

The Body as Temple

Health and Healing in a Boston Adventist Church

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Introduction

I'd like to begin with an excerpt from an interview I conducted with a young woman I'll call Michelle. Michelle is a recent college graduate, and she is also a Boston-area Seventh-Day Adventist. During our conversation, she shared this passionate account about dealing with her mother's second bout with breast cancer.

The Bible instructs [us] to call the elders of the church when there's a sickness, and to come and lay their hands on them and pray a prayer of faith. And so we said, "Alright, this will be our last measure." . . . And I remember [the church elders] telling us beforehand that we should not be part of the [anointing] circle if we didn't have complete faith.

. . . I wouldn't have been part of that circle if I felt like I was going to hinder anything. I went ahead and did it. It was just a small little thing. And he . . . got out the oil, and touched my mom. Nothing miraculous happened. No lightning bolts from heaven, nothing – it was just a quiet time and they left.

That evening, [my mom] was in bed, and I was in the room next to her asleep. And I hear[d] her calling my name in urgency. And I'm thinking this is the deathbed experience. . . . So I remember running to her room and by her side and grabbed her hand. I had prepared myself for this. She was crying. And I was crying. And I just knew it was time. So she grabbed my hand, and she put it over her chest, and she said, "It's gone." And I had to ask her to say it three or four times. And she said, "It's gone, it's gone, it's gone."

And sure enough, the golf-ball size of a lump was absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, just absolutely gone. Again, He proves He is father to the fatherless and defender of widows. . . . And she's been cancer free ever since.

The doctors were absolutely befuddled. . . . They had no answers. They sent her home scratching her head. But we had answers.

Just what kind of answers was Michelle referring to?

Over the past few months, I've been trying to find out, by exploring how Seventh-Day Adventists understand the relationship between their faith and

their health. Specifically, I've focused my fieldwork on a local congregation known as the Boston Temple Seventh-Day Adventist Church, located just an outfielder's throw from Fenway Park. During my time with this church, I've attended their Saturday Sabbath class and worship services. I've prayed, talked, and worshiped with them. I've sung with them. And, unable to resist their free, cardio kick-boxing class, I've even sweated with them.

From my participant-observation and interviews with individuals in this community, I've drawn several conclusions about how Adventists care for their bodies. Here, I focus on the Adventist understanding of how prayer promotes physical health and healing.

Adventist History and Theology

First, I want to outline briefly the historical roots and theological center of the Adventist faith. The tradition draws its doctrinal roots from William Miller's movement during the 1840s, which came to fame for predicting the earthly return of Jesus Christ in 1844. After what's called "the Great Disappointment," when Jesus did not appear, a young woman named Ellen G. White emerged as the leader of the Millerite remnant that became officially known as the Seventh-Day Adventist denomination in 1860. Adventists claim that Ellen White received God's special counsel in guiding the sect until her death in 1915. The movement has increasingly put its energy into missionary activity, establishing a global school system and hospital network. Today, the Adventist Church claims over eight million members worldwide and is widely known for its medical outreach, especially its flagship, Loma Linda University Medical Center.

Adventists consider themselves "whole-Bible Christians," not just "New-Testament" Christians. They honor the Sabbath by resting from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. And they strive to treat the body in accordance with this passage from First Corinthians:

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (I Corinthians 6:19-20)

Ellen White connected this spiritual understanding of the body into a well-developed theology of human health.

How *do* Adventists pray to promote healthy bodies?

Individual Prayer

Temple Adventists I spoke with do not see prayer as a last resort, as a panacea for physical ills, or as ritual obligation. It is first and foremost a spiritual lifeline with God. One woman told me, "prayer is just like water, like air, it's . . . I don't understand how people can actually survive without it."

Virtually all of the Adventists I spoke with said they prayed "all the time" and described their connection with God in very friendly, even intimate, terms. By identifying God in these personal terms – as a friend, father, and husband – the Adventist approach to prayer constitutes a radical form of the Protestant emphasis on an individual's direct connection to God.

Adventists do not typically see sickness in existential terms. A body with a nasty cold needs, in one young man's words "motherhood and apple pie" treatment: greater rest and fluid intake, and possibly a doctor's advice on how diet and exercise should be altered. In these cases, prayer is held to be more of a spiritual comfort than bodily medicine. To my question about God's opinion of the flu, a Temple Adventist and student at Harvard's School of Public Health responded, "I think while God is interested in it, and He cares about stuff like that, I don't think He wants to intervene in day-to-day living."

I've observed three distinct ways Adventists rely on individual prayer for physical healing.

On the first level, Adventists believe that prayer can act to help guide them toward making the right medical decisions. This is consistent with the Adventist notion that medical ministry and human health care are extensions of God's good will toward His creation on earth.

On another level, prayer and study of the Bible and/or Ellen G. White's writings serve to keep Adventists alert to the need for health vigilance. I spoke to recent converts to the Adventist faith, and they mentioned the greater awareness they had of their bodies' physical and spiritual needs. These new adherents told me they were slowly but surely incorporating more exercise and the Adventist vegetarian

diet into their lives. In this sense, prayerful immersion in the Adventist tradition constitutes preventive medicine.

In its consummate form, however, prayer is held to have a direct healing effect. To Adventists, nothing is impossible to God. "I don't think it's impossible for Him to heal somebody, for Him to raise somebody from the dead," one man told me. Prayers in the name of Jesus Christ are powerful appeals that can work wonders. One woman, a recent convert from Roman Catholicism, told me: "I definitely think prayer has an enormous amount of power. I'm a migraine sufferer. I have been since I was six or seven. I feel that through prayer, that helps me regulate them."

She added an interesting explanation about the tension between prayer and medicine. "I have prescription medicine for [migraines], but I really don't like to take it, because I really don't want to put too many drugs in my body. I don't necessarily believe in man-made chemical drugs. But thank God they exist. Because, I guess, He allowed mankind to develop those to help people when they really need it. But I just don't like to abuse that."

Now, this sentiment does not fairly represent Temple Adventist attitudes about Western medicine. I observed many informal church discussions oriented around medical issues, and I never heard prejudicial comments about prescription or over-the-counter drugs. I should note that some of Ellen White's earliest writings evidence strong views against reliance on drugs. But today, the Adventist Church, theologically and institutionally, identifies prayer and medicine in a complementary relationship.

Prayers, of course, don't always grant church members' wishes. And though they strongly emphasize the idea that God's will is preeminently good, Adventists feel His will is sovereign and ultimately transcends their own petitions. I asked Michelle why, if two sick Adventists prayed, only one might get better. "I have a hard time feeling that our efforts have anything to do with anything that happens to us," she said. "Our efforts are not part of the equation. I feel that God's will is everything."

A perception that prayer has failed, however, does not automatically create cognitive dissonance. One Temple Adventist explained that life's trials need to be seen within the context of eternal life. "I think it brings me comfort to know that whatever happens in this world is really of pretty small consequence when you compare it to the bigger picture of eternal life." Another individual said, "When there are trials, those are for your own good."

But even if Adventists implicitly identify breast cancer as a “pretty small consequence,” do they hold it as a divine consequence? Does God cause illness? Or do Adventists blame sin? My assessment is that Adventists are not losing sleep over these etiological questions. From a strictly theological perspective, Adventists trace all disease and physical suffering to Genesis 2, when the serpent beguiled Eve and sin came into the world. But I never heard Adventists describe individual illness as a punishment for individual sin.

To them, illness is more or less bad luck, whereas health is more or less merited. As stewards of their bodies, they must treat them as temples. In that sense, Adventists can characterize smoking, drinking, and a junk-food diet as sinful behaviors—activities that are automatically “punished” in the body. But I have not encountered the suggestion that marital infidelity, for instance, is punished with jock itch.

This theological model is important, because it informs the Adventist interpretation of Jesus’ healing works as reported in the New Testament. One Sabbath class I attended focused explicitly on the connection between sin and illness. Their consensus? The *real* healing Jesus performed was always the forgiveness and redemption he offered to sinners; physical restoration was seen as a nice bonus.

Collective Prayer

The church, however, clearly supports this “nice bonus.” Adventists frequently incorporate prayer requests into their services. A call to embrace specific individuals who are suffering from illness serves to tighten community bonds. But Adventists also contend that community prayers on behalf of one person are powerful and transforming petitions.

Here’s how one Temple Adventist described the experience of participating in the church’s prayer circle, led by an elder. “The requests were for someone’s mother who was sick, a friend without a job, a person seeking courage, the church for success in its Easter series. And then once everybody put in their requests, then the elders prayed for each individual request while the group knelt. Personally, I thought that was a powerful way to ask God to reach individuals in church with what they needed.”

Many Adventists said they were comfortable approaching church acquaintances to ask for prayerful support. Indeed, I witnessed spontaneous

peer-to-peer prayers after Sabbath events, often expressed in simple terms such as, “I’ll be thinking of you this week in my prayers.”

Unfortunately, I was not able to attend the church’s most visible prayer ritual: the anointing service. It’s a fairly common Christian event, based on a passage from James:

Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. (James 5:14-15)

It was this service that Michelle credited with healing her mom’s breast cancer. In fact, the Boston Temple pastor also credited an anointing service with his own recovery from a malignant melanoma in his eye. The medical experts, he said, gave him little chance of surviving the risky operation he chose. But after an anointing service held before the procedure, he said he felt no anxiety. “What did you feel after the ritual?” I asked him. “Peace, to put it bluntly,” he responded.

Conclusions

I’d like to recap, briefly:

- For Adventists, prayer’s chief therapeutic value lies in connecting man to God. Actual physical restoration from illness is nice, but it’s not necessarily the point.

- The Adventist theological model of eternal life strongly affects churchgoers’ views about health and healing. In a sense, the priority of salvation leads to a “best-of-both worlds” approach. Life’s problems, including illness, can be explained as necessary trials to win eternal life. But God’s gift of earthly life demands care and cultivation of the human body here and now.

- Institutionally, the church puts great effort to help their members stay healthy through secular means. But the church devotes equal resources to remind Adventists of prayer’s power to foster health.

- Temple Adventists recognize the immense potential power of prayer. Their reliance on prayer for physical healing seems to increase in proportion to the seriousness of the physical problem. For everyday illness, medicine is the body’s best hope. For serious illness, prayer is the body’s best medicine.