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ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE, APOLOGETICS, AND THE CHURCH

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In 1998, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that Americans spent as much as \$32.7 billion on 15 popular alternative healing methods in the previous year. That same year some \$27 billion total was paid out of pocket on alternative therapies.¹ Since that time, the evidence indicates that alternative medicine has continued to grow and capture the attention (and dollars) of millions more people. Alternative medicine is no longer the domain of obscure holistic health practitioners or small out-of-the-way “New Age” stores. The movement, also referred to as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) or integrative medicine, has grown into a multibillion-dollar industry, garnering high-profile attention from the mainstream media and claiming entire sections of shelf space in popular bookstores. Alternative practices once scoffed at by the mainstream medical establishment are making inroads into conventional health care. Therapeutic Touch, a practice based on Eastern religion, which involves the alleged manipulation of invisible energies, continues to be taught in some 80 hospitals in North America despite its lack of viable research support.

In May 2004, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a report on the state of CAM in the United States, focusing on usage among adults 18 and older. The report notes that 36 percent of American adults are involved in the use of CAM.² Stephen Strauss, director of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, said of the statistics, “These new findings confirm the extent to which Americans have turned to CAM approaches with the hope that they would help treat and prevent disease and enhance quality of life.”³ There is no doubt that alternative medicine is growing, but what is it and why is it relevant to Christian apologetics?

What Is Alternative Medicine? Alternative medicine is difficult to define. Some aspects of conventional medicine (the predominant form of health care in America), for instance, were once considered alternative; moreover, practices that are considered “alternative” in America are common in many other countries. The distinctions are blurred even further as alternative medicine continues to grow and assimilate with conventional health care. One definition suggested is that alternative medicine in America consists of practices that generally are not taught in medical schools or practiced in hospitals and doctors’ offices and generally are not covered by health insurance. Such a definition, however, fails to consider the inroads some alternative practices are making into mainstream health care. Perhaps a better approach is not to try to specifically define alternative medicine, but to use biblically based principles of discernment as well as the filter of valid medical knowledge to view and evaluate any medical practice.

Why Is Alternative Medicine Relevant to Apologetics? There are a number of reasons why alternative medicine is relevant to Christian apologetics. Medical practices, like philosophies or religions, are rooted in specific worldviews. Alternative medical practices often are rooted in worldviews that are to some degree incompatible with Christianity. In other words, apologists must apply biblical principles of discernment not only to competing philosophies and religions, but also to health care. In the book I coauthored with Paul Reisser and Dale Mabe, *Examining Alternative Medicine* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), we divide alternative practices into four broad categories. The one that is of most concern to believers (when not associated with proper Christian practices, such as prayer) is the supernatural. Practices in this category are explicit in their claims to engage and manipulate the supernatural (i.e., the occult) in ways that are forbidden by God in Scripture.

Why Do People Turn to Alternative Medicine? In the CDC report noted above, respondents were asked why they utilized alternative treatments. Fifty percent said they thought CAM “would be interesting to try.”⁴ Such a response is indicative of the postmodern attitude that there is no truth, so anything goes. There are, however, other reasons people turn to alternative medicine. First, many are unsatisfied with conventional health care for various reasons, such as the bureaucratic mess it often becomes and the rising costs. Second, some are discouraged by the lack of solutions offered by conventional medicine for chronic conditions, such as arthritis, fatigue, cancer, and AIDS. Third, conventional medicine is viewed as primarily offering two limited options: drugs and surgery. In a world where “natural” remedies are often considered to be better than conventional remedies, these options seem severe. Alternative health-care practitioners, on the other hand, are generally known for spending more time with patients than do conventional doctors, viewing patients as whole persons, and in many instances offering “just the right thing” for the condition in question. People are happy to have such optimistic assurances regarding their health, especially when such solutions are presented as “natural.” Many Christians, not surprisingly, find alternative approaches appealing because they offer natural (i.e., “God-made” rather than “man-made”) solutions and because alternative practitioners sometimes attend to the spiritual dimension — an area too often neglected by the scientific naturalism (i.e., the view that matter is all that exists) that permeates much of conventional health care.

Alternative Medicine and the Church. The impact of questionable alternative medical practices on the church is alarming. Some practices are generally harmless from a spiritual perspective, since they do not invoke a non-Christian belief system to explain their operation. Other practices, however, can be physically and/or spiritually dangerous. Physical danger occurs, for example, when unproven or spurious practices are the therapy of choice for a serious disease. An example of spiritual danger can be found in various forms of energy-based healing, which is a recurring theme in alternative medicine. Some Christians involved in these practices argue that such “energies” are really the Holy Spirit or the “breath” of God; however, these practices are rooted in worldviews that are decidedly opposed to Christian theism, such as Jin shin do, Reiki, Shiatsu, and Therapeutic Touch.

There are also, surprisingly, a number of Christian books that seem to be fascinated with longevity. This is a recurring theme in many alternative medicine circles and in works by authors such as Deepak Chopra, but it seems out of place in books by Christians. There is nothing wrong with wanting to live a long, healthy life, but a fixation on extending the current physical state is odd in light of the Christian belief that we are creatures who will be resurrected and live forever.

Alternative medicine also exerts influence on the church in the area of Christian radio. Reisser observes, “Every weekend, many of the same stations that bring us respected evangelical voices turn over their transmitters to a procession of health-product infomercials, complete with a litany of specious claims.”⁵ He lists a few of the alleged benefits of these alternative treatments: “Increased energy always leads the list, usually said to occur within hours of taking the first dose. Others include reversing the aging process, increasing detoxification, strengthening the immune system, oxygenating the cells, improving sleep and enhancing one’s sex life.”⁶

Reisser raises an important question when he asks why Christian radio stations broadcast so many hours of health misinformation every weekend. One reason, he suggests, is profit. These programs and advertisements have an impact on Christian consumers. A second reason Reisser suggests is listeners’ very real and understandable desire to relieve pain that “has not been adequately met through their contacts with conventional medicine.”⁷ A third reason is ignorance, which also can be applied to the growing infiltration of questionable alternative healing methods in the church as a whole. Too many Christians don’t know what they believe or why they believe it. In short, they lack the knowledge required for proper worldview discernment. Others simply do not make the connection between health and theological discernment. Some are looking for a quick fix for their health issues despite the fact that many medically related matters require commitment and perseverance.

What Can Christian Apologists Do about Dangerous Forms of Alternative Medicine? The topic is controversial, but one thing Christian apologists should not do is remain silent. As Walter Martin often said, “Controversy for the sake of controversy is sin. Controversy for the sake of truth is a divine command.” The church needs to be awakened to the dangers of spiritual error in the area of health care. The apostle Paul offers excellent advice: “Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21 NASB). Christians need to apply this principle to matters of health as fervently as they apply it to matters of theology. Apologists need to take a stand and the church needs to be educated concerning problematic forms of alternative medicine; but, as apologists we must always keep in mind the directive to defend the faith “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15 NIV). This means we need to acknowledge the very real human factors of pain and suffering and respond accordingly. If someone is dying of cancer and is desperate for an effective treatment, for example, we must not condemn that person for considering a dangerous alternative medical practice; instead, we must present carefully reasoned insights compassionately, prayerfully, and above all, lovingly.

— Robert Velarde

NOTES

1. David Eisenberg et al., “Trends in Alternative Medicine Use in the United States, 1990–1997: Results of a Follow-up National Survey,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 280 (1998): 1569–75.
2. Patricia M. Barnes et al., “Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use among Adults: United States, 2002,” *Advance Data from Vital and Health Statistics* no. 343, May 27, 2004, National Center for Health Statistics, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad343.pdf>. When prayer is included, the figure rises to 62 percent.
3. National Institutes of Health, “More Than One-Third of U.S. Adults Use Complementary and Alternative Medicine, according to New Government Survey,” news release, May 27, 2004, National Center for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine, <http://www.nccam.nih.gov/news/2004/052704.htm>.
4. Barnes.
5. Paul Reisser, “Cure-Alls and Christian Radio,” *Physician*, May–June 2003 (<http://www.family.org/physmag/missions/a0025704.cfm>).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.