of Abrams' devices (Watch Tower 1925), and various subscribers wrote testimonials about the efficacy of the Electronic Radio Biola, a machine for home use, and for which *The Golden Age* carried an advertisement (22 April 1925: 479). Albert Abrams' methods appear to have been employed at the Brooklyn Bethel, where Dr Mae J. Work was a physician, and she was a supporter of Abrams.

Not everyone in the Watch Tower Society, however, was convinced about such methods of treatment. One vociferous critic was Roy D. Goodrich, who persisted in writing numerous lengthy letters to the Watch Tower headquarters on the topic. Goodrich's concern was that, since the machines lacked any scientific basis, they were comparable to ouija boards, and relied on occult powers for their operation. Woodworth was generous enough to allow Goodrich to write an article for *The Golden Age* expressing his views. (In those days the magazine permitted discussion of conflicting ideas.) Dr Mae J. Work wrote a rejoinder, and various satisfied patients wrote testimonials about how they had benefited from the treatment. Goodrich refused to be silenced, and continued to write detailed critiques of the machines. Finally, the Watch Tower officials, tired of Goodrich's constant – not to say obsessive – agitation, decided in 1944 to disfellowship him on the grounds that he was creating serious dissent within the organisation.

Woodworth's office as editor of *The Golden Age* and its successor *Consolation* lasted from 1919 to 1946. Shortly after his death in 1951, the journals' relatively new successor *Awake!* put forward less eccentric views of health and medical treatment, and condemned "quack cures and food fads" as "a dangerous waste of money and health", and ironically included Abrams' Radioclast – one of his ERA devices – as an example, claiming that it was useless, lacking any scientific basis (Watch Tower 1953; see also Watch Tower 1962a).

In common with the majority of the population, Jehovah's Witnesses believe in natural healing, as well as the practice of medicine. One Watch Tower publication points out that Luke was a physician, and that it was appropriate that he should practice his profession (Watch Tower 1953: 267). Hence healing miracles should not be a substitute for natural and scientific ways to combat illness and disability. In addition to orthodox allopathic medicine, Jehovah's Witnesses are amenable to alternative forms of treatment: a *Watchtower* article written in 2000 commends herbal medicine, homoeopathy, chiropractic, massage and acupuncture. The only forms of medical treatment that Witnesses reject are those that involve the giving of blood, and – less well-known – hypnosis, the latter being associated with the occult, which Jehovah's Witnesses eschew (Watch Tower 1962b; 2003).

Unsurprisingly, Jehovah's Witnesses have recourse to prayer as a way of coping with issues relating to health and suffering. However, like many mainstream Christians, Witnesses

do not expect miraculous results to come from prayer. Prayer is a means of attuning oneself to Jehovah's purposes, and coming to terms with conditions and situations which one might not necessarily welcome, but which must be there for a purpose. Witnesses acknowledge that prayer can have results, but suggest that such results involve changing mental attitudes and spiritual development (Watch Tower 2010: 10). These, of course, may result in improved health, but such effects are natural processes rather than violations of the laws of nature, such as the miracle worker seeks to achieve. Watch Tower literature acknowledges that, even in the apostolic period, many physical ailments remained uncured, or were not made to disappear by miraculous powers. It cites the examples of Epaphroditus, Timothy, and Trophimus (Philippians 2:25-30; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20; Watch Tower 1988a:633). Timothy was instructed to drink wine for his health's sake, and the Watch Tower Society acknowledges the importance of diet and drink in pursuit of health. Alcohol, of course, should be drunk in moderation, since excess alcohol consumption can itself lead to serious illness (Watch Tower 2011: 4).

Health and spiritual well-being are viewed as being particularly connected. The Bible portrayed those who were sceptical about Jesus' healing miracles as spiritually blind, and miraculous healing proved almost impossible where Jesus' authority was questioned, for example in his home town of Nazareth (Mark 6:5). Complete spiritual healing occurs with repentance and true acknowledgement of Jehovah's rule, and in the coming New World, those who are part of the everlasting paradise on earth will enjoy abounding health (Watch Tower 1988b: 1056). It is not expected that in this coming paradise that will be a restoration of the lost spiritual gifts, for they will have become unnecessary. There will be no sickness (Isaiah 33:24), no disabilities (Isaiah 35:5-6), no pain, sorrow, or death (Revelation 21:4). The things that cause such conditions will be absent, for example malnutrition, war, stressful work, lack of shelter. Jesus, the great healer, did not accomplish his miracles through spectrochrome machines or fad diets, but by his ransom sacrifice, which makes possible the coming kingdom.

However, members of the Great Crowd who survive Armageddon – in contrast to the 144,000 anointed ones, who will have spiritual rather than renewed physical resurrection bodies – will carry over old-world illnesses and disabilities. Those who are resurrected will be revived with bodies in perfect condition, free from all imperfections, and hence will not need any miraculous healing. For those who survive Armageddon the situation is somewhat different: the imperfections and maladies will require a renewal of Christ's healing powers, and hence the revival of miraculous cure – but only by Jesus, not by the restoration of miraculous powers to human beings. Christ's work of performing miracles when on Earth serves as an assurance to encourage the great crowd, that not only will they live beyond Armageddon, but they will experience everlasting life in perfect physical health (Watch Tower 1991:12).

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Endnotes:

- ¹ All Watch Tower publications after 1942 are anonymous, and many before that date are unattributed. The author of such material is therefore cited as 'Watch Tower'.
- ² Jehovah's Witnesses always spell 'spirit' and 'holy spirit' with lower casing, since they regard the spirit as Jehovah's active force, rather than a person.
- ³ For a more recent view of inoculation, see Watch Tower (1993).