After centuries of neglect and disavowal, the ministry of healing is being renewed in the church at large. My own denomination, the United Methodist Church, has adopted a healing liturgy in its new Book of Worship. The roots of this renewal include both the Holiness-Pentecostal movements of the last two hundred years and the more recent liturgical renewal which has recovered the ritual acts of healing in the early church that were later distorted as a sacrament for the dying (Extreme Unction).

My focus here is on contemporary charismatic theologies of healing. Each of these theologies makes distinctive theological claims which have implications for ministry. In particular, two issues are examined: how these theologies relate God’s faithfulness and God’s freedom, and their understanding of faith. With respect to the former issue, these theologies can be arranged in a rough typology between the two poles of freedom and faithfulness.

By God’s faithfulness I mean faithfulness to God’s promises. An extreme view would claim that, if God has promised healing, and God is faithful to that promise, one will instantly be healed. Healing is seen as somewhat automatic, and failure to be healed is due to our not meeting the conditions for healing.

By God’s freedom I mean God’s freedom to choose how and when and whether to act. An extreme view would see God’s activity as totally mysterious and unpredictable. There are no healing theologies adopting this extreme position, but there are some that do lean toward this pole.
The implications for ministry are significant. If someone is not healed, how is this understood? Is it assumed that God is always faith-ful, so that the sick person must not have met the necessary conditions for healing? Or is it assumed that God in freedom did not choose to heal, at least at that time?

The second issue, the understanding of faith, also affects ministry. Is faith necessary for healing? If so, is faith understood as trusting scriptural promises or trusting in Christ? And whose faith is necessary, that of the one needing healing or that of those praying for healing?

These theological issues directly affect the shape of a healing ministry and the lives touched by that ministry. As they involve our understanding of God, they impact upon our spiritual lives as well.

Following my analysis of contemporary theologies of healing is a reflection on the insights of John Wesley concerning healing and their implications for us today.

I

Perhaps the most controversial Christian theology of healing is that of the ‘faith confession’ or ‘word of faith’ movement. The key figure in this movement is Kenneth Hagin Sr; other prominent leaders include Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Fred Price, Charles Capps, Robert Tilton, Jerry Savelle and Kenneth Hagin Jr. This diverse group, by no means identical in the details of its members’ beliefs or practices, is nevertheless united around a number of common theological affirmations.

Fundamentally, these people believe that Christians are entitled to the ‘blessings of Abraham’ through the cross of Jesus Christ, and that these blessings are received through faith. The blessings of Abraham include salvation, physical health and material prosperity. The insistence that prosperity as well as healing is promised to Christians distinguishes this movement from all the other healing theologies considered in this paper.

Even more characteristic is their emphasis on ‘positive confession’. According to Kenneth Hagin Sr, this ‘principle of faith’ or ‘faith formula’ was discovered by him when, as a bedridden and physically paralyzed teenager, he began to study the Bible. Mk 11.23-24 claimed his attention: