in any form either. The Bible permits functional jewelry. Christians today should comport themselves according to the biblical principles of modesty, simplicity and prudence.

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The Perception of the Gifts of Healings and Miracles by West African Seventh-day Adventists

Sampson M. Nwaomah, *PhD*

Abstract

The gifts of healings and miracles are part of the spiritual gifts that God has endowed on the church for the work of ministry both within and outside the church. Current trends, however, has led to conflicting positions on the relevance and manifestation of these gifts in contemporary Christianity. Therefore this paper examines the perception of Adventists in the West Africa sub-Region towards the biblical gifts of healings and miracles. The study observed that most Adventists seem to be familiar with these Biblical gifts, and uphold their contemporary relevance. However, it seems that some factors negatively affect the enthusiasm of some Adventists towards these gifts. These factors are lack of thorough understanding by some clergy and laity of the function of these gifts; lack of sufficient faith by members and clergy; fear of counterfeits and supposed abuse of these gifts by the Pentecostals. However, the paper argues for balanced biblical approaches to these gifts that we believe are still relevant in contemporary Christian mission.

Introduction

Scripture identifies spiritual gifts that are available to the church for its mission. Among these are the gifts of healings and miracles (see 1 Cor. 12:4-11, 27-31). It is suggested that these gifts are different from the privilege, which every believer has in praying for the sick and receiving answers to such prayers, but refers to special powers as those exercised by the disciples (Nichol, 1980, p.771). Further in the view of Zackrison (1997) the gift of miracle is:

> *the special ability that God gives to certain members of the body of Christ to serve as human intermediaries through whom it pleases God to perform powerful acts that are perceived by*

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observers to have altered the ordinary course of nature (p.129).

He further describes the gifts of healings as:

The special ability that God gives to certain members of the body of Christ to serve as human intermediaries through whom it pleases God to cure illness and restore health apart from the use of natural means (p.129).

It has also been acknowledged that it was part of God's "plan that His followers should have power to perform miracles to advance His work on earth" (Nichol, 1980, p.776). Commenting on these gifts, Zackrison (1997) further opines:

We are all familiar with the practice of these gifts (miracles and healings) in the early church. We are also familiar with experiences related in missionary literature. How about ourselves, close home? (p.129).

In her commentary on Christ's gospel commission to the twelve in Luke 9:1-6; cf. Matthew 10:7,8, White (1951) concurs that the spiritual gifts of healing is bound up with the gospel commission, (p.497) and observed that the believers in the early church had this manifested in their ministry. The manner in which this is to be accomplished by those with the present truth is well articulated by her in this manner:

The great work of the gospel is not to close with less manifestation of the power of God than marked its openings. The prophecies which were fulfilled in the outpouring of the former rain at the opening of the gospel are again to be fulfilled in the latter rain at its close...servants of God, with their faces lighted up and shinning with holy consecration, will hasten from place to place to proclaim the message from heaven.... miracles will be wrought, the sick will be healed, and signs and wonders will follow the believers (White, 1911, p.106, emphasis mine).

This affirmation is hinged on her resolute faith that:

When the Saviour said, 'Go,... teach all nations,' He said also, 'These signs shall follow them that believe; in My name they shall cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. The promise is far reaching as the commission. Not that all the gifts are imparted to each believer. 'The Spirit divides to every man severally as he wills.' 1 Cor. 12: 11. But the gifts of the Spirit are promised to every believer according to his need for the Lord's work. The promise is just as strong and trustworthy now as in the days of the apostles (White, 1948b, p.612).

She then queries, "the gospel still possesses the same power, and why should we not today witness the same results?" (White, 1948a, p.429).

But perhaps of all the gifts mentioned for the ministry of the church, none seem as controversial as these, even within the Adventist church. This article therefore, attempts an investigation of the perception of the gifts of healings and miracles by Seventh-day Adventists in West Africa.[2] But before we turn our attention to this task we begin with a survey of these gifts in the post-apostolic era and in church history.

A Synopsis of the Gifts of Healings and Miracles in the Post-Apostolic Era and Today

Early Christian literatures seem to show that the gifts of miracles and of healings continued during the first two centuries following the ascension of Christ. This is testified to by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullia and Origen (Cottle, 1988, p.648). For instance, Irenaeus spoke of daily exorcisms, healings and even occasional raising from the dead (Grieve, 1974, p.369). It is most likely that the frequency and operation of these gifts significantly waned in the following centuries due to the flourishing of ecclesiasticism and asceticism. Church rituals became mere formalities and also impersonal and ascetic temper regulated physical healings to relatively obscure position. In fact asceticism revered pain and sickness as indispensable instruments of God to the soul (Cottle, 1988, p.648).

However, gifts have never been totally extinguished in the life of the Christian church. It is believed that Francis of Assisi, Luther, Wesley, the Waldenses, the early Moravians, the Quakers, and others experienced these gifts intermittently throughout the history of the Christian church (ibid).

The contemporary Christian era has also witnessed a revival of interest and varied emphasis on gifts of healings and miracles. This emphasis seems to have reawakened an awareness and belief in the reality and permanence of the gifts in some circles, especially among the Pentecostals. This has not, however, been without challenges.

Perhaps the modern challenge to the continuity of the gift of healing in the church could be traced to the Age of Enlightenment, an era with a philosophy which rejected the reality of miracles. This rejection assumes either the absence of a deity or disinterest on his part if he does exist. The leading proponent of this notion was David Hume who flatly denied the reality of miracles. Warfield, (1972), Edger, (1983), MacArthur, (1992), have further extended this cessation's argument.

On the other side of the debate and in support of the continuity of the miracle of healing on the church is Lewis. He argues intensely in defense of this, (Lewis, 1974). His contemporary ally is John Wilkinson who based his view on Paul's listing of

the gift of healings and miracles among the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit gave to the church, (Wilkenson, in Dike, 2004, p.11). It is also opined that only a deficient concept of God would concede to the cessation of the age of miracles, (MacArthur, 1992, p.152).

Evaluating the contemporary attitudes towards these gifts (Mwansa, cited in Dybdahl, 1999) argues that the attitude is summarized by three conflicting positions. First, some believe that the healings and even miracles are not relevant to contemporary Christianity perhaps because of the advance of medical sciences. Second, others believe and desire that healings and miracles should occur in the church today and as such be used as evidences of God's presence among believers and authority over evil forces. The last group while not denying their existence argues that their occurrences are so few and hence inconsequential, (p.126).

Perception of the Gifts of Healings and Miracles among Seventh-day Adventists in West Africa

As was stated at the beginning of this work, our purpose is to examine the perception of the gifts of healings and miracles by Seventh-day Adventists in West Africa. In pursuance of this objective a survey was conducted among some Adventist populations.

The sample for this study was drawn from the delegates to the West-Central African Division of Seventh-day Adventists Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL) Conference which held in Nigeria in the first quarter of 2005 and the students in the MA Summer School run by Andrews University on the Campus of Babcock University in Nigeria in the same year. All the students in the MA program are Seventh-day Adventist Pastors. The sample was mostly drawn from Ghanaians and Nigerians in the two groups. A sample size of sixty was randomly chosen in the two groups. Ten of these were ladies chosen from the PARL Conference since all the students in the MA class are males. Fifty-three respondents returned their questionnaires.

The questionnaire sought the biblical knowledge of the respondents on the gifts, their contemporary relevance, perceived attitudes of clergy and members towards them and possible factors responsible for the perception. The result of the survey of the survey indicate that 56.6 % of the respondents claim a good knowledge of the biblical gifts of healings while 43.4% seems to have a limited knowledge of the issue. 66.03% of the respondents acknowledge the contemporary relevance of these gifts, while 15.09 % says no and 18.86 % are undecided. On the contemporary possibility of the manifestation of these gifts in ministry of SDA pastors and members, 66.03% of the respondents are in the affirmative 15.09 % says no and 18.86 % is undecided. From the survey, we also observe that 50.94 % of the respondents indicated that the attitude of SDAs towards these gifts is negative, 28.30 % says it is ambivalent while 20.75 % sees it as positive. Finally we gathered from the survey that 24 52% of the respondents think the factor responsible for SDA attitude towards these gifts is insufficient biblical knowledge. 26.42 % claims it is insufficient faith, 22.64 % points to the abuse by Pentecostals and 26.42 % think it is fear of counterfeits. [3]

On the aspects of the attitude of SDAs to the gifts of healings and miracles, six factors were listed. Responses indicate that four of the six factors listed significantly affect the attitude. The perceived factors are:

i) lack of thorough understanding by some clergy and laity of the function of these gifts;
ii) lack of sufficient faith by members and clergy;
iii) fear of counterfeit due to the activities of Satan; and
iv) supposed abuse of these gifts by the Pentecostals.

In the remaining section of this work we examine these factors as they may affect the functionality of these spiritual gifts. Certain insights and clarifications are made in relation to the spiritual gifts in question.

Inadequate Theological Understanding

The first factor identified by this survey is the lack of thorough understanding of the theology of spiritual gifts both by some clergy and laity. No doubt, ignorance of biblical truths could incapacitate the potentials available to the church and individual believers. Speaking on the relationship between adequate theological Knowledge and faith, Hosea lamented the poor sate of faith of his people for lack of faith (4:6). Similarly, Apostle Paul implies that Israel lost. This situation could apply to the subject of spiritual gifts and their manifestation in the ministry of the Church. It is, therefore, possible that an incorrect theology of spiritual gifts among some ministers, which could affect the understanding of some members, might lead to a situation where their (spiritual gifts) relevance and potency may not be experienced. Consequently, this paper holds that both clergy and laity need to have a balanced biblical-theological understanding of the subject. Relevant literatures that address the functionality of these gifts in Christian mission could be used in the teaching. [4]

Insufficient Faith

The next possible cause according to the survey for the bias towards the subject in view seems to be lack of sufficient faith. This could be collaborated from the Scripture. In one instance in the ministry of Christ, the hindrance to the disciples' inability to heal the boy who had seizures in Matthew 17 seems to be an index of their spirituality. The Gospel of Matthew in reports:

> Then Jesus answered and said, *O faithless and perverse generation*, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me. And Jesus rebuked the demon; and it came out of him; and the child was cured

from that very hour. Then came the disciples to Jesus privately, and said, why could not we cast it out? So Jesus said to them, *Because of your unbelief: for assuredly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say unto this mountain, move from here to there; and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go not out except by prayer and fasting* (17: 17-21 NKJV) (emphasis mine).

Commenting on this episode, White (1948a) opines that the disciples' unbelief had shut them out from deeper sympathy with Christ, and the carelessness with which they regarded the sacred work committed to them, had caused their failure in the conflict with the powers of darkness, (p.429).
In other words formalism and complacency in Christian faith and practices might lead to a paucity of faith. The evidence of this might be the inability to accomplish the mission God has assigned to the church. It is the position of this paper that the church is responsible for the raising of the faith of the members so that those whom God could or have been endowed with these gifts can demonstrate the power of the gospel.

Fear of Counterfeits
A third reason adduced by the survey why some West African Adventists hold with contempt the gifts of healings and miracles is the abuse these significant gifts have suffered. The Bible long warns of such possibility as the following passages reveal:

For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:24 RSV).

Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders (2 Thess. 2:9RSV)

And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared. And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of the great day of God Almighty (Revelation 16:12-14RSV).

In the early history of the Seventh-day Adventist church she was also warned that in the last days:

> The sick will be healed before us. Miracles will be performed in our sight. Are we prepared for the trial which awaits us, when lying wonders of Satan shall be more fully exhibited? Will not many souls be ensnared and taken, (White, 1948c, p.302).

These counsels might have possibly cautioned some SDAs enthusiasm in relation to these gifts. However, as timely as they may be, they do not, in our opinion, suggest that there would be no genuine miracles and healings nor do they imply that these gifts will be withdrawn. In fact a counterfeit presupposes the existence of the genuine. Therefore one may say that the Devil seeks to counterfeit the genuine because of their significance in the mission of the church. In this dilemma it is our view that the responsibility of the church is to prove the Spirit by working in concert with those (her members) who might lay claim to such gifts to prove their genuineness or otherwise.

Supposed Abuse by Pentecostals
Next to the intense activity of Satan in counterfeiting miracles and healings is what appears to be an over-emphasis by the Pentecostals. Anderson observes that they give a prominent position to healings and miracles in their praxis and mission outreach, (Anderson, 2002, 525). To them healing is good news for the poor and afflicted and at the dawn of the twentieth century it was expected that "signs and wonders" would accompany an outpouring of the Spirit' healing was linked to the work of Christ on the cross, demonstrated His victory over all forms of affliction, salvation was wholistic thus encompassing all of life's problems, and the presence of these 'signs and wonders' was the realization of the presence of the kingdom of God, (*ibid*). Therefore these signs and wonders should compliment the proclamation of the word. These became an indispensable part of Pentecostal evangelistic methodology, (Saayman, 1993, p.46).

No doubt, there has been a major attraction to Pentecostalism because many see these miracles and healings as validation of the word of God and have been persuaded to become Christians. But some people have argued that in some instances, "the rhetoric about miraculous healing far exceeds the reality", (Wright, 1995, p.76). There are also the perceptions of commercialization and hypnotism in the practices of these gifts among some who professed to be endowed such abilities. Therefore, we align with Walker (1995) who cautions that beliefs in them "surely entail the moral imperative to protect them from fraudulence or from frivolity and shoddiness," (pp.129-130).
Nevertheless, McGee observes:

> *The confident belief that God had at last poured out the Spirit with miraculous power to empower Christians to bring closure to the Great Commission...has forced the larger church world to reassess the work of the Holy Spirit in mission, (McGee, 1997, p.278).*

In assessing the position of the Pentecostals, we opine that the cloud in

the Pentecostal belief in divine healings is the rejection by some of other methods of healings. We also object that the gifts of healings and miracles are particularly relevant in societies where disease is rife and access to adequate health care is a luxury, (see Anderson, 2002, 525; Währisch, 2001, pp.94, 97).

. An easy reaction in the face of the seeming factors considered might be to follow the pattern of many- that is, dismissing these gifts as irrelevant. But there are compelling reasons to still see them as integral parts of the provision of Christ in His atonement. For example Matthew 8:16, 17 points in this direction:

> *When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through prophet Isaiah: He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases* (NIV).

We have also shown that He gave His disciples' power to continue His healing ministry (Matt. 10: 7,8; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 9:1,2,6; 10:9; Acts 3:1-11; 5:16; 9:33-34; 14:8-10; etc). The apostle Paul clarifies this power as spiritual gifts, which the church would not be destitute of for the Lord endows some in His wisdom to equip them towards fulfilling the mission mandate He has entrusted to her. Further, the functionality of these gifts is not predicated on the proportion of health-care available or affordable, neither on the social or economic status of its recipients. Further, while the argument of Trapnell (1980) that the miracles and divine healing may be necessary:

> *where the word of God and His servants need to be authenticated and illustrated... The fringe of an area of new evangelization on the mission field would therefore seem to be the most likely place for miraculous healings to occur today...* (p.622).

This seems close yet the possibility of these gifts is not and cannot be inhibited by scientific investigations or confined to areas of new evangelization.

Summary and Conclusion

Evangelization, the task of the Church, is an on-going process for every generation and thus the gospel always needs authentication. To enhance this course God has endowed some in the church with the gifts needed to do so as the need may arise. While certain gifts are less conspicuous (R. Rice, 1985, p.192), none is less significant towards fulfilling the mission of the Church, the abuses notwithstanding.

It is therefore quite biblical to conclude that the gifts of healing and miracles in the church is a demonstration of the fact that God can and does heal independent of medical remedies. As it was in the early church, it can be today since Christ gave that assurance. The fear of the counterfeit cannot invalidate the genuine. Rather the Church looses when she stifles the genuine manifestation of these gifts in her midst. We thus opine that it is an imperative for the Church to affirm the biblical teachings on the gifts of healings and miracles and create the right environment for those who are genuinely endowed with these gifts to fulfill their ministry...

Notes

[1] This paper is an abridged and modified version of part of Chapter five of a PhD thesis. See Nwaomah, Sampson M, "The Concept of the Church in Luke-Acts and Its Implications for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in West Africa," An Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to Faculty of Arts, Obafemi Awolowo Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 2006.

[2] This is one area of conflicting responses in SDA mission practices, at least in English West Africa. While some feel that there is no need for this, others agitate that the church should create an environment for the manifestation of the gifts of miracles and healings. There are noticeably divergent opinions on the relevance of these gifts. Among others, these differences in perception may have been responsible for the church's response in some instances towards a few that claim they have these gifts. In the last decade the church in Ghana dismissed a minister who claimed these gifts. In Nigeria one had his ordination delayed and his apartment subjected to a surprise search for charms, amulets and literatures, which the antagonists claimed, were responsible for his claims. In the course of the survey conducted for this work, I interviewed a minister and Church leader from Northern Cameroon in the 2005 MA class who said he noticed he had such gifts but had to de-emphasis them for fear of possible censure.

[3] See pp 135-150 of unpublished thesis for the details of this survey and a full discussion of the findings.

[4] In 1997, the SDA Church devoted a quarter of her weekly Sabbath Bible Study Guide to address spiritual gifts and their contemporary relevance. See Zackrison, James W. (1997), "Spiritual Gifts: Key to Ministry," *Adult Sabbath School Lesson Study*

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