Joseph W. Williams


The crippled standing up and walking away without crutches; the blind suddenly being able to see; the cancerous tumor that suddenly vanished—all are examples of miraculous healings that were reported during the earliest Pentecostal revivals. While during those early years Pentecostals invoked these miracles as signs of God’s blessing upon them, eventually Pentecostal healing began to shape-ship into new forms—forms that were reflected within American health culture at large and that changed as believers’ needs changed. This story of change, influence, and innovation within Pentecostal healing is succinctly told by Joseph W. Williams in his new book _Spirit Cure: A History of Pentecostal Healing._

Williams divides his book both by theme and trends within Pentecostal healing. He begins by focusing on early Pentecostal healing, and the influence of pre-Pentecostals such as Alexander Dowie, Maria Woodworth-Etter, and Frank Sanford. For them, as well as early Pentecostals, healing was seen as hand-to-hand combat with the dark forces of Satan manifested in the form of physical illness. The saints’ preference for Pentecostal healing was also spurred by the inefficiency of early twentieth century physicians, who sometimes prescribed dangerous and unreliable ‘cures’ during this era. Williams is careful to point out that early Pentecostals were not as likely to reject science as they were to reject some of the practices of early doctors. Yet this rejection of the medical establishment would not be forever—in fact many later twentieth-century Pentecostals would come to engage the field in their own due time.

By the mid-twentieth century many Pentecostals had embraced an uneasy détente with the medical profession—most professed to believing in divine healing as well as the abilities of modern medicine. The healing evangelist Oral Roberts spearheaded this approach, publically stating that “‘I believe God gives us good doctors,’ he added in 1957, ‘I believe he gives us good doctors because he wants man to be well’” (p. 63). Roberts eventually established a school of medicine at the university bearing his name in the hopes of training Pentecostal doctors who would combine both their faith and abilities as physicians. Although his medical school would close in the late 1980s, his push for Pentecostals to embrace medicine heralded a shift in Pentecostal attitudes towards the medical establishment.

The heart of Williams’s book lays in how Pentecostals eventually engage modernity in the form of a new approach to healing post 1960. One of the most interesting chapters focuses on some Pentecostals’ embrace of mental
healing (or “inner healing” as some called it). Williams traces the fascinating influence of Episcopalian Agnes Sanford on Pentecostals and charismatics by teasing out the variety influences that she brought in her teachings, including New Thought and some New Age and metaphysical ideas. Her teachings were eventually picked up by some Pentecostals and charismatics as ways to promote mental healing. What is fascinating about Williams’s research is that he shows the tangled influences of Pentecostal healing, and how many of the saints were influenced by healers that may not usually be understood as being within Pentecostal circles, such as the Episcopalian Sanford or the Catholic minister Francis McNutt. While Pentecostals like to think that they have a unique approach to healing, what Williams shows is that they often borrowed heavily from other traditions, including those that they strongly disavowed.

Another strength of Williams’s book is that he does not limit the category ‘Pentecostal.’ Williams includes traditional Pentecostal groups, charismatic groups, and Word of Faith groups all together in his history of healing. This allows him to seamlessly approach the various themes in healing without having to create arbitrary boundaries or to be hemmed in by them. For instance, in his chapter on mental healing, Williams includes Word of Faith preachers, such as Kenneth Hagin, Joyce Meyer, and T.D. Jakes and takes apart how they incorporate some language of mental healing within their own ministries. He then ties this language to what more traditional Pentecostals and charismatics use in their own assessments of “inner healing,” thus highlighting the fluid influences between more “traditional” Pentecostal groups and Word of Faith.

In the last chapter before the conclusion Williams addresses the Pentecostal diet and health trend. Jesus, as it turns out, did not wish for his followers to be fat and unhealthy. Here, Williams fluidly goes back and forth between showing how greater American trends in late twentieth century diet culture influenced Pentecostalism, and how Pentecostals continued to mold diet culture to fit their own conceptions of healing. Especially among Word of Faith believers, one’s weight loss could be interpreted as material evidence of the Holy Spirit’s positive work on a believer. Weight loss, it seems, could show that one was blessed.

Williams’s book mainly focuses on the leaders within the healing movements, not on how the masses perceived healing, but he is very specific in the beginning of the work that this was going to be his approach. One advantage of such an approach is that the reader is able to follow particular healing evangelists throughout the myriad of healing trends that the author talks about. This book would be great to use in a history of Pentecostalism class both at