

Can Medicine Offer Salvation? God Fills Gaps When Technology Teeters

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The message is perfectly clear for anyone who tunes in to *Miracle Workers*: When it comes to serious health issues, technologically savvy surgeons are the means to salvation.

Health is a desirable good that people need and want, said Dr. Brian Volck, a pediatrician in private practice who also teaches in the medical school at the University of Cincinnati. There is no doubt that life has improved for people who undergo surgeries performed by the highly skilled doctors featured on the prime time show.

But the show (Mondays, 10 p.m. EDT, ABC) also reinforces what Volck describes as the temptation to treat physicians and the medical-industrial complex as gods.

"It is as if you can peel off the skin, throw it away and you're left with this creamy nougat center of the soul."

"Theologically informed Christians," said Volck, "should be asking, 'Do we have the good properly ordered here?' Yes, doctors can do some amazing things, but are they really the efficient cause of our salvation? Is salvation found in health or is it in something else?"

Volck is the co-author with Joel Shuman of *Reclaiming the Body: Christians and the Faithful Use of Modern Medicine*. At *Vital Theology's* request, he watched several episodes of *Miracle Workers*.

ABC describes the program as "a life-changing new series about real people overcoming insurmountable odds with the help of an elite team of medical professionals" that employs "cutting edge medical technology."

The first-year program is in the unenviable position of going head-to-head with CBS's popular *CSI: Miami*.

In their book, Volck and Shuman write that "the modern world, in practice if not in word, refuses to trust the God revealed in Christ to save us from death."

Therefore, they say, "those sanctioned with the power to preserve life and vigor and to

forestall or control death are understood within modern culture to represent, if not to possess, godlike power.

"This is not because these people think of themselves more highly than they ought, but because of the social significance we give to the power they represent," Volck and Shuman continue. "This is how the fallen powers function; they cooperate with the disordered appetites of those who use and depend upon them, allowing us to see them not as God's instruments, but as gods, period."

It is equally easy for modern North Americans to misconstrue the connections between body and soul, Volck told *Vital Theology*.

Whereas Judeo-Christian belief holds that the body and the soul are connected, there's a tendency to lapse into Gnostic constructions that claim the spirit is more important than the body.

"It is as if you can peel off the skin, throw it away and you're left with this creamy nougat center of the soul," said Volck. "It just doesn't work that way in the Hebrew and basic Christian understanding."

Television has no need to treat its subjects theologically and should not be faulted for failing to do so, Volck said. But for Christians, he said, *Miracle Workers* should raise several issues.

Community, church absent

On *Miracle Workers*, health is conceived of as a series of encounters between an individual patient and medicine that are focused on an individual's autonomy—what choices he or she can make, what activities he or she can do. But interaction between the patient and his or her community is almost nonexistent.

Inside an Hispanic evangelical church on the show, the father of a seriously ill child sings a song he wrote about his hopes for the boy. But the church serves as little more than a stage. When the child pulls through the difficult operation, there's a seaside picnic, complete with clowns and balloons.

Volck contrasts that with a recent experience in his own Roman Catholic parish after a woman was diagnosed with a melanoma.

The church took quite literally the call of

James 5:14: “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

The family and friends of the woman anointed her with oil during Sunday Mass. No doubt there were prayers for a good outcome, said Volck, but the purpose of the service was to show that health was not the highest goal in this instance. While the community was in solid support of the sick woman, this was an act that demonstrated that the parish members knew they were not in control. This was simply the community coming together to affirm the importance of this particular member.

Seeking the good life

Most patients on *Miracle Workers* are portrayed as being at the end of their medical ropes. An adolescent girl with Tourette’s syndrome, a neurological disorder marked by involuntary movements and vocalizations, wants only to be a normal teenager.

“For the younger kids, there is always this sort of gesture for the wonderful life and the wonderful things they are going to do later on, which is, of course, what every parent we know of ... is looking forward to for their children,” said Volck.

What is portrayed as normative, he noted, is the ability to act independently and make choices for one’s life without relying on other people. Anything short of this is viewed as a dismal life.

If the concept of television as catechesis is extended to encompass the advertisements, then the normative account of the good life is one in which people learn to make good consumer choices, said Volck.

“Part of the grating effect that Christian theology has on North Americans,” said Volck, “is that it questions a lot of those assumptions about autonomy and individualism, which seem to be inherent in the portrayal on television.”

Volck is certainly not the first to comment on the powerful acculturating force that television has become, especially its focus on consumption.

“This is so implicit and so internalized by all of us—including me—that it takes something as radical as the witness of Christ and the people that Christ called together into a church to break us out of that,” said Volck.

When technology fails

Generally, God is acknowledged on *Miracle Workers* only when technology is inadequate.

When the potential for paralysis is discussed as a surgical risk, the patient’s father responds, “We’ll leave that in God’s hands.”

Indeed, most episodes include an almost formulaic point of high tension when the success of the technology is in doubt, said Volck. During one such moment a doctor responds: “We’re in God’s country now.”

Said Volck, “This is the medical version of the God of the gaps. God is largely irrelevant except when we are no longer in control.”

Volck would have Christians believe that they are always in “God’s country” because they are never in charge of their own medical lives. In fact, it is one of the first things he tells the parents of his own pediatric patients.

There’s no doubt that horrific problems are brought under control through medicine, but Volck observed that the show downplays the fact that patients continue to suffer some disability after corrective surgery.

Although it is easy to assume that medicine is a very Christian practice, said Volck, the medical establishment makes assumptions that are sometimes alien to the faith and many people do not perceive the tension that exists between Christianity and medicine.

The current rapprochement between spirituality and medicine falls far short of making medicine and Christianity fully compatible, said Volck. The mere presence of a chaplain in a hospital or the occasional reference to the spiritual dimension of healing are not signs that medicine and Christianity are in perfect harmony. ◀