Alternative Medicine – A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran applies a biblical worldview perspective as he assesses the rise of alternative medicine in the mainstream of American culture. He points out the types that a purely fraud and those which may be useful for some people.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Rise of Alternative Medicine

Alternative medicine has blazed its way into the mainstream of American culture while also making significant gains in the medical community. Nearly half of all U.S. adults now participate in some kind of alternative therapy.{1} A recent study showed that Americans spend almost $30 billion a year on alternative treatments.{2}

Alternative medicine remains a controversial issue. Do these medicines actually work? Do these alternative therapies embrace an Eastern religious system? Should Christians be involved with alternative treatments? How do we evaluate a particular practice that is unconventional?

The sudden rise of alternative medicine can be attributed to a growing dissatisfaction with conventional medical practices. Modern methods have mainly focused on the physical symptoms. However, we are spiritual, social and emotional creatures as well. Healing improves when all of these components are addressed. Conventional medicine has also been criticized for its impersonal approach. Overworked doctors may spend only a few minutes diagnosing the problem without much follow-up.

The main reason people may be flocking to alternative medicine is that it offers hope when conventional medicine has failed.

The frightened and discouraged look there as a last resort. Many therapists profess to heal cancer or know the secret to prolonged youth. For example, Hollywood guru Deepak Chopra writes that his therapies can take us to ". . . a place where the rules of everyday existence do not apply." Through his methods we can ". . . become pioneers in a land where youthful vigor, renewal, creativity, joy, fulfillment, and timelessness are the common experience of everyday life, where old age, senility, infirmity and death do not exist and are not even entertained as a philosophy."{3} These are attractive temptations to those without hope.

As discerning individuals, we must not be enticed by such claims. The Bible teaches that we live in a fallen world. Despite our best efforts people get sick, and sometimes they die. When faced with a serious illness, we first must accept the consequences of the Fall. God can heal any time He chooses using whatever method He wills. However, He does not work contrary to His nature or revealed truth. If an apparent healing leads someone to embrace teachings contrary to Scripture, we should question whether that healing came from God.

So when the test results are bad, we should not panic in fear, but trust God's sovereignty and control over our lives. We should seek wise counsel from doctors and our pastors. Then, if an alternative medicine is recommended, we should make sure it has been medically tested and does not promote a false teaching or false hope. In dealing with illness, we can honor God or we can blemish our testimony. In the following sections, let us consider how to wisely evaluate alternative medicines.

Getting a Handle on Alternative Medicines

Today there are hundreds of therapies labeled "alternative medicine," but what exactly does that mean? A broad definition would be any therapy that is not accepted by the dominant

medical establishment of our culture. There are several characteristics of alternative medicine. For example, these therapies are not practiced in hospitals or physicians' offices. They focus on natural methods of healing with an emphasis on preventing disease. They are also more likely to treat chronic ailments after conventional medicine has failed.

Alternative medicine originates from the traditions of ancient cultures, particularly China and India. For instance, 370 different healing drugs were used in Mesopotamia while 600 were common in India. The Chinese had 2000 herbs, metals, and minerals as ingredients in 16,000 different preparations.{4} Despite the variety, many historians agree that these ancient medical practices had little success in actually curing disease. The real effects are still under scrutiny today including comparisons with the strides made by modern medicine. Despite the shortfalls of conventional medicine, we live longer and are healthier than people of long ago.

Ancient alternative medicine was greatly influenced by Eastern religions. That is why today's users of so-called "rediscovered" alternative medicines can still see those religious concepts interwoven with the treatments. Many alternative medicine proponents approach holistic health from a pantheistic worldview. Central to pantheism is the idea of monism—the idea that everything in the universe is one ultimate reality. If all is one, then man is divine. Since we are divine, we are without sin. Sin is merely an illusion that creates false guilt. This guilt is what leads to illness.

Deepak Chopra writes, ". . . the seeds of God are inside us. . . . When we make the journey of the spirit, we water these divine seeds. . . . In the eyes of the spirit, everyone is innocent, in all senses of the word. Because you are innocent, you have not done anything that merits punishment or divine wrath."{5}

Some advocates of alternative medicine would point out that

the biblical view of health is also considered holistic. Indeed, God made man a complex being with physical, mental, social and spiritual dimensions, and He cares about every aspect of our personhood. (You can see these aspects in Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23.) Contrary to pantheism, the Bible teaches God is a personal being and we are His created beings. We were meant for a personal relationship with Him, but we are separated from this by sin. Biblical health begins with a right relationship with a personal God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Rather than ignoring sin, it must be dealt with through repentance and restoration. Finally, a Christian must acknowledge that God may have a purpose for suffering, and that there is value to yielding to His plan.

Should a Christian Use Alternative Medicine?

When it comes to selecting an alternative therapy, there is a smorgasbord of choices. How can a Christian discern an acceptable alternative medicine from one that is unacceptable? In making a decision, it is helpful to identify the different alternative medicines. The authors of *Basic Questions on Alternative Medicine: What Is Good and What Is Not?*{6} give five categories of alternative therapies.

The first category is *complementary* therapies. These deal with lifestyle issues such as diet, exercise and stress. The next category is *scientifically unproven* therapies. These have undergone scientific research, but with little evidence for their effectiveness. Herbal remedies would be an example of scientifically unproven therapies.

A third category is *scientifically questionable* therapies. These are therapies which contradict basic scientific principles or that cannot be easily verified. An example is Chinese acupuncture that teaches a contradictory understanding to what is known about human physiology. A fourth category is

life energy therapies. These assume life energy called “Chi” or “Prana” that can be manipulated using a variety of techniques. Maybe you have heard of “Reiki” and therapeutic touch. The final category of therapies is *quackery* and *fraud*. These are therapies that have been shown to have no reasonable benefit.

Before deciding to use an alternative medicine, a Christian should consider first under which category the particular therapy falls. Generally speaking, complementary therapies provide important insights into maintaining good health. Scientifically unproven and questionable therapy must be studied and decisions made on a case-by-case basis. Many of the proofs for alternative medicine are based on controversial interpretations of scientific theories or testimonies of users.{7} The wisest approach is to only use cures endorsed by sound medical research and controlled testing. Christians should avoid therapies that fall under the life energy and fraud categories.

Consult your physician and pharmacist. Too often individuals will engage in alternative treatments without informing their physician. Proponents of alternative medicine try to discourage their clients from using conventional medical methods, claiming their way to be the best. This can be a dangerous concept. An alternative therapist may prescribe approaches contrary to your doctor’s recommendation, or give you medicines that may react negatively with your prescribed medications.

Finally, be a wise steward. Don’t spend your resources on therapies that have been proved ineffective or questionable. Watch out for practitioners of a false religious system. In my pastoral experience, I have witnessed Christians turn to shamans and Chinese folk medicine when diagnosed with a serious illness. In all cases the alternative therapy did not help the situation and cost the family monetarily. More importantly, it impaired their witness for Christ. Make your

lifestyle, especially the way you handle illness, a testimony for Christ.

Life Energy Therapies

As mentioned earlier, there are five categories of alternative medicines. Christians should avoid *life energy* and *quackery* and *fraud* therapies.

Let us take a careful look at life energy therapies. Although there are over 60 different names for these therapies, they are all based on six fundamental principles.{8} Practitioners believe that life energy flows throughout the universe. There are numerous names for this impersonal energy. Traditional Chinese medicine calls this energy "Chi" while Indian Ayurvedic medicine titles it "Prana." Some Christians mistakenly equate this with the Holy Spirit. The two are not the same.

Life energy therapists believe that humans are composed of energy surrounded by a material body. Life energy therapy directs this energy so that it flows throughout the body unhindered. Disease is believed to be the result of an imbalance or blockage in the energy flow. Traditional Chinese medicine describes an elaborate system of channels within the body called meridians. To cure an illness, the body must be manipulated to restore the flow of energy through the meridians.

Traditional Chinese and Indian practitioners believe they can determine one's energy flow by looking at the skin color, symptoms, tongue, and pulse. Therapeutic touch practitioners say they can sense the energy flow by moving their hands above the skin. Supposedly there are now high tech machines that can measure this energy flow. Many of these machines, for example the Vegatest and its spin-offs, have been deemed fraudulent and are illegal.{9}

It is said that life energy can be re-directed to treat an offending illness. Life energy therapists believe they can adjust the flow of energy through physical manipulation or invisible transfer from healer to patient. In traditional Chinese medicine, needles are used to unplug holes or stimulate the flow of this energy. Massage, exercise, and herbs are also believed to restore Chi as are breathing and meditation techniques.

Miracles are believed to occur by altering the life energy. This is the message presented in *Star Wars*. In the movie, the Jedi masters could control the life energy, or Force, to perform miraculous feats. The concept of God and energy are used interchangeably. From this we can conclude that life energy is, in essence, God. Since we are energy, we are divine because we are of the same essence as the Divine.

Christians should avoid therapists who expound life energy therapy. Many ideas are built on a pantheistic worldview, causing these therapies to embrace or at least acknowledge Eastern mysticism. Also, their teachings have drifted far from objective knowledge of the human body. Finally, God is not an impersonal force, and He cannot be manipulated by formulas or healing rituals. God will not heal through any practice that is contrary to His Word.

Herbal Treatments

Wherever you look, it seems like there is an infomercial or ad for herbal products. According to a 1998 study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, between 1990 and 1997, there was a 380 percent rise in herbal remedies and a 130 percent increase in high dose vitamin use in the US.{10} Current estimates say 60-72 million Americans use herbal supplements.{11} Many herbal treatments make remarkable claims of healing cancer, arthritis, depression, and other illnesses. What are we to make of the herbal craze?

Be discerning if you choose to use herbs. *Natural* does not guarantee *safe*. There are many natural herbs that can produce dangerous, and even deadly, side effects. Be wary of the marketing hype. Despite the ads, the truth of the matter is that research has concluded that the effectiveness of herbal use is questionable at best. You also need to consider quality control. Unlike prescription and non-prescription drugs that are tightly regulated by the FDA, no organization is directly responsible for monitoring the quality or concentrations of herbal products. Be skeptical of "a pill for every ill" mentality. Finally, be sure to avoid anyone who claims to have a secret formula, especially if he reports to have been persecuted by the American Medical Association or Federal Drug Administration. Avoid any retailer, radio ad, or person who is bent on selling his product as a cure-all.

Some herbal treatments are costly and provide no enhancement. However, some herbal supplements *have* shown some promising benefits. Herbal treatments may prove to be helpful additions to conventional treatments. Herbs like ginseng have shown to be beneficial for Type 2 diabetes, for example. Herbal preparations are sometimes less potent in dosage than prescriptions drugs and may be less toxic.

It is important to thoroughly research the product you are considering using. Inform your doctor and pharmacist. They know your medical history and can alert you to any potentially dangerous interactions between herbs and pharmaceutical drugs. Be leery of thinking that if taking a little is good, a heavier dose must be even better. Find out whether the herbs are for long or short term. Check the quality of the product and be aware of the possible side effects. Don't assume that if the product has been used for a while, even for centuries, it must be better.

There is no biblical admonition forbidding the use of herbal products. However, Christians should approach the herbal market from an informed perspective. Some excellent books on

the subject are *The American Pharmaceutical Association Practical Guide to Natural Medicines* and *Alternative Medicine: A Christian Handbook*. Excellent Web sites include herbalgram.com and naturalmedicines.therapeuticresearch.com/.

In times of health and especially in dealing with illness, our goal is always to honor the Lord.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Cowley, "Alternative Care," *Newsweek* Magazine, 2 December 2002, p. 47.
2. Ibid., p. 47-48.
3. Deepak Chopra, *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind: The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old,* (New York: Harmony, 1993), p. 3.
4. Dónal O'Mathúna & Walt Larimore, *Alternative Medicine: The Christian Handbook,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 2001) p. 31.
5. Deepak Chopra, *Seven Spiritual Laws for Parents* (New York: Harmony/Random House Publishing, 1997), p. 20-21, 31, 57, 68.
6. *Basic Questions on Alternative Medicine: What Is Good and What Is Not? BioBasic Series* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1998).
7. O'Mathúna & Larimore, *Alternative Medicine,* 22.
8. John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *Can You Trust Your Doctor? The Complete Guide to New Age Medicine and Its Threat To Your Family* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991) p. 46.
9. Paul Reisser, Dale Mabe and Robert Velarde, *Examining Alternative Medicine* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 85-86.
10. Reisser, Mabe and Velarde, *Examining Alternative Medicine,* p. 127.
11. Ibid.

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1. BioBasic Series. *Basic Questions on Alternative Medicine*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1998.

2. Chopra, Deepak. *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind: The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old.* New York: Harmony Publishing, 1993.

3. Cowley, Geoffrey. "Integrative Care." *Newsweek Magazine.* December 2, 2002, pgs. 47-53.

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5. Reisser, Paul, Dale Mabe, and Robert Velarde. *Examining Alternative Medicine.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001.

6. Underwood, Anne. "Learning from China." *Newsweek Magazine*. December 2, 2002, pgs. 54-57.

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