Joseph W. Williams


Rather than a simple chronology, Joseph Williams offers an insightful perspective on the changes in pentecostal (author’s usage) approaches to healing in the past century. In particular, he explicates the complex relationship between pentecostals and both traditional and alternative medicine. Williams also suggests an intriguing association between pentecostalism and metaphysical religion (defined as any religion that “deemphasized personal conceptions of the divine,” “stressed the correspondence between supernatural and natural realms,” and “underscored the manipulability of spiritual power” [15]). He does not exhaustively catalogue pentecostal healing but focuses on healers’ “increasingly explicit spiritualization of natural means of healing” (22). In contrast to other works, he highlights their “willingness over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to borrow and appropriate rival metaphysical practices” (23).

Williams first reviews pentecostal healing in its early days when there was antagonism towards established medical practice (William Seymour claimed that medicine was only for unbelievers). However, the quality of medical care at that time was poor. Alternative medicine was also distrusted: “only God provided a reliable cure” (39). Healing was considered within a supernatural framework; faith in the atonement was considered sufficient, and sickness was usually attributed to demonic forces. Early pentecostal views were complex. Although they denounced “New Thought,” including Christian Science, much teaching (the supernatural current of healing, the Spirit as a substance-like force) sounded suspiciously like metaphysical traditions. Williams concludes that pentecostals were more like alternative healers than orthodox physicians. “By focusing on ... human bodies as transmitters of divine power ... early pentecostals mimicked the metaphysical inclination to blur rigid differentiations between natural and supernatural realms” (52).

Next Williams examines midcentury transitions in pentecostal healing, when divine healing became more a complement to than a substitute for traditional medical care. Pentecostal churches included an increasing number of physicians, and advancements in medical science aided pentecostal support of medicine. However, there remained a group (including William Branham and Oral Roberts) who continued to stress divine healing and deliverance over traditional medicine. Naturopathic medicine was endorsed as it fit well with pentecostal teaching against overindulgence. In another interesting transition, psychology (previously labeled evil) became more respected, with some noting...
that God can heal the mind. References to demonic powers continued but an increasing role of the mind in illness and healing was allowed.

Chapter Three, “Making Medicine Spiritual,” details the increasing support of orthodox medicine by faith healers such as Agnes Sanford and Kathryn Kuhlman. The 1960s saw a decline in the popularity of healing revivalists due to the fraudulent claims and extravagant lifestyles of some. Although there was still some mistrust of traditional medicine, doctors like William Standish Reed incorporated a spiritual approach to medical care. Many pentecostals aligned themselves with the 1970s “holistic health explosion.” Roberts emphasized wholeness and his university included a medical school and mandatory fitness programs. Chapter Four, “Minding the Spirit,” examines the late-century transition toward pentecostals’ acceptance of psychology, especially the inner healing and Word of Faith movements. Some referred to God as the “divine psychiatrist” or “Lord of the subconscious,” and incorporated concepts like “self-esteem” into their ministries. Pioneered by Sanford, the inner healing movement exploded during this period. Sanford emphasized the power of the mind in allowing God’s healing power to work and used visualization techniques in healing. Although inner healing represented some merging with contemporary psychology, charismatics tended to expect dramatic transformations. Controversy remained, partly due to the questionable morality of some faith healers. The Word of Faith movement (including Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland) emphasized reliance on divine healing, but also saw the mind as a key to healing. More recently, Joyce Meyer and T.D. Jakes used a hybrid approach, incorporating Word of Faith and psychological concepts in their teaching.

Williams next moves from mind to body in describing pentecostal teaching on diet, exercise and “natural” medicine, which blended with contemporary culture’s idealization of thin bodies. Pentecostals taught spirit-led diet and exercise, and popular books included Slim for Him, The Diet Bible, and Sweating in The Spirit. The devil remained a prominent figure (disguising himself as fattening food; people claimed deliverance from overeating) and the holistic movement again proved an ally to pentecostals who stressed divine blessing on natural substances. Physician Don Colbert (The Bible Cure, Toxic Relief) encouraged following Levitical food laws and eating like Jesus ate, and Jordan Rubin (The Maker’s Diet) emphasized eating “biblical” foods like our ancestors did. Many pentecostals also marketed their own supplements (Dr. Reginald Cherry sold “digestion support” tablets). Some were more moderate, encouraging realistic body expectations (Making Peace with Your Thighs).

Williams concludes that pentecostals’ emphasis on the Holy Spirit, conceived of as an impersonal force, distinguished them from other Christians