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# The Truth About Alternative Medicine: What Christians Should Know

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{This article was published in *Mission: America* (Winter 1997) pp. 7-8. [Mission: America](#) is an organization addressing tough societal issues from a Christian perspective. Click on my name above to return to my home page from where you can get to other papers I've written, my interests, or get in contact with me.}

Widespread news coverage of alternative **medicine** reflects growing interest in these therapies. In response, many medical schools and nursing colleges now teach courses in alternative therapies. Some are available in certain hospitals, and insurance companies sometimes cover them. What should Christians think of this cultural trend? We must seek to understand why people are interested in these therapies so that we can bring the power of Christ to bear on the underlying needs.

Many terms are used to describe these therapies: complementary, unconventional, holistic, fringe, or New Age **medicine**. Each term has different connotations contributing to different definitions of alternative **medicine**. Sometimes broad definitions give the impression that popular use is higher than may be the case. A frequently cited *New England Journal of Medicine* study found that 34% of Americans used some unconventional **therapy** during 1990, spending \$13.7 billion. Included were alternatives like Chinese herbal **medicine**, chiropractic, homeopathy and **energy healing**. However, also included were therapies few would classify as alternatives: self-help groups, weight-loss programs and relaxation techniques!

Yet interest in the health benefits of lifestyle issues could be seen as an 'alternative' to a purely physical approach to health and **healing**. Modern **medicine** has often neglected the importance of lifestyle, relationships, stress, and spirituality. The difficulty in defining these terms should caution us against quickly endorsing or rejecting alternative **medicine en masse**. We believe Christians can welcome and affirm certain aspects of alternative **medicine**, but other aspects demand caution, and still others must be completely rejected.

The perceived emphasis on technology, drugs and surgery in modern **medicine** makes alternative **medicine** seem more attractive. People are frustrated with the impersonal treatment and financial pressures of hi-tech **medicine**. We as Christians can empathize with these concerns. Humans are not just bags of chemicals, but are embodied spiritual, emotional and relational beings (1 Thes 5:23; Heb 4:12). Any **medicine** which neglects patients' feelings, family dynamics, or lifestyle issues fails to care for the whole person (2 Sam 13:2; Prov 3:8; 17:22). Scripture, unlike modern or alternative **medicine**, also claims we cannot have complete health without dealing with our moral guilt (Ps 32:3-4; 1 Cor 11:29-30). Only Christ can 'treat' this.

Many seek alternatives when dealing with chronic illness or death. We must be sensitive to people's struggles in these trying times. But frantic searching after the latest technological or natural remedy is not the answer. We should certainly care for our bodies and pursue appropriate treatments, especially recognizing that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19-20). However, we should not worship our bodies and expect to be free of suffering. Paul prayed that the thorn in his flesh (thought by many to have been some illness) would be removed, yet it was not (2 Cor 12:7-10). He was comforted knowing his weakness strengthened the power of Christ in him. He learned, and calls on us to learn, to be content in any circumstance (Phil 4:11-13). We can also be comforted knowing that sickness, pain and death will be eradicated (1 Cor 15:26; Rev 21:4). We must base our hope on these promises, not the uncertainties of modern or alternative **medicine**.

Two biblical principles guide us in choosing treatments: stewardship, and avoiding evil practices. Stewardship should lead us to ask whether therapies work or not. Some alternative medicines have never been researched, but others have. Those found beneficial are gaining credibility among health care professionals, e.g. chiropractic for lower back problems, acupuncture for pain, and biofeedback for behavior modification. Lifestyle issues, stress reduction, and caring for the whole person, are demonstrably important. However, many alternative therapies have failed to demonstrate significant benefits in controlled trials, e.g. iridology, homeopathy, and aura **healing**. Yet media reports usually don't mention these, leaving the impression that no alternatives have been shown to be ineffective, and that criticisms are based only on biases.

The lack of consensus on a definition of alternative **medicine** causes problems here also. For example, one critic cited in *Life* noted that little scientific evidence backs up the claims of alternative medicines. The journalist responded that, "This is not entirely true," and mentioned studies dealing with massage, support groups, exercise, diet and meditation. However, his article had been describing practices such as craniosacral **therapy**, **cupping**, homeopathy and pulse diagnosis. Clearly, this is comparing apples with oranges! Yet these rhetorical tactics are commonplace with proponents of alternative **medicine**, and are not limited to the popular media.

Therapeutic touch (TT) is a popular nursing alternative **therapy**. Proponents claim people are primarily **energy** fields. These extend a few inches beyond the skin, and can be detected when meditating. Nurses pass their hands a few inches over patients' bodies *without* making contact. Imbalances in the **energy** field are corrected by "effortless effort" guided by the nurse's good intentions. Rochelle Mackey claimed in a nursing article that several studies show that TT reduces pain. The only one described, by TT proponent Thérèse Meehan, actually concluded "that TT does not significantly decrease postoperative pain." Meehan responded to Mackey's article, writing "that the effects of TT on pain are unclear and replication studies are needed before any conclusions can be drawn. . . . Other claims about outcomes are, in fact, speculation." Yet Mackey's article continues the illusion that TT is research-supported, while reviews of the research show this is clearly not the case.

Wasted resources must concern Christians, but so should the spiritual nature of some alternative medicines. TT's universal **energy** field is common in alternative **medicine**, called by various names like life **energy**, *chi*, and *prana*. Reflexology, Reiki, homeopathy, pulse diagnosis, etc., utilize it, although no physical evidence supports its existence! Some Christians even view this **energy** as God's power and promote these practices. We must evaluate this **energy** in light of its claims, and discern if it could be from God (1 John 4:1-3). We cannot buy into our culture's belief that if it's God for me, and Buddha for you, and life **energy** for them, we can all be happy and accept one another's 'truths.'

God is a personal being to whom we can (and should) pray for **healing** (Jm 5:14-16). But we cannot expect to control God's power (Luke 4:22-27; Acts 8:18-23). Rather, we should submit to his will for our lives (Jm 4:15). In contrast, life **energy** is an impersonal force accessible for **healing** through various techniques. Unlike God, however, it makes no moral claims on people. In effect, these practices offer control over divine power without the need to repent. What is promoted as alternative **medicine** is actually alternative religion. As one practitioner said in *Time*, "I got more

from mind-body **medicine** than I bargained for: I got religion. . . . The God I have found is common to Moses and Muhammad, to Buddha and Jesus. . . . It is what the Cabala calls Ayin, Nothingness, No-Thingness. It is Spirit, Being, the All."

Belief in the existence of life **energy** is deeply rooted in Eastern mystical religions and Western occult traditions. One of TT's founders encourages use of divination. Barbara Brennan's **Healing Touch** recommends the use of spirit guides. Information about Reiki, an ancient Japanese **therapy**, is available through channeling. One alternative **medicine** encyclopedia notes that life force or *prana* "can be harnessed by the individual who sensitizes himself by certain occult practices." These include deep breathing, chanting mantras, advanced visualization and "secret rituals which have been closely guarded secrets of the highest mystery schools on earth . . . and beyond."

Even if therapies based on life energies do heal, Christians must be willing to forgo them. There are fates worse than illness and deformity in this life (Mark 9:43-48). We are to completely avoid the occult (Deu 18:9-14; Isa 8:19; Acts 19:18-19; 1 Cor 10:19-22). False prophets used divination and visions, but only revealed the futility and deception of their minds (Jer 23:16-17; Eze 13:6-8). Sorcery, spells and astrology are useless in our hour of need (Isa 47:9-13).

Instead, we must turn to God and the resources he gives us. We can learn to face illness and death with Paul's hope and contentment (Phil 1:21-24). We should pursue health care as good stewards of the lives and gifts we have been given (1 Cor 12:7). But our focus should be on glorifying God and serving others (Rom 14:7-9). When people see us loving others as God loves us, they will be drawn to his love (John 13:35). They can then experience the true **healing** which comes through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Modern health care could be changed to better reflect the care God wants given to everyone. In doing this, we may gain some insights from alternative **medicine**, but we must reject those religious practices based on Eastern and occult religions.

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