

TESTING PRAYER: SCIENCE AND HEALING

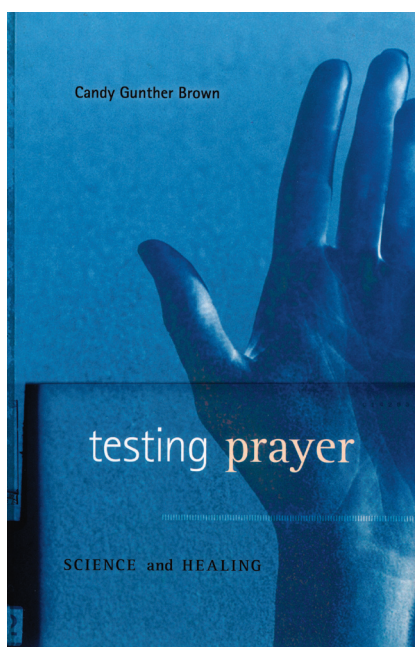
REVIEWED BY DOLORES L. CHRISTIE, Ph.D.

The growth and development of Pentecostalism is an area of expertise for Candy Gunther Brown, Ph.D., an associate professor in the department of religious studies at Indiana University Bloomington. Healing through prayer, the theme of her current book, is integral to the Pentecostal movement, which began in the mid-19th century and moved more to the mainstream in the second half of the 20th century.

In *Testing Prayer: Science and Healing*, Brown does not attempt to prove God's existence nor to verify divine intervention into human healing. Rather, she poses two questions: 1) What do people who receive prayerful intervention actually believe about healing prayer? 2) What happens to people as a result of such belief?

The author explores both the context and kinds of healing prayer. She notes the limits of scientific methodology, as well as the mixed response of Pentecostal groups to doing research on faith healing. Some such groups welcome scientific exploration; others suspect it as a biased attempt to disprove the effects of prayer; some think that God will not be tested and therefore God will skew the results.

Chapters 2 and 3 detail the limits of randomized trials — the gold standard of clinical research — and of the collection of medical documents to dem-



TESTING PRAYER: SCIENCE AND HEALING
BY CANDY GUNTHER BROWN, PH.D.
Harvard University Press, 2012, 384 pages,
\$29.95

onstrate medical conditions before and after prayer. These do not appear to be satisfactory methods to verify cures attributed to intercessory prayer. While one can demonstrate, for example, the existence of a diseased organ before prayer and the lack of disease in that organ after prayer, the actual cause and effect is beyond the scope of ordinary

clinical research methods. In some studies, those who received prayer actually got worse.

The second half of the book proposes a multi-dimensional approach to research on healing prayer. Chapter 4 looks at surveys completed by attendees at Pentecostal meetings. The author is careful to assert that it is the *perception* of the person healed that is documented. Her study makes no claim about whether healing actually occurred or whether God intervened.

Chapter 5 focuses on two very specific issues: hearing and vision. Studies in Brazil and Mozambique tested improvement in these senses after prayer. These observations measured visual or auditory acuity before and after prayer and reported subjective sensations such as the experience of heat at the site of the “cured” organ. The author notes that the research has flaws. Sample sets were small; controls were absent; other factors (background noise, subjective issues, etc.) which may have contributed to demonstrated improvement could not be assessed. Yet, she notes, further exploration is warranted, as “*something* is going on” at Pentecostal meetings.

Chapter 6 traces the longitudinal implications of faith life through accounts from and about those who have experienced healing. It recounts several dramatic stories of life transformation, including those of a couple who themselves were healers. Like chapter 4, the major focus is on the personal perceptions of the healed as to the source of their renewed health.

As a born-again scientist, trained in the catechism of biology and chemistry, I am always a bit skeptical of research that relies heavily on qualitative

EXCERPT FROM *TESTING PRAYER: SCIENCE AND HEALING*

Science and religion are umbrella concepts that encompass diverse beliefs and practices. ... It is important to note that both science and religion are ways of constructing what is “real” in the world rather than offering transparent windows onto reality.

models. Brown's sample sets are rather limited, and they are confined to a particular religious context. She does not examine healing claims from other religious contexts, the Catholic shrine at Lourdes, for example. While she provides some medical documentation of before and after results, it is not always convincing or complete.

She admits to the exigencies of some of the research that diminish or disqualify results. Much of the research is done without the usual safeguards associated with scientific studies. Many of her illustrations are small and difficult to read, although this may reflect the editorial process rather than the hopes of the author. Nevertheless, this book represents a serious attempt at a scientific approach to faith healing. The scope and design of the research keep the claims within the circle of belief. It is respectful of the faith claims of healers and healed, but it aims to be appropriately scientific. On the last page, the author admits that the book does not resolve all the questions which it has raised. I would agree.

DOLORES L. CHRISTIE is a clinical ethicist, teacher and former executive director of the Catholic Theological Society of America. She is the author of three books, *Adequately Considered: An American Perspective on Louis Janssens' Personalist Morals* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991); *Last Rights: A Catholic Perspective on End-of-Life Decisions* (Sheed & Ward, 2004); and *Moral Choice: A Christian View of Ethics* (Fortress Press, 2012).

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, September - October 2012
Copyright © 2012 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
