



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

Editors Note: Beginning in November, the Update will be issued just twice a month instead of each week. The normal dates will be the first and third weekends of each month.

One of the most fascinating areas of spiritual life is the relationship between prayer and healing. I was asked to speak this past weekend at a conference for parents who had experienced the death of a child, a rather overwhelming task. Of course one of the issues which kept on rising from some in the group was the fact that God did not heal their own child. In spite of fervent and incessant prayer, for some of them it was over a very extended period of time, the prayers simply did not change the outcome. All of the pious clichés we sometimes use were not very helpful to this group.

Thus it was with existential interest that I picked up the New York Times on Sunday and saw a headline article entitled "Can Prayer Heal?" Of course the only way the Times or other major newspapers consider "spiritual" topics is if there is some deep-seated conflict taking place. Religion is only news if it is conflicted. Unfortunately, there is usually more than sufficient ammunition for the prurient interests of the mainstream media.

Can prayer heal? The latest flap occurred when the U.S. government awarded a \$2.3 million grant to do prayer research. Since 2000 at least ten different studies of intercessory prayer have been conducted by researchers at various institutions, including the Mind/Body Medical Institute, a non-profit Boston group run by a Harvard-trained cardiologist. In addition, Duke University and the University of Washington have received similar grants. Government financing of intercessory prayer research began in the mid-1990's and has continued under the present Administration.

As expected, scientists, theologians, academicians, doctors and medical researchers have all weighed in on the advisability of the government funding such studies. On the one side is Dr. Richard McNally,

a psychologist at Harvard who says, "Intercessory prayer presupposes some supernatural intervention that is by definition beyond the reach of science..it is a total waste of time and money."

On the other hand Dr. Richard Nahin, a senior advisor at the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a part of the National Institute of Health, says that the studies were meant to answer practical questions, not religious ones. "We really only recently understood how aspirin works. A recent government study found that 45% of all adults pray specifically for health reasons...it is a public health imperative to understand if this prayer offers them any benefits."

The article highlights how even those who defend prayer research concede that such studies are inherently difficult. For one thing, no one knows what constitutes a "dose," some studies have tested a few prayers a day by individual healers, while others have had entire congregations praying together. At the same time many Christians are skeptical that prayer can be subjected to scientific scrutiny. For one thing, prayers vary in their purpose and content.

Proponents of prayer research often cite two large heart studies to justify the study of prayer's healing potential. In one study, Dr. Randolph Byrd, a San Francisco cardiologist took 393 patients in the hospital coronary care unit and randomly assigned half of them to be prayed for by born-again Christians. These patients were not told of the experiment. Remarkably he found that those who were prayed for were five times less likely to need antibiotics and had three times fewer complications than those who were not prayed for. (Of course those not prayed for by Dr. Byrd's group may have been prayed for by others, it is impossible to control all of the factors—and of course no one wants to stop prayer.)

Another major study by Dr. William Harris of St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City reported that patients who were prayed for by religious strangers did significantly

better than others in a measure of coronary health that included more than 30 factors.

The battle between those who want to do prayer research and those who want to see it stopped has now created enormous pressure toward political correctness. A massive study just completed by the Mind/Body Institute with \$2.4 million from the John Templeton Foundation included 1800 volunteers, heart bypass patients at six hospitals. They were monitored according to strict medical guidelines and randomly assigned to be prayed for or not. But now two medical journals have turned down publishing the study, many are doubting the study will ever be released. The forces of secularism and rationalism are powerful indeed.

Time Magazine had a much more open and positive look at this subject some years ago, as it analyzed some rather incredible studies. I mention a few of them. Dartmouth College in New Hampshire showed that one of the best predictors of how well people recover from heart surgery has to do with how much comfort and strength they derive from their religious faith. In fact, the study found that people who had no faith in God had three times the death rate of those who did have religious faith.

Another study was quoted as demonstrating from thirty years of research on blood pressure that people who go to church regularly and have a religious faith have lower blood pressure than those who do not, even when adjusted for other factors. A further study showed that women and men who attend church regularly have half the risk of dying of coronary disease than those who rarely or never go to church.

A separate study found that the elderly who attend religious services are much less depressed and physically healthier than those who do not attend. A study of patients who were recovering from hip fractures found that those who regarded God as a source of their life and strength and who attended church were able to walk further upon discharge and had lower rates of depression than those of little faith.

In addition, non-churchgoers were found to have a suicide rate four times higher than those who attended church. Returning to the Dartmouth study, perhaps the most amazing conclusion of all; when people become a part of a church, an affirming religious community with a support system, caring

friends, people who love and pray for them, life is often dramatically changed.

The study showed that people who trust God and have a social support system in their church have a 14 fold advantage over those who are isolated or without faith. Just imagine, people who are people of faith and who are surrounded by a loving community are 14 times better off in terms of health than those who are not religious and do not have such a community.

Some conclusions: It is important to note that not everyone is healed, no matter how consistent and passionate the prayers. Not everyone in the Christian community is healthy, cancer and heart disease and other conditions happen to believers and non-believers. We must be absolutely clear that we do not imply that to be spiritual is to be healed of all medical problems.

A second observation is that it is probably much better that such studies of prayer and healing are not funded by the federal government, there seems to be too many political considerations which seem to enter into this. Much better that Templeton or Lilly or other huge foundations with a strong interest in religion provide the funding, so that the results are not subject to political litmus tests.

And thirdly, it is important to note that all of the studies point to one basic conclusion, that prayer and healing are closely connected. Miracles still happen. Not always, but often. Many of us have experienced personally or know people who have been surprisingly and amazingly healed from conditions which were dangerous or life-threatening. Prayer does change things. Many Christians do not need a study to validate our own experience. With God all things are possible. Keep on praying.