During the last ETS Annual Meeting in Toronto in 2002 I presented a paper called “A Biblical Theology of Chronic Illness.” That paper will be published in the next edition of the Trinity Journal. During the question and answer period after the Toronto presentation I was asked many questions about Alternative Medicine. Christian prayers for healing would be classified as “Complementary or Alternative Medicine” (CAM), a phrase that I will define shortly. Many in the audience asked me whether they should encourage or discourage Christians in their churches from seeking herbal medicine, acupuncture, therapeutic massage, diet, exercise and a variety of other Alternative Medicine approaches to healing. Out of that question-and-answer session the current paper arises. If I were a good theologian I would give you a good theology here. But instead, in the first five parts of this paper, I am going to respond to the needs of the audience for practical advice. Only the sixth section of this paper will plunge into theological issues.

This paper will address six issues:

1. Define Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM);
2. Show that CAM treatments are about as popular as conventional medicine, and growing more influential as time goes on ---- in other words, post-modernism has come into the field of medicine;
3. Show that CAM remedies are effective and safe for certain medical problems;
4. Tell you how to advise Christians about CAM treatments;
5. Suggest that herbal remedies are not always as safe as the public believes;
6. Discuss how the spiritual aspect of some CAM remedies is problematic for Christians.

CAM is just now beginning to become a focus of theological attention. There is only one article in any theological journal that addresses CAM. Yet CAM urgently needs theological attention. I am not the only one who thinks that CAM is a theological hot spot. Since the turn of the millennium six Christian books have appeared on CAM. Of those six, half were published this year (2003). What we are talking about in this paper is the crest of a wave of new interest among Christians.

Conventional medicine in the United States is sometimes called “allopathic medicine.” In their book, The Biblical Guide to Alternative Medicine, Neil Anderson and Michael Jacobson point out that the Christian church has overly-identified itself with allopathic medicine. Now that the postmodern medical world is changing so as to allow medical pluralism, theologians need to rethink the theology of medicine. It turns out that allopathic medicine is not closer to the Bible than other forms of medicine. A lot of the trouble we have is because, Anderson and Jacobson say, there are so few physicians in the ETS and so few theologians in the Christian Medical Associations. The chasm that separates theology from medicine is bizarre, because every medical system is based on theological assumptions. Allopathic medicine, for example, is based on pragmatic, atheistic and materialistic assumptions. This is why allopathic medicine
has been so vulnerable to invasion by Taoism, Hinduism and New Age spirituality, because its anti-
spiritual approach proved to be too narrow. Once medical research showed that spirituality was healthy,
the floodgates were opened to any and all forms of spiritual invasion into the medical arena. The reason
that we are having so many spiritual problems in the medical world, according to Anderson and Jacobson,
is because evangelical theologians have been so narrow-minded in defining the confines within which
theology exists.

**Part 1: Definition of Complementary & Alternative Medicine**

Conventional western (allopathic) medicine is by no means the only medical tradition on earth. The
Chinese have had doctors treating diseases for thousands of years, using herbs, acupuncture, attempting to
balance the flow of energy (called *chi* or *qi*), through meridian channels in the skin. The subcontinent of
India has a medical tradition called Ayurveda, focused on the flow of energy (called *prana*) through the
body, particularly through *chakas* where this energy is especially concentrated in the spine. In addition
there is homeopathy, which currently has no acceptance among conventional allopathic doctors. Homeopathy has taken root in India because it is based on ideas about spiritual energy, which in India is
called *prana*, as I mentioned. There are shamans and medicine men of the Native American tradition.
There are herbs from all over the world, some of which have been purified into prescription pills, others
of which have not. Walk into a health food store and you have entered the Alternative Medicine culture.
There are vast and contradictory ideas about diet and exercise. There are healing services in Christian
churches, Lourdes, and reports of miraculous healings sometimes attributable to the God of the Bible, but
more often based on spiritual traditions antithetical to the Bible. These are only the tip of the iceberg of
unconventional approaches to health and medicine, outside the confines of traditional western, scientific
medicine.

The term “Complementary and Alternative Medicine” used by the US Government’s National Center
for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (www.nccam.nih.gov) is as follows: Medical and
healthcare practices that are outside the realm of conventional medicine, which are yet to be validated
using scientific methods. Complementary Medicine is defined as those practices that are used together
with conventional standard medical practices. We used to think that the American people used these
approaches instead of conventional medicine, so we called this “Alternative Medicine.” Research
indicates that most Americans use BOTH conventional and non-conventional medicine. Therefore today
we use the term “CAM.” When we use the term CAM, we must remember that we are not speaking of
one thing, but of a diverse array of different practices that have nothing in common with one another.
“Integrative Medicine” is another term you will hear, meaning an approach that integrates or weaves
together conventional and complementary medical approaches.

The best two books on CAM currently are

- Dónal O’Mathúna and Walt Larimore, *Alternative Medicine: The Christian Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); and

Disclaimer: I have no vested interest in promoting these books. I do so simply because, after reading
widely to prepare this paper, I find them to be the best sources of reliable information for Christians.

O’Mathúna and Larimore’s book is more practical. Anderson and Jacobson’s book is more
theologically sophisticated. These books provide a panorama of CAM, showing which treatments have
evidence of effectiveness. I will discuss this in part 3 of this paper.

In the paper as read in Atlanta, the author skipped from here to Part 6 (page 9), since there was not
sufficient time to read parts 2 through 5.
Part 2: CAM Treatments Are Extremely Popular

Research by Dr. David Eisenberg at Harvard indicates that Americans visit CAM providers more often than they visit primary care physicians, and they spend more money on CAM than on conventional primary care. In 1996 Eisenberg declared that CAM is the invisible mainstream of American medicine. Forty nine percent of the American people have used an herbal remedy in the past year. A majority of the Christians in your churches are probably using CAM remedies in addition to their regular doctors.

This presents moral and ethical problems. We have almost no information on the efficacy or safety of CAM. This is one of the two reasons why so many Christian pastors squirm when their flock seek their advice about CAM treatments. (The other reason is because theologians have blindly embraced allopathic medicine and are not open-minded about CAM.) How can you advise people about treatments for which there are almost no data about safety or effectiveness?

David Eisenberg’s research caused a stir in Congress. The Congress created a new branch of the National Institutes of Health, called the National Center for Complementary Alternative Medicine, which has spent the last decade giving out money to do research on the efficacy and safety of CAM treatments.

Why are CAM treatments so popular in America? Here is Eisenberg’s answer: “Patients who are interested in exploring alternative therapies do so for diverse reasons:

   a. They seek health promotion and disease prevention;
   b. Conventional therapies have been exhausted;
   c. Conventional therapies are of indeterminate effectiveness or are commonly associated with side effects or significant risk;
   d. No conventional therapy is known to relieve the patient's condition; and
   e. The conventional approach is perceived to be emotionally or spiritually without benefit.”

Part 3: CAM Remedies Are Effective and Safe for Certain Medical Problems and Have Advantages Over Allopathic Medicine

Because the NCCAM (www.nccam.nih.gov) has been funding CAM research for the last decade, we are accumulating evidence that some CAM treatments are safe and effective for certain medical problems. I will provide a list in a moment.

a. Allopathic Medicine Is Increasing Failing the American People

Furthermore, when you think about conventional (allopathic) medicine in the United States, you have to admit that there are some major deficits, flaws, and ethical problems. Conventional medicine is more and more expensive. Most Americans are paying an increasing amount of money for the health insurance that used to be previously provided entirely by their employer. Co-payments are going up every year, especially for medicines. The national price tag is staggering: $1.3 trillion per year or 14% of the Gross Domestic Product. Every year those numbers creep upward and the number of people with no health insurance at all (42 million currently) increases. Mark my words: I predict that during my lifetime the allopathic healthcare price tag will increase to 25% of the Gross Domestic Budget.

The biggest issue in medicine today is whether the American people take responsibility for their own health (as CAM urges), or allow themselves to live unhealthy lifestyles with the expectation that allopathic doctors will bail them out of trouble. We can no longer afford the latter approach.

Allopathic medicine is wedded to high technology, which, by the way, is why the price tag is climbing so inexorably. The worst thing that ever happened to American medical costs is that we
successfully mapped the human genome, because now there will be vast breakthroughs in new medicines, which promise to bust the budget and leave even more Americans with no health insurance.

Prescription medicines have major side effects, in contrast to the average herbal remedies. One study estimated that adverse effects from medications are so common in hospitals as to be the fourth leading cause of death in the USA. \(^5\)

Conventional MD’s are extremely busy and harried, spending only ten to fifteen minutes with each patient. Consumers feel pressured, and their minutes with the doctor are so tense that they can’t remember all the questions and concerns they had. The human side of the conventional medical system is dwindling. Furthermore, we MD’s talk about prevention, and we all believe in prevention, but there is little time to focus on prevention in today’s medical system. We MD’s have, on average, been seduced by expensive procedures such as angioplasty, and we are seduced away from things that are less lucrative, like advising patients about diet and exercise to reverse hardening of the arteries. \(^6\)

Things you tell your doctor get written in your medical record. These records are less confidential than they used to be. This information then gets into insurance company computers and pretty soon you may discover that you are classified as uninsurable for life or health or disability insurance.

Allopathic medicine has been based on materialistic and atheistic assumptions. It is a product of the Enlightenment. It has taken neither the whole person, nor prevention into consideration. Instead allopathic doctors focus on disease processes. That is like closing the barn door after the horses have escaped.

In summary, when you look at the flaws in allopathic medicine today, it is easy to understand why people are dissatisfied, and are searching for some other approach. In a variety of ways the medical establishment fails to meet the needs of Americans. I say this as a member of the medical establishment. This is one of the main reasons that CAM remedies are gaining favor. The best approach for Christian theologians is to be patient and tolerant in their attitude toward CAM in general, because the flaws in the conventional, allopathic medical system in the United States are growing worse year by year.

b. CAM Offers Hope for a New Approach to Medicine

There is solid evidence for the following list of effective and safe CAM remedies. \(^x\) Because I am a psychiatrist and a theologian, I will place in bold typeface the issues I want to emphasize.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>massage therapy, meditation, biofeedback, aromatherapy, and Shiatsu massage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>chondroitin sulfate, topical capsaicin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back pain</td>
<td>massage therapy, chiropractic, and Shiatsu massage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy</td>
<td>saw palmetto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer Prevention</td>
<td>diet &amp; nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Cholesterol</td>
<td>diet &amp; nutrition, red yeast rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constipation</td>
<td>diet &amp; nutrition, aloe, colonics, senna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coronary Artery disease</td>
<td>diet and nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Depression</strong></td>
<td><strong>light therapy, St. John’s wort, Sâme (S-adenosyl methionine)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>diet &amp; nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy Improvement</td>
<td>diet &amp; nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorder</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart Disease</td>
<td>diet &amp; nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy Metal Poisoning</td>
<td>chelation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Blood Pressure</td>
<td>meditation, biofeedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Long Life</strong></td>
<td><strong>going to church regularly</strong>&lt;sup&gt;xiv&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning Sickness</td>
<td>acupressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nausea</td>
<td>acupuncture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuropathy</td>
<td>topical capsaicin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psoriasis</td>
<td>light therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin Disorders</td>
<td>light therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>aromatherapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tension</td>
<td>massage therapy, meditation, biofeedback, aromatherapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vomiting</td>
<td>acupuncture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight Loss (desired)</td>
<td>diet &amp; nutrition, exercise, social support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for the following list of disorders is not as solid as for the preceding list. Nevertheless, there is still substantial evidence supporting the efficacy and safety of the following CAM remedies:<sup>xv</sup>

**Anxiety**
Tai Chi, yoga, reflexology, *(kava is effective for anxiety but toxic to the liver)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>glucosamine, evening primrose oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer Prevention</td>
<td>selenium &amp; vitamin C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colds</td>
<td>echinacea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>chromium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headache</td>
<td>acupressure, biofeedback, meditation, hypnosis, massage therapy, Shiatsu massage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Blood Pressure</td>
<td>diet &amp; nutrition, Tai Chi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Flashes</td>
<td>black cohosh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insect Bites</td>
<td>aloe, marigold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Memory Loss as You Get Older**
*ginkgo biloba*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Menopause Symptoms</td>
<td>black cohosh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migraine Headaches</td>
<td>feverfew (for prevention), biofeedback, meditation, hypnosis, Shiatsu massage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nausea</td>
<td>acupressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain, chronic</td>
<td>meditation, massage, hypnosis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Peripheral Artery Disease  ginkgo biloba
Rheumatoid Arthritis  evening primrose oil
Skin Disorders  aloe
Sleep (chronic insomnia)  valerian
Tension  Tai Chi, Shiatsu massage, reflexology
Wounds, minor skin  aloe, Echinacea (topical), marigold

The preceding two lists are remarkably short. There are hundreds of CAM treatments not listed on either list. This is because we have almost no evidence on the efficacy or safety of most CAM remedies.

Part 4: Advising Christians About CAM Treatments

David Eisenberg wrote a paper, “Advising patients who seek alternative medical therapies,” from which much of the next section of this paper is taken. In terms of the safety of CAM treatments, the first question to be asked is whether a parishioner is turning to a CAM treatment instead of a conventional medical treatment that might be more effective. For example, if someone might have cancer and turns to prayer instead of going for a diagnostic workup, you should question whether prayer is safe, unless it be prayer for guidance.

Aside from such an obvious issue, relatively safe “therapies include homeopathy, most forms of massage, prayer, guided imagery, . . . hypnosis, and relaxation techniques.” In other words, if your parishioners ask your advise about such treatments, you can advise them that they are likely to be medically safe. In terms of whether they are effective, I would think that usually you are on safe ground if these treatments are used in conjunction with conventional medical approaches.

Most Americans are misinformed and believe that there is more evidence in favor of the effectiveness and safety of CAM remedies than is true. This is largely because the CAM practitioners talk about miraculous cures. One of the best ways to handle this problem is by handing your Christian layperson the book I told you to buy, Dónal O’Mathúna and Walt Larimore’s book, Alternative Medicine. From this book Christians can read a fair and even-handed appraisal of which forms of treatment are effective for what conditions. Another trustworthy source of information on the efficacy and safety of a particular CAM therapy is the Cochrane Reviews, which are available free online and provide the world’s best scientific evidence of the effectiveness of any and all forms of treatment (www.cochrane.de/cochrane/revabstr/mainindex.htm).

When advising a parishioner about seeking CAM treatment, here are several practical things you might do:

First, ask them to identify the primary symptom or target they are wanting treated, such as back pain.

Second, ask them to keep a diary about that symptom, so they can look back to see whether they think the treatment made any difference over time. Without a diary, your parishioner will lose perspective and forget. Let me give you an example from the medical world. During medical school I was working in a surgery clinic with a patient who had an ulcer on his leg. I measured the size of the ulcer as two centimeters by six centimeters. Going back over the chart, I found notes every month for eighteen months saying that it appeared to be healing nicely and growing smaller every month. There was only one note in which someone had measured the size of the ulcer, which was a note eighteen months earlier, at which time the ulcer was two centimeters by six centimeters.

Third, discuss the parishioner’s preferences and expectations. “The discussion often focuses on the reasons patients seek alternative treatment or their desire to avoid conventional therapies. Patients with low back pain, for example, may incorrectly assume that surgery is their only conventional option. If
patients wish to pursue alternative therapy but lack strong preferences for specific therapies, encourage . . . investigating options further.“xviii

Fourth, review issues of safety and efficacy, which usually means a review of the lack of data on these issues.

Fifth, provide the parishioner with questions to ask the CAM provider:

a. What are the spiritual and religious assumptions on which this treatment is based?;
b. What are the spiritual and religious beliefs of the CAM provider?;
c. Does the provider have experience with similar cases, and what have been the outcomes?;
d. Of what will the treatment consist, at what frequency and for what duration?;
e. How many weeks will pass before a decision can be made that it is effective or ineffective?;
f. What is the cost without medicine? Is treatment covered by health insurance?;
g. Are medicines paid for by insurance?;
h. Are there side effects of the treatment?;
i. Will the provider give a summary of treatment to the parishioner’s primary care doctor?xviii

Sixth, schedule a follow-up conversation in two months to see how the CAM treatment is going.

**Part 5: Herbal Remedies Are Not Always Safe**

You would think that herbs and dietary supplements purchased in your local drug or health food store are safe. The sales people will tell you that the herbs have been used for thousands of years, so they must be safe. In general it is true that herbal preparations have less side effects than prescription drugs.

So far there is no regulation of herbal remedies in the United States. Indeed, one of the conspicuous differences between conventional medicine and CAM is that the former is more heavily regulated than any other segment of the American economy, whereas the other is completely unregulated. Our country differs from Germany, where herbal remedies are regulated by the national government and paid for by health insurance. Some of our best information about herbs comes from the German Commission E.xix

Studies by Consumerlab.Com indicate that less than half of the herbal remedies sold contain the amount of the herb listed on the label. Sometimes the herb listed on the label in the health food store is not contained in the bottle. The label may say “Ginseng,” but there is guarantee about what is in the bottle, sometimes little Ginseng.xx Similarly, Consumerlab.Com found that less than half the vitamins sold contain the amount vitamin per pill that the label says. What you should learn from this is: DON’T TRUST THE LABEL ON THE BOTTLE for either herbs, vitamins, or other dietary supplements.

Often herbal preparations contain other things, not listed on the label. Herbs imported from Asia are notorious for the risk of containing mercury, lead, and other heavy metals. The plants pick these metals up from the soil, if they grow in polluted areas.

Since there is no standardization by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), you don’t know what is in the herbal preparation you are taking. Chinese herbs to increase sexual potency sometimes contain Viagra among other things, so they turn out to be effective. Someone who turns to a Chinese herb in order to avoid using Viagra, might be misled.

You have heard of Fen-Phen, the diet pill that was taken off the market because it could cause damage to the heart, lungs and nervous systems? It caused some deaths. Well, it is back! Some of the herbal diet remedies sold in health food stores, although they are advertised as being completely “natural,” contain Fen-Phen among other ingredients. Thus, when the health food store employee tells you that their herbal remedies must be safe because they have been used for thousands of years, you
should listen to their advice with caution. Below I will tell you how to get reliable information about these herbal preparations.\textsuperscript{xxi}

Kava is widely sold as an herb for reducing anxiety. Only the Kava roots are used on the Fiji Islands where this plant was first discovered. It turns out that the Kava stem, which is used in many of the Kava preparations available in the United States, naturally contains biochemicals that are toxic to the liver. This same Kava, toxic to the liver, is still sold in health food stores and pharmacies in the US, even though it has been banned throughout the European Union, Canada, Australia, Japan and China. Kava is banned in all those countries, but still available in the United States, sometimes marketed specifically to children in preparations with names like “Kid Calm.”\textsuperscript{xxii}

St. John’s Wort is widely used to treat depression. Few people who use it realize that it can speed the metabolism of other drugs. Thus if you take St. John’s Wort and you are on birth control pills, the birth control pills will be cleared from your blood more rapidly and you are more likely to get pregnant. Similarly this herb increases the speed with which chemotherapy and AIDS drugs are cleared out of the body, rendering those medicines ineffective.

I don’t mean to alarm you. Things are rapidly changing since the leaders of American medicine have become aware of the growing public interest in CAM. The FDA is about to impose standards on the herbal industry to protect the public from some of these problems. Currently the best way to purchase safe herbal remedies is to look for the letters “USP” on the label, referring to “United States Pharmacopoeia.”\textsuperscript{xxiii} Another way to avoid problems is to subscribe to the Website www.consumerlab.com, to get an independent review of what exactly is in the bottle you buy at the health food store.

I am talking about two problems. First, how can you know what is actually in the bottle if you can’t trust the label? I answered that question in the preceding paragraph. Second, how can you find balanced and even-handed evidence about whether a particular herb is safe and effective? I will answer that question in the next paragraph.

There are two answers: either Dónal O’Mathúna and Walt Larimore’s book, Alternative Medicine, in which the second half of the book focuses on particular herbs and dietary supplements; or the Cochrane Reviews, which I discussed in Part 4 of this paper.

**Part 6: The Spiritual Aspect of Some CAM Remedies Is Problematic for Christians**

Some of the CAM approaches that could be medically safe might be spiritually unsafe. Dónal O’Mathúna and Walt Larimore’s book, Alternative Medicine, points out that many CAM treatments are based on non-Christian spirituality, and are dangerous for Christians because of exposure to the occult.

Neil Anderson and Michael Jacobson write, in their book, Biblical Guide to Alternative Medicine,\textsuperscript{xxiv} “When I (Neil) was pasturing a church, I recall how excited I was to hear that a neighboring medical school was going to start a new program that would graduate family practitioners. The goal was to become more wholistic, with the new curriculum addressing nutritional as well as spiritual and psychological needs. My enthusiasm was quickly dampened, however, when I discovered that the spirituality being taught did not represent orthodox Christianity. Without divine revelation, the spiritual input took on the early forms of what we now understand to be New Age. Big names in medicine like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Jonas Salk soon found themselves taken in by the occult. Christians should have been the ones promoting wholistic medicine, but instead it was the spirituality of the New Age practitioners that stole the day.”

James Herrick, in his 2003 book, The Making of the New Spirituality, claims that the increasing public interest in CAM practices in the United States is part and parcel of an explosion of interest in non-Christian forms of spirituality, and the eclipse of biblical religion.\textsuperscript{xxv}
As Herrick says there are many ways in which non-Christian spirituality has become culturally dominant in America. One of those ways is through CAM. The picture I will paint in this sixth part of the paper is that Christian pastors are preaching from the pulpit, ignoring the proselytizing of the American people that is occurring without pulpits, but through the avenue of CAM. We are losing the war for the hearts and minds of the American people. In health food stores and CAM practitioner’s offices, in the Alternative Medicine section of secular bookstores and Prevention Magazine we are losing the war to the ancient opponents of Christianity. The names of our opponents are well known to us: Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, pantheism, and New Age Spirituality. The Wiccan religion (witchcraft) is also gaining influence in CAM, and also through the television show, “Sabrina, Teenage Witch,” movies like “Harry Potter.”

In order to understand why we are losing this war, we need to start by asking what Americans care about most.

a. Americans Are More Interested in Health than Salvation

I propose that the average American is far more interested in his or her health than in his or her salvation. If I were preaching to you I would read you this sentence twice more. But since this is a scholarly ETS presentation, I will read it only one more time: The average American is far more interested in his or her health than in his or her salvation.

There is a reason that people are fascinated with health and bored with theology. Augustine explains the reason in The City of God. The human race can be divided into two groups of people, those who love the Creator more than creation, versus those who love creation more than the Creator. Christians are of the former variety, or at least the invisible church is. By contrast, most Americans are more interested in creation. They love the blessings of this life. Foremost among those blessings is health. We Americans have many sayings that make it clear that health is an idol, such as, “The most important thing is to have your health.” It is necessary to be somewhat healthy in order to enjoy this creation properly. That is why we Americans are willing to pay $1.3 trillion dollars for conventional healthcare, a price tag that continues to escalate. And similarly, that is why we Americans are so vulnerable to the exaggerated claims of miraculous cures through CAM.

Using the usual definition of idolatry as that which is more important to a person than God, health is an idol for many Americans today. Since CAM encourages that idolatry, it has a big advantage over Christian preaching, in terms of commanding the attention of Americans.

b. What Does the Word “Spirituality” Mean?

One of the greatest mysteries of our time is what the word “spirituality” means when it is used in the realms of allopathic medicine and CAM. The word is used with great approval, and vigorous nodding of the heads. Everyone seems to agree that, whatever it refers to, it is probably a good thing. But, as concerns that to which it refers, one is left in a fog. Many people agree that everyone would be better off if the specific definition that word were never discussed. Yet there is a firmly established principle that spirituality leads to health. Drs. Harold Koenig and the late David Larson have amassed considerable scientific evidence that shows many positive health effects from “spirituality,” whatever that word means.

When I venture into the fog that surrounds the medical word “spirituality,” I often think of what the Apostle John wrote in his first letter: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world” (1 John 4:1-3 NIV).
Although the word “spirituality” is vague and virtually never defined in the healthcare field, there is an implicit rejection of 1 John 4:1-3 assumed in most CAM discussions of spirituality. The idea that the spiritual world is divided into two warring camps, and only the camp that acknowledges Jesus Christ can be trusted, is an alien concept in the worlds of medicine and CAM these days. One finds rather a covert assumption that any and all forms of spirituality are equally healthy.

There are two forms of spirituality that are more popular than the Bible inside CAM healthcare today. The most popular is traditional Chinese medicine. The second most popular is Ayurveda medicine from India. I am speaking about what is popular in America and among health-conscious American Christians today.

c. Traditional Chinese Medicine

When President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger went to China in February 1972, American television became fascinated with ancient Chinese medical practices such as acupuncture. We were incorrectly told that the Chinese were able to endure surgery with no other anesthesia than acupuncture. This was the beginning of the love affair between the American people and Chinese medicine. Traditional Chinese medicine dates back to The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine, written somewhere between 200 BC and 100 AD.

According to traditional beliefs in China, the world is enlivened with a spiritual and impersonal energy called chi. These days the letter “q” in Chinese is pronounced like “ch” in English, so this energy today is sometimes spelled qi. This life-force (chi) is particularly concentrated inside humans. It flows through us from the world around us, like the way that the earth’s magnetic field flows through us. When the chi becomes distorted in its flow, the result is disease. The key to health is to smooth out and balance the flow of chi through the body.

“The ancient Chinese – and contemporary practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine – believe that all life is made up of opposites called ‘yin’ and ‘yang.’ Each needs the other, and they must always be in balance. Night and day, winter and summer, everything must come into balance with yin and yang. . . . The body’s internal organs are also said to have yin and yang. As there is stress or relaxation, subtle adaptations take place. So long as the yin and yang are in proper relationship, good health is assured. But when yin and yang cannot adapt and adjust, illness occurs.” This is from the Taoist religion. Yin and yang determine the balance in the flow of chi through the body.

The goal of Chinese medicine is to restore or maintain the balance in the flow of chi through the body. Chi flows through channels in the skin, called “meridians.” This is spiritual, not physical energy. Acupuncture and acupressure applied to the skin change the flow of chi, thereby restoring health to the internal organs of the body. Thus when we say today that acupuncture helps certain forms of chronic pain, such as headaches, we are using an Americanized version of acupuncture, that is only a tiny fragment of the illnesses for which acupuncture was traditionally considered to be efficacious. Originally it was used to treat diseases of the liver, kidney, heart, lungs and intestines. All the diseases that internists and surgeons treat today, were treated through acupuncture, because it facilitated the correct flow of chi through meridians of the skin corresponding to internal organs.

Large numbers of CAM practices are aimed at restoring the balance in the flow of chi, based on these religious views of ancient Chinese medicine. Among them are: acupuncture, acupressure, Tai Chi, Therapeutic Touch, many forms of meditation, and Qigong.

Chinese herbs, which we view as botanical treatments, were originally chosen because of their alleged powers to restore balance to chi. We think, incorrectly, that herbs have a pharmacological effect on the body. Actually these herbs were selected because of their taste, not their pharmacological effect. A bitter-tasting herb effects fire; a salty herb effects water; sweet has an impact on earth; acrid has its effect on metal; and a sour-tasting herb has its effect on wood. The body is made of five elements: fire, water,
earth, metal and wood. By using herbs with different taste, you restore balance to the chi flowing through your body. xxx

When I toured psychiatric hospitals in China in 1983, I found that Chinese pharmacies carry more than herbs. They also offer dried frogs as medicinal agents. (I have no idea whether a dried frog has its main effect on the fire, water, earth, metal or wood in your body.)

Reiki is a Japanese remedy very similar in its assumptions to ancient Chinese medicine. The bio-energy that the Chinese call chi, the Japanese call ki. Reiki practitioners can become attuned to and can focus and influence life energy (ki) so as to produce long-distance healing, they claim.

Some aspects of this religious system were incorporated into George Lucas’ Star War movies. “May the Force be with you,” is a way of speaking about what the Chinese call chi. “The Force” is not the traditional God of the Bible. It is an impersonal life force that involves a balance of good and evil (the Chinese would say yin and yang). Just as Reiki healers in Connecticut today claim to be able to feel the ki flowing through the earth and are able to direct it so as to allegedly heal Americans of many diseases, similarly the Jedi knights are able to control the positive side of the Force to produce healing. Darth Vader controls the dark side of the Force to kill people.

“Energy medicine” is one of the spin-offs of the Star Wars movies. Go into your secular bookstore, go to the Alternative Medicine section, and you will find many books on “bio-energetics” or energy medicine. This phrase, “bio-energy,” refers to chi.

As James Herrick says in his book, The Making of the New Spirituality, the word “spirituality” in our day usually does not refer to anything biblical. When Americans use this word it usually refers to an impersonal non-physical energy that is the creative force behind Darwinian evolution. (It is possibly related to Process Theology, in this regard.)

What is wrong with this concept of chi? The problem is that you and I know from the Bible that the spiritual energy of the universe is not impersonal, nor is it safe. I read you before the quote from the Apostle John concerning how we should “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1-3). Christians stumbling into the many Chinese CAM therapies are exposing themselves to occult forces that do not acknowledge Jesus Christ. People have been known to become emotionally and spiritually disturbed, and to have trouble entering Christian churches after some of these treatments, according to O’Mathúna and Larimore.

As far as empirical evidence is concerned, if we take Therapeutic Touch, its proponents claim that it strengthens the immune system (by influencing the flow of chi) and therefore promotes wound healing and fighting of cancer. There have been five scientific studies of the impact of Therapeutic Touch on wound healing. Two have found faster wound healing; two have found slower wound healing; and one has shown no effect on wound healing from Therapeutic Touch. This form of Chinese medicine, Therapeutic Touch, is popular among nurses in conventional American medicine, as you will learn if you venture into almost any hospital. Some Christians have uncoupled Therapeutic Touch from its roots in Buddhism and Taoism, and have coupled it up with the Christian idea of laying-on-of-hands.

Chinese CAM therapies are increasingly being adopted into conventional American medical centers in clinics called “Integrative Medicine” treatment settings.

d. Ayurveda Medicine from India

Let us now switch from China to India, in order to appreciate how many current CAM treatments are disguised forms of Hinduism. That energy which in China is called chi, is called prana in India. It is particularly concentrated in certain areas of the spine called chakas. By meditation you becomes attuned to your inner self, i.e. to the flow of prana up your spine. Disturbances in this flow cause disease, and releasing the flow from spiritual blockages restores health. This is what “centering” meditation is all about.
Dr. Deepak Chopra was originally an endocrinologist and medical director of a conventional allopathic hospital in Boston. He then became enamored with Transcendental Meditation and he returned to his upbringing in the Hindu religion of India. Today Chopra is a Hindu evangelist. His many books on health dominate shelves of the Alternative Medicine section of secular bookstores (Creating Health, Quantum Healing, perfect Health, and Ageless Body, Timeless Mind).

Chopra teaches that by meditation you begin to get in touch with your divinity. Meditation allows you to blend into the Universal Consciousness that is the divine life force of the universe. You come to recognize that you are not actually a finite person. By union with the Universal Consciousness you experience that you are divine, that you have no limits, that you are omnipresent and immortal. Chopra believes in complete dominance of spirit over matter. By the spiritual insights you can create the health you want. “Chopra claims that each of us is God.”

“Although our package of skin and bones looks very convincing,” Chopra writes, “it is a mask, an illusion, disguising our true self which has no limitations.” Here we see the Hindu doctrine of maya or “illusion.” That which we call creation is actually an illusion. Note that this is not the same thing as Gnosticism, although it may have some similarities.

Awareness of your breathing, relaxation, and attention to your inner self is essential to the various forms of meditation. There are many forms of meditation practiced in America today. Some of them are spiritually neutral. You have to inquire carefully into the beliefs of the teachers to be able to discern when meditation or yoga is a disguised form of Hinduism. Many forms of meditation and yoga that start out sounding innocuous, lead down the primrose path toward recognizing that your inner self is actually free of any finite limitations because it is united with the prana or life force of the universe, i.e. “god.”

e. Why Call It Proselytizing?

My thesis has been that Chinese and Hindu religions are seeping into our culture via the gateway of health. This is not the only route, but it is one of the biggest. I have further proposed that Americans are more interested in health than in religion, so this gateway is wide-open. Americans welcome new ideas about their health. They are indiscriminate about those ideas.

If you look at Deepak Chopra’s books you will discover that he is a Hindu evangelist. Dr. Andrew Weil is also aggressively proselytizing. Weil is not so easily categorized as Chopra. Weil’s theology is best described as pantheistic. His spiritual perspective is explained in Weil’s book, Health and Healing, where he identifies health, holiness, wholeness and balance as being equivalent to one another, and says that all religions teach the same thing.

In Moslem countries you cannot draw a distinction between religion and politics. Similarly, in Asian countries you cannot draw a distinction between religion and health. The Asian religions that are now so popular in CAM are simply introducing potential converts to lifestyle changes based on non-Christian ideas about energy. There is no need for a Hindu temple or a Buddhist monastery in your town. These religions don’t need noisy evangelization in order to produce converts.

Because we Americans draw a distinction between religion and health, we are blind to the spread of these religions in the healthcare arena. Who ever would have guessed that the well-accepted phrase “healing energy” would be a codeword for the invasion of America by Asian religions?

Why do theologians draw a distinction between religion and health? Because our theologians have embraced allopathic medicine with its pragmatic, atheistic and materialistic assumptions. We incorrectly think that if something is purely materialistic then it belongs to medicine, whereas if something is spiritual, then it belongs to theology. Such dualism is obviously not biblical. We are complacent because we assume that medicine is outside our area of expertise. Perhaps God is calling us to develop a medical theology.
You might ask, “Why don’t Christians begin doing research on the healing effects of Christian spirituality?” The answer to that question is astonishing. The most comprehensive source of information about spirituality research in medicine is edited by three Christians named, Harold Koenig, Michael McCullough and David Larson. Their book, which has become the standard reference textbook on the subject, is titled *Handbook of Religion and Health*. If you read it you will discover that the lion’s share of this research has been focused on Christian spirituality. The best research in the world is coming from evangelical Christians at Duke University Medical School, especially the research of a Christian named Harold Koenig.

Ironically, our people are doing the work, but our enemies are taking credit for it. The Christians are leading the pack in producing research showing that Christian spirituality is medically healthy. But when this research is published the generic term “spirituality” is used, as if it were about any form of spirituality, not necessarily Christian. When these research studies are read and digested by the medical establishment in America, they are understood to support generic spirituality, and specifically New Age spirituality.

The bottom line issue, according Anderson and Jacobson’s book, *Biblical Guide to Alternative Medicine*, is that Christian theologians have to wake up and begin to lead in shaping the spiritual assumptions upon which American medicine will be based in the future.

**Summary**

In summary, this paper grows out of the question-and-answer period of the paper I delivered last year at the ETS Annual Meeting in Toronto. My paper was titled “A Biblical Theology of Chronic Illness.” Many of the questions I was asked afterward were about alternative medicine.

I have attempted to respond to those questions by addressing six issues:

1. Defining of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM);
2. Showing that CAM is increasingly popular with the American people;
3. Showing that CAM remedies are effective and safe for certain medical problems;
4. Telling you how to advise Christians about CAM treatments;
5. Suggesting that herbal remedies are not always as safe as the public believes;
6. Discussing how the spiritual aspect of some CAM remedies is problematic for Christians.

Among the hundreds of different forms of CAM gaining influence in America today, I have chosen to focus (in the sixth section of this paper) on a small number of highly influential practices that grow out of traditional Chinese medicine or Ayurveda medicine from India. I have not spoken of the vast number of CAM remedies that truly are secular. Nor have I spoken of the few CAM remedies that are Christian, such as healing prayer or the Hallelujah Diet.

My purpose is to serve the needs of my audience by offering an entertaining paper that hopefully will provoke lively discussion. What are the six take-home messages from this paper?

a. That Americans care more about their health than their salvation;
b. CAM is about as popular as conventional medicine in America, and growing more popular as time goes on;
c. There is little evidence that most CAM treatments are effective or safe;
d. Many CAM treatments are spiritually dangerous;
e. Health is our greatest idol in America;
f. Medical spirituality is emerging as the hottest subject in Christian theology today, as evidenced by the flood of new Christian books on CAM.

Walter Larimore and Traci Mullins recent book, *10 Essentials of Highly Healthy People* (Zondervan 2003), suggests the direction that the Christian church needs to go in the future, namely to proclaim and promote our own version of CAM. Previously Christians interested in the medical field have restricted their attention to healing prayer. We have accepted a false dualism that views real medicine as outside our area of expertise. We have not previously taken on the big picture of teaching people how to live healthy lives in a comprehensive manner. This book is for “pursuing wellness, coping with illness, and developing a plan to care for the health needs of life.”

The time is long past when Christians can afford to ignore medicine as a theological arena. We have seen what happens when theologians treat medicine as outside their area of expertise: New Age and Asian spiritualities rush in to fill the theological vacuum. The greatest need for missionaries today is inside the United States and Europe. To missionize these nations we need to be able to speak their language, which is first-and-foremost a language saturated with medical, health, and wellness jargon. To evangelize you have to speak to people where they are, focusing on subjects they find interesting. The American people start with an interest in their health. They are bored with theology. They are a people increasingly harassed by the rising cost of allopathic medicine, searching for a new approach to health and wellness that is more compassionate.

Hopefully the last paragraph of my paper will knock your socks off. Christians are healthier than other Americans in every respect but one, according to medical research. The one exception is that Christians tend to be fatter than non-Christians, as you can tell by looking around the ETS annual meeting. But in terms of other health variables, we are ahead. We are ahead in terms of social supports, use of seat belts, avoidance of cigarette smoking, drunkenness, road rage, violence, divorce, and following the orders of our doctors. We live longer if we go to church. There have now been thirty scientific studies that show that Christians who go to church at least once a week live longer than the average Americans.\(^{xxxv}\) Altruism is medically healthy, and we are also ahead in that area.\(^{xxxv}\) Therefore we Christians have a solid track record upon which to build our health advice, as we begin to develop our Christian versions of CAM.
References


v Elisabeth Targ conducted two studies of long-distance healing prayer directed at AIDS patients, and both appeared to produce positive results. These were not Christian prayers for God’s intervention. The healers in this study were an assorted group: psychics, many trained in bio-energetic healing, a Buddhist, a rabbi, a shaman, Native American medicine man, and a Christian. The healers were shown photographs of AIDS patients, and were asked to carefully avoid any “appeal to a higher power. Rather than ask God for help the healers were directed to send positive healing energy, to direct an intention for health and well-being to the subject” shown in the photograph. Both studies were reported as having positive results. Elisabeth Targ, prior to her death, became internationally famous as the medical researcher who allegedly showed that healing prayer worked. See: Po Bronson, “A prayer before dying,” Wired Magazine, (Dec. 2002): pp. 175-179, 221-223; Fred Sicher, Elizabeth Targ, Dan Moore D 2nd, and H. S. Smith, “A randomized double-blind study of the effect of distant healing in a population with advanced AIDS,” Western Journal of Medicine, vol. 169(6) (Dec. 1998): pp. 356-363.


xi Dean Ornish, Dr. Dean Ornish’s Program for Reversing Heart Disease (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990). The Ornish program is well supported by research data.


xv Dónal O’Mathúna and Walt Larimore, Alternative Medicine, pp. 466-477.

xvi David M. Eisenberg, “Advising patients who seek alternative medical therapies.”

xvii Ibid.

xviii Ibid.


xxi Tieraona L. Dog, “Mood disorders: Is there a role for dietary supplements?”


xxiii Tieraona L. Dog, “Mood disorders: Is there a role for dietary supplements?”


xxvi Harold G. Koenig, Michael E. McCullough and David B. Larson, Handbook of Religion and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). On p. 18 they define “spirituality” as “the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community.” They draw a distinction between religion and spirituality, the latter being more individualistic and subjective, without doctrines.

xxvii O’Mathúna and Larimore, Alternative Medicine, pp. 279-282.

xxviii The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine, Ilza Veith translator (University of California Press, 2002).

xxix O’Mathúna and Larimore, Alternative Medicine, p. 280.

xxx Ibid., p. 288-289.

xxxi Ibid., pp. 97-100, quote from p. 98.


xxsiv See endnote 14.

xxsv The ideas in this paragraph come, in part, from Dr. Peter VanNess, a spiritual epidemiologist and theologian at Yale Medical School and Yale Divinity School.