



# Christianity and Spirituality in Healthcare

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## Abstract

According to the American Medical Association, 'Health care is a fundamental human good because it affects our opportunity to pursue life goals, reduces our pain and suffering, helps prevent premature loss of life, and provides information needed to plan for our lives.' Christianity is the world's largest religion and most widely diffused of all faiths stemming from the life teachings of Jesus Christ. Religion, medicine, and healthcare have always been intertwined from history. Dating back throughout the Middle Ages and up to the French Revolution, physicians were often clergy. The first hospital in the West was started by a religious organization and staffed by religious orders. Researchers at the Mayo Clinic have concluded that, "Most studies have shown that religious involvement and spirituality are associated with better health outcomes, including greater longevity, coping skills, and health-related quality of life (even during terminal illness) and less anxiety, depression, and suicide. Several studies have shown that addressing the spiritual needs of the patient may enhance recovery from illness." Jesus Christ in his teachings instructed his followers to heal the sick and since then the early church and Christians practiced practical charity that gave a basis to nursing homes and hospitals. Jews and Christians believed that human worth was predicated on the fact that each person was created in the image and likeness of God, which—for Christians—was directly stated in Matthew 25:40 "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me." In recent times, when people are faced with many health issues that medical professionals do not seem to have an answer for, looking outside of the traditional health setting and up to a divine power for healing has been on the rise. A 2018 survey of American physicians and patients suggests that about 64% of physicians believe in the existence of God or a higher power, and more than 90% of patients claimed the same. Jesus in his teachings emphasized the need of treating every human with love, which is why Christian hospitals were established with the main aim of practicing the teachings of Jesus and alleviating suffering of the sick. It is also noted that there is an increase in modern western medicine with the importance of patient spirituality in treatment and healing which must be considered by healthcare professionals while providing care.

As for physicians who are rooted in the Christian faith, they would provide care to their patients keeping in mind that they are made in the image of God. Since healing is an art which is personal and human, there is only a limited amount of human intervention which can contribute to its success. When modern medicine and Christian faith is intertwined in patient care, the provider and patient feel a sense of spiritual calmness that contribute to the total healing journey.

**Keywords:** Health Care; Christian's Duty; Prayers and Healing

## Introduction

The Christian faith encouraged its followers to help the sick and needy which was considered as a part of a Christian's

duty to alleviate the sufferings of others. Christians have been leaders in providing care to the sick and building of hospitals because of their Savior, Jesus Christ of Nazareth who healed the sick during his ministry on earth (Matthew

9; 10:8; 25:34-36). The parable of the Good Samaritan has been described as the parable that changed the world and is considered as “the model of Christian agape” (Luke 10: 25-37). The Christian faith and the art of healing has had a strong connection for centuries. Many medical providers are strongly influenced by the Christian principles and practices while providing care to their patients. A growing number of studies have shown that a patient’s spirituality and Christian religious involvement has led to better health outcomes. Many studies have shown that when a patient prays with faith, they recover more rapidly. A famous quote from one of the fathers of surgery and a battlefield surgeon named Ambroise Paré, “I dressed his wounds, and God healed them” (Ghaly, n.d.)

### Christian Contribution to Hospitals

Hospitals in the western world were founded on the Christian culture and the teachings of Jesus. Charity hospitals for the poor were founded- these Christian hospitals were the world’s first voluntary charitable institutions. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is considered as the Great Physician who was not only concerned about the spiritual condition but also focused on the healing of physical health. The first hospital was built by St. Basil in Caesarea in 369 AD [1]. This was the first large-scale hospital which cared for the seriously ill and disabled. Victims of plague were cared for here. Deaconesses worked as nurses, cared for the sick and the poor. In addition to patient care, hospitals provided food for the hungry and cared for the widows and orphans. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-547 AD) founded one of the main duties of the monastic order was to care for the sick. The love of Christ was the motivation that helped them care for the sick. The Arab Muslims began constructing hospitals in Arab countries after being influenced by the work of Christians in establishing hospitals. The early monastic hospitals were predecessors of the modern Christian affiliated hospitals. Monks can be considered as the forefathers of modern practitioners who provide care to all regardless of the ability to pay, race ethnic group or religious affiliations. Christianity was a major catalyst in changing healthcare in the world, even beyond the boundaries in the West.

### Christian Mission in Healthcare

With the teachings of Jesus Christ as the focus to care for the sick and the needy, Christians have treated the sick differently due to two reasons:

1. Image bearers of God
2. Love

Image bearers of God: Man created in the image of God is a crucial part in the practice of medicine. Each human being is a precious gift in God’s sight. The Bible emphasizes that

we are made in His image (Gen.1:26; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). The image of God could include the physical body, the mind, and the spirit. This is the perspective through which the Christians treat the sick and distressed.

Love: True love is from God. Our helping someone in need is helping the Lord Himself (Matthew 25:40). Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39) and this is used by Christians when caring for the sick and needy.

Jews and Christians believed that human worth was predicated on the fact that each person was created in the image and likeness of God, which—for Christians—was directly stated in Matthew 25: “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me”. Christians treat the sick differently because they recognize them as being created in the image of God and they follow the teachings of Jesus to look out for the good of their neighbor [2]. A primary care provider at Johns Hopkins discussed in the Symposium on Christian Faith, Reason and Vocation in 2017 that, his faith encouraged him to view all people as made in the image of God and how that encouraged the treatment of his patients [3].

### Prayer and Healing

For many patients, their deep-rooted faith in God and prayer is the core of their value system which brings meaning to both health and suffering. Positive outcomes have been recognized regarding spirituality in health. Prayer is considered as an important component in spiritual care of those in pain and suffering. The word prayer comes from the Latin *precarius* which means “obtained by begging, to entreat” (Duncan, n.d.). There is no specific way to pray as there are different forms that people choose to pray. The different forms include silent prayer, prayer of the mind and spoken prayers. Rev Catherine Duncan in her article “Prayer” describes the different types of prayer, such as:

1. Intercessory prayer- praying for someone else
2. Distant healing prayer- praying for the healing of someone or something at a distance
3. Petition prayer- asking God for something
4. Centering prayer- centering on a word or phrase for a minimum of 20 minutes in silence, usually meditating on it
5. Contemplative prayer- opening to union with God
6. Meditation- differs by religion. In Christianity, the goal is union with God (Duncan, n.d.)

Many studies have shown that people who are remembered in prayer heal more quickly and completely whether or not patient themselves were involved in the prayer. In a 1999 research study conducted by Harris et al., to understand the effects of remote, intercessory prayer on outcomes of patients admitted to the Coronary Care

Unit (CCU), it was found that remote, intercessory prayers were associated with lower CCU scores. In this study, these patients were unaware that they were being prayed for, and the intercessors did not know and never met the patients [4]. Among all of the different forms of complementary medicine, prayer is described as the single most widely used healing modality. Research conducted by Dr. Christina Puchalski, Director of the George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health, prayer is the second most common method of pain management (after oral pain medication), and the most common non-drug method of pain management (Duncan, n.d.).

Though there are many studies that have proved the positive outcomes of prayer in healing, there are also a few other research studies which indicate the absence of benefits. In a 2001 research study conducted by Aviles et al., examined cardiovascular outcomes related to prayer. In this study, 799 coronary care unit patients at discharge were randomized to intercessory prayer or no prayer conditions. Prayer was conducted by five persons per patient at least once a week for 26 weeks. The results remained nonsignificant when data were analyzed separately for high- and low- risk patients. Thus, this study showed that, as delivered in this study; intercessory prayer did not influence the 26- week outcome after discharge from a coronary care unit [5].

Therefore, the use of prayer whether petition or intercessory, in clinical practice may promote different positive effects or may not have any resulting changes in the diagnosis of the patient. It is observed that in the twentieth century and the twenty-first century, there has been a growing interest in examining the effects of prayer on diseases and other sicknesses such as anxiety, depression, and heart disease. Researchers have identified that; prayer is used as a complementary intervention or alternative therapy identified by healthcare professionals as adequate treatment for spiritual disturbances. Even when physicians or nurses find it difficult to pray with the patient, they must involve the religious leaders or chaplains who are a part of the multidisciplinary healthcare team. When a patient is deep in his faith and insists on praying for his sickness along with modern medicine, healthcare providers must identify that need and support prayer as an intervention, as this includes the patients' intimacy, values, and beliefs. This highlights the need for education and training based on ethical background when dealing with spirituality [6].

### Christianity in Modern Medicine

For most healthcare providers, faith has played a pivotal role in selection of health care as a career. As Christianity is rooted in the teachings of Jesus to help others, we see that faith-based healthcare organizations and healthcare

providers practice medicine with this in mind. Faith in the practice of medicine provides solace along with patient management. The sick is often shunned by the community, and this is where the need for medicine which is raw and real helps in healing. According to David Madder, a primary care provider at Johns Hopkins, "There's a lot we can't do in medicine, and there's a lot we don't know in science, and in those moments, my faith is very important to me to remember that I don't share that burden alone." Madder discussed the importance of drawing from within oneself the love of Christ and the importance of spreading this love in the workplace [3]. It is therefore seen that Christian practices are often used in the practice of modern medicine by the physician. Medicine is tough at times, and in believing that Jesus was a healer many physicians mirror and follow his footsteps in their practice.

### Conclusion

Many research studies that were conducted to understand the relationship between Christianity, spirituality, and sickness have concluded that people who believe in God and pray during illness have been reported to have better health outcomes than those who do not [7,8]. Most patients have a spiritual life and regard their spiritual life equally important as their physical health. A large number of studies have shown a positive health outcome as a result of religious involvement and spirituality. Physicians are recommended that the spiritual history of the patient be taken from all patients with serious or chronic illness. Studies have also shown that when the spiritual needs of patients are addressed, it facilitates recovery from illness [9]. Healthcare teams should consider prayer as an alternative intervention as it contributes to a holistic paradigm in health. There were also a few research studies which showed that there was no direct relationship between spirituality and healing. However researchers suggest that more studies need to be carried out in this area to understand the relationship of Christianity and spirituality in healthcare [10,11].

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