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THE IMPACT OF HEALING ON THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN ASIA: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

JULIE MA

Spiritus 4.2 (2019) 283–296

<http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/spiritus/>

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Keywords *healing, missions, evangelism, Asian Pentecostalism, miracles*

Abstract

This article explores the role healing has played in the expansion of Christianity throughout Asia. It documents stories from various regions of Asia to demonstrate that healing is an effective method for evangelism.

Introduction

The followers of Christ are commissioned to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. This call to witness is a critical component in the building and expansion of God's kingdom (Matt 28:19; Mark 16:15). Jesus was not just concerned with proclaiming the gospel, he also brought healing to the suffering. In fact, Jesus' whole life and ministry were characterized by displays of divine power, which both confirmed and helped promulgate the good news. In the same way, Christ delegated to his followers the power and authority to preach the gospel, cast out demons, and heal the sick (Luke 9:1). This commission was echoed in Paul's declaration, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Cor 2:4). From this point

of view, biblical proclamation of the gospel should go hand in hand with demonstration of the gospel in healing, signs, and wonders.

Although the continuity and validity of divine healing today continues to be questioned by some Christian traditions, the emergence and growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements has reignited the discussion on the validity of healing today. The explosive growth of Pentecostalism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America has contributed to the growing acceptance of healing as part of the gospel. Even non-Pentecostal churches in the global South frequently conduct healing services resulting in hundreds of people claiming divine healing and conversions.¹ In many places like China, Korea, and India, it is the phenomenon of healing that has accompanied the growth of Christianity across denominations.

Two prominent missionaries came to Asian countries to bring souls to Christ: Hudson Taylor to China in 1865 and William Carey to India in 1761. Their marvelous mission works resulted in bringing countless people to the knowledge of Christ. Subsequently, many other missionaries came and passionately worked for drawing non-believers to Christ, including Pentecostal missionaries. However, it was Pentecostalism that brought healing as an important part of Christian life and ministry. Pentecostal faith and ministry were introduced to China in 1907 by Bernt Berntsen, a missionary who was deeply impacted by his spiritual experience at the Azusa Street revival meeting.² It was also introduced to Japan in 1907 by several missionaries led by Martin L. Ryan.³ In 1928, Mary C. Rumsey, an American woman missionary, came to Korea as the first Pentecostal missionary.⁴

Pentecostals have excelled in promoting God's miraculous work of healing today as an essential element of evangelization. Supernatural healing has the potential to authenticate the witness of God's love and power, confirmed by signs and wonders. No one exemplified the wedding of healing and evangelism more than Oral Roberts, whose dynamic preaching and his "healing line" were watched by millions on television.⁵ What difference does the demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit through

healing make in helping people to take a step of faith towards Christ? This study discusses the demonstrations of the Holy Spirit in healing among many Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal Christians, and its impact on the Asian church.

Experiences of Healing Power in Asia

The rapid growth of Pentecostalism in Asia over the past century has been remarkable. As Alan Anderson has pointed out, Asian Christianity has been given a “charismatic face” through explosive growth of Pentecostal communities.⁶ Because of this, healing, prophecy, exorcism, and tongues are naturally practiced in Asian Pentecostal churches. As I have pointed out, the religious history of Asia has provided fertile ground for Pentecostal practices of Christianity.

As the birthplace of all the world’s established religions and widespread animism, religions played a crucial role in providing solutions to life’s diverse challenges. Albeit the advent of modern education and economic development along with political independence from the middle of the twentieth century, religious faiths, both native and foreign to Asia, persist in all the East and Southeast Asian countries. Their dynamic worship, the expectancy of divine intervention, the teaching of empowerment by the Spirit, and external signs like speaking in tongues and healing have moved the fastest growing religion in the region. Their unique spirituality has brought the affective dimension of human existence into a religious experience.⁷

The phenomenon of the supernatural is prevalent partly because of Asia’s worldview, which recognizes that every religion includes elements of the supernatural.

The incorporation of healing as a major component of church growth has been exemplified in the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul Korea, where the practice of healing in worship and through ministry takes place

on the Prayer Mountain.⁸ Yonggi Cho has placed a strong emphasis on faith, prayer, and healing along with Spirit baptism accompanied by speaking in tongues as a sign. He passionately preached that God is pouring out his Spirit in our days according to the prophecy of Joel. The exceptional manifestation of divine healing and supernatural occurrences have become the main features of his ministry from the tent church era (1958–1961).⁹ Countless people were healed from diverse sicknesses, and subsequently, many non-Christians who experienced God’s healing came to his church. Cho’s sermons had a powerful impact on the lives of city slum dwellers, his initial congregation. Needless to say, divine healing was the driving force behind the growth of his church.

But Korea is not the only place in Asia where healing has been a major catalyst. Other Asian communities, such as the tribal people in the mountains of northern Luzon, Philippines, where my husband and I ministered for decades, have practiced these spiritual gifts during prayer time in the worship services when the Holy Spirit strongly moved upon the congregation. Within Asian Pentecostalism, cases of divine healing have contributed significantly to evangelism. Several cases are included as an illustration of the point.

Nepal

In 1961, Nepal had very few churches; only about twenty-five Christians were known to exist. However, by 2010, the number of Christians reached 850,801 adherents.¹⁰ Although Nepal is a Hindu kingdom, Christianity is experiencing a spiritual harvest. In the Himalayas, people are drawn to churches with an openness to the supernatural manifestation of God’s power, especially healing. Suresh Tamang’s testimony is a good illustration. When his mother was suffering from various diseases, his father and the village priest sacrificed several goats and chickens to their gods and prayed for her healing, but she did not improve. The priest traveled to other villages to buy more animals to sacrifice, but the mother soon died. In his sorrow, Tamang went to a Buddhist lama and implored him to bring back his

mother's life. The lama visited the house and chanted prayers for several hours, but with no result. Lastly, Tamang decided to call a group of Christians from a nearby village, having heard that their God had the power to heal. The Christians came to his home and prayed for his mother, while the entire village kept an eye on them. To Tamang's amazement and delight, his mother came back to life. As a result, he and his family, along with twenty other households, totaling more than 160 people, accepted the Lord. Today Tamang leads twenty new fellowships in the Himalayas and is closely associated with Asian Outreach.¹¹

It is known that healing frequently draws people to Christ in Nepal. One source asserts that "there must be thousands who have come to the Lord through healing."¹² One story from Nepal tells that an "expatriate carpenter ruptured his spleen in an isolated area" where necessary medical treatment was unavailable. But when the group of believers prayed, the man swiftly started to recuperate. Another story involves a researcher who traveled to Nepal and asked a Nepali Christian, Udaya Sharma, if he had seen any healing. He mentioned that in December 2005, he and several other Christians prayed for a person afflicted with a kidney problem for more than five years. The man was healed, a fact that was confirmed by his doctors who declared he no longer needed dialysis. As a result, numerous people in the village became Christians.¹³

Philippines

Elva Vanderbout was a legendary American Pentecostal missionary in northern Luzon, Philippines.¹⁴ In the entire year of 1954, each week she preached the gospel in an open-air service in Tuding where she proclaimed the healing power of God, based on Mark 16:15–18. Moved by the dire needs of the people, with her simple faith in the Word of God, she and her ministry team prayed for the sick and many people were healed.¹⁵

One such story was of a fourteen-year-old boy who was crippled because of a broken leg when he was 7 years old. As his bones grew, his leg abnormally developed so much that his deformed leg could not touch the

ground. Instead of walking, he hopped along with the help of a stick or by crawling along on the ground. He went to the witchdoctors for treatment, but there was no improvement. Because of this, his parents gave up on their pagan worship and decided to follow Christ.¹⁶ Vanderbout and her ministry team visited the boy's home. She laid her hands upon him and prayed, believing in Christ to heal. After the prayer, he threw away his stick because of his faith in God's healing.¹⁷ From that time on, he no longer used his stick as little by little his leg straightened up. Another story was of a young girl who had not been able to walk for a few years. Through Vanderbout's ministry, she was healed and began to walk. Her parents turned to Christ through the healing, and they attended the services regularly.¹⁸

Many were saved by healing experiences through God's power manifested in the ministry of Vanderbout and her ministry team. Such testimonies of healings caused revival to grow and added to the number of believers. The crowd attending her meetings normally comprised the whole village population. Such revivals soon spread. The revival in Tuding, for example, eventually spread to the whole Benguet Province and other provinces throughout the mountain region.

In 1951 in Banget Province, Manual Gonzales was very weak and the family prepared for his death. When Christians prayed for hours for his restoration, he suddenly began to shake himself and soon jumped out of bed. As he was fully recovered, his funeral was canceled. The word spread and more came to Christ. Years later, he became a prominent Christian leader.¹⁹

Dom Bustria, a rural pastor, who is now 61 years old, had epilepsy for twenty-five years. Often his seizures occurred around once a week. In his despair, he developed various addictions, particularly to alcohol. In November 1988, at the naval base in Diego Garcia, he accepted Christ as his personal Savior. From that day forward, he never had another epileptic attack, nor did he have any desire for his previous addictions. That has lasted more than two decades. He began sharing Christ in villages and finally left his well-paying work to become a pastor.²⁰

Malaysia

John Savarimuthus was the Indian bishop of the Anglican Church in mainly Muslim West Malaysia. He postponed a triple-bypass heart surgery due to his extremely demanding ministry. As his heart condition degenerated, however, the surgery was at last arranged. The night before the planned surgery, in prayer, he sincerely dedicated his heart problem to God. While still in prayer, he abruptly felt hotness in his heart. The next day, he had a pre-operation test and his heart condition turned miraculously normal. It was verified the sensation he had felt earlier was the touch of God's healing. Since this experience, when he prays for the sick, people start getting healed. He even held a healing service in Kuala Lumpur's stadium with permission from the government.²¹ Through his healing ministry, many sick people and non-believers came to the knowledge of Christ.

Myanmar

In Myanmar, the widespread personal accounts of miracles—including healing of cancer, tonsillitis, blindness, and deafness—have enabled the church to grow. A village priest who was close to dying was miraculously cured through prayer and became a believer, and a woman paralyzed for twenty years was radically healed.²² The expectation of the indigenous religion often challenges Christian works.²³ Lang Do Khup, a Baptist minister, was challenged by a village priest that the Christian God is not strong enough in healing in comparison to the traditional spirits. The minister began to seek God for the gift of healing. When he saw a lame girl in his church, he was urged to pray. Having returned home, the urge grew stronger to go back to her and pray again. After his second prayer, she stood up and took steps with no assistance. It shocked the entire village, both Christians and non-Christians alike. In the area, such a supernatural experience had never been known as part of the Christian life. This occurrence of healing was a watershed moment for bringing the villagers to the Christian faith.

Cambodia

As a nation, Cambodia was suffering from national trauma from the genocide campaign of the Pol Pott regime when the Christian message of healing was introduced in recent years. In five years (1975–1979), close to 2 million people, or more than 20 percent of its population, were killed by the Khmer Rouge government. Coupled with the claims of supernatural healing by folk Buddhism, healing was a Cambodian national agenda.²⁴ There was a widow in her fifties known for her mental disability. Sometimes she violently shook her body, while at other times, she could not acknowledge her mother. Many times, she lay on the ground. She was also deaf. Some Christians pitied her and prayed for her. Soon, she was led to faith in Christ, and she confessed her sins. At that moment, she felt something expelled from her ears, and from that time on, she could hear. This was followed by the disappearance of other symptoms. Her normal life was restored with no trace of symptoms.²⁵ Her healing and other people's healing became widely known, resulting in a large number coming to the Lord.

Indonesia

Many people have reported on miracles as part of the revival in West Timor, Indonesia, a few decades ago. John Wimber recounts, "A key element of this revival was its indigeneity of appropriateness for its Indonesian context. In its beginning, Johannes Ratuwalu, reportedly immature in his faith but responding to a vision, prayed for healings from October to December 1964, with many people being healed."²⁶ Though the numbers may be overstated, many have assessed that "thirty thousand healings through prayer took place in this period."²⁷ One study by a western observer stated that many blind and deaf people experienced healing through one particular person's prayers in a short length of time. He even reported "many eyewitness accounts of water being turned to wine."²⁸ The manifestations of healing were instrumental in bringing many non-Christians to Christ and impacted church growth.

South Korea

Prayer for destitute people, frequently with “report of miraculous answers,” has been considered to be a crucial contribution to church growth at Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, the world’s largest church. Its founder, Yonggi Cho himself, experienced divine healing. He suffered from severe tuberculosis when he was young. Very often he was in bed with excruciating pain for a long duration. He put his trust in God and experienced a miraculous healing. To the astonishment of his doctor and his family, Cho was absolutely cured. A new set of x-rays showed that the large spot on his lung had gone.²⁹

Another healing story is of Jürgen Moltmann, a renowned theologian who once attended a theological conference hosted by Yoido Full Gospel Church. He offered his gratitude to Pastor Cho for his ministry and “theological reflection.” Moltmann expresses in his autobiography that he was suffering from recurring asthma when he visited the church. According to him, Cho “took my hand and prayed; and when I flew home, the asthma was in abeyance and remained so for some weeks. I do not want to make miraculous healing out of this, but it was certainly unusual.”³⁰

A seminarian named Jun Kim in Korea had an accident in 2004, falling from a two-story height. “His face was paralyzed from a head injury; he could not open one eye or control his facial movement but decided against surgery for his head injury.” Another patient in the same hospital room had the same signs, and the operation was unsuccessful. He was surprised that Kim would decline the option of the operation. He continued his prayer committing his problem to the Lord, asking whether God would heal him or not. The next morning, he was able to begin to move his face. The doctor who examined him was astonished by this unexplainable improvement. He was allowed to go home and keep exercising his face, which was not fully restored. Kim’s roommate was also astounded that Kim was discharged. An eyewitness declared such as “direct experiences of healing, as in the Gospels and Acts.”³¹

China

A large number of Christians have reported cases of healing and exorcism in the Chinese church. Earlier reports from some members of the official China Christian Council suggested that roughly “half of the new conversions of the last twenty years have been caused by faith healing experiences” of the convert or someone close to them. Speaking more broadly of Christians in China in general, one researcher estimates a much higher number. “[A]ccording to some surveys, 90% of new believers cite healing as a reason for their conversion.” Whatever may be the exact figure, the expectation and experience of healing in China is widespread. Testimonies of healing are so common that even some government officials recognize that many people become Christians in response to claims of prayers resulting in healings.³² The practice of healing and exorcism is widespread among unregistered rural churches where it is a regular practice for believers to visit sick people to pray for their healing.³³

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, healing miracles were instrumental in bringing numerous people to Jesus Christ. Craig Keener documents one case where doctors concluded that Nadaraj, a Hindu man, had an incurable case of blood cancer. Out of desperation, he asked pastor D. F. Rodrigo to pray for him and he was miraculously healed. Nadaraj became a believer right away and later an elder in the church. Another healing story is about a Buddhist who became anguished because of his failing health from a hole in his heart. He requested Pastor Premadasa Ginigaloda to pray for his healing. Subsequent medical tests showed a healthy heart, to the astonishment of the cardiologists.³⁴ He truly experienced God’s almighty power of healing.

Keener gives another healing account of a Sri Lankan man who became a Christian after the experience of healing through the prayers of a pastor.

For two years, Wimalasiri's right foot suffered swelling, and doctors, medicine men, and even a chief exorcist were unable to provide relief. He, therefore, scoffed when one evening some Christians prayed for his foot, though he felt something strange in his foot at that moment. The next morning he awoke to discover his foot completely healed. Despite initial resistance, he became a Christian after about three more months and eventually established a church, now quite large, in an area that previously had very few Christians.³⁵

India

In 1992, Nivedita Ghosh in India had an operation followed by radiation treatment for her final-stage brain cancer. It had completely ruined her salivary glands, thus, taking away the capability to speak and eat. Doctors determined that she would not live for more than five months. While she was unconscious, a believer in her neighborhood visited her and offered a passionate prayer for her healing. To the family's amazement, Nivedita's fever suddenly disappeared, and she started speaking. The family immediately removed their idol figures from the home and began to attend a church. For the following months, she was able to swallow food. Within six months, she became well and normal. Her neurosurgeon tested her and declared that she was cancer free. The doctor could not even locate the surgery marks from her earlier operation.³⁶ This marvelous testimony traveled across her village and amazed both believers and non-believers. As a result, numerous unbelievers began to come to church.

Conclusion

Healing was an integral part of Jesus' ministry along with his preaching and teaching. It served as the powerful demonstration of God's power and love. It also drew people to the presentation of God's kingdom. This crucial component of ministry continues today across Asia. Without doubt, healing

has played a vital role in evangelism and church growth, and will continue today and in the future in Asia.



Julie Ma (jma@oru.edu) is Associate Professor of Missions and Intercultural Studies at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.

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