

Theophostic Prayer Ministry

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: “Theo (God) Phostic (light) is a ministry of prayer that is Christ centered and God reliant for its direction and outcome.”¹ On its website Theophostic Prayer Ministry (TPM) further defines the ministry as “*Intentional and focused prayer with the desired outcome of an authentic encounter with the presence of Christ, resulting in mind renewal and subsequent transformed life.*”² TPM is widely used within evangelical³ churches as an approach to “inner healing or healing of memories.”⁴ Formerly called “Theophostic Counseling,” training for practitioners is now provided through a series of proprietary DVD training videos and books.⁵

History: “Theophostic Prayer Ministry” originated with Dr. Edward M. Smith, a Southern Baptist clergyman and counselor who resides in Campbellsville, KY. He began to develop TPM in 1998 as an outgrowth of work with adult victims of childhood sexual abuse. After beginning with a more therapeutic understanding and practice, he has in recent years modified the program into something more singularly focused on prayer (consequently, practitioners of TPM are now called “ministers” and forbidden to use the term “counselor”). Smith has revised TPM through the years in response to criticisms and concerns raised by others, showing particular sensitivity to charges that TPM is not Christian, cult-like in character, or a practice which induces faulty “recovered memory.” A 2005 Christian Research Institute evaluation proved to be particularly influential, resulting in a new set of training manuals and some significantly different theological descriptions of the program. Smith no longer stands by much of the material in his earlier publications. One consequence of the evolution of TPM is that—arguably—the practice may no longer be accurately described as part of the “deliverance movement.”⁶

Texts: Edward M. Smith. *Basic Training Seminar Manual* New Creation Publishing, 2007.
-----, *Healing Life’s Hurts: Experiencing the Peace of Christ through Theophostic Prayer*, New Creation Publishing, 2005.

Beliefs and Practices

TPM’s goal of “an authentic encounter with the presence of Christ, resulting in mind renewal and subsequent transformed life”⁷ is based on the assumption that emotional pain is often a result of past life experiences which Satan has led us to interpret falsely. Smith calls this a “lie-based belief,” contrasted with “logical truths” or true beliefs. The lie-based belief becomes the “interpretive grid” that leads to pain and anguish. (For example, someone abused as a girl interprets this to mean she was at fault, is dirty, etc. Later she is unable to have healthy marital relations because she believes these lies.) TPM says only a direct encounter with Jesus can change lie-based thinking to “mind renewal and subsequent transformed life.”

¹ The website for Theophostic Prayer Ministry is www.theophostic.com. The quotation is from a page within the site titled, “What is Theophostic Prayer Ministry?” <http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=2>.

² Ibid., emphasis in original.

³ The terms “evangelical churches” or “evangelicals” are used as a commonly accepted identification for a movement or general category of Christian churches and individuals holding such beliefs as a high view of biblical authority, the necessity of a personal commitment of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and a symbolic understanding of the sacraments. Southern Baptists have been one of the most notable evangelical denominations, while most “non-denominational” churches also view themselves as part of the evangelical movement.

⁴ Elliot Miller, *An Evaluation of Theophostic Prayer Ministry (Position Paper PST001)*, Charlotte, NC: Christian Research Institute, 2005 (online pdf version: <http://www.theophostic.com/freepdfs/PST001.pdf>), 5.

⁵ Ed Smith, *Basic Training Seminar Manual* and *Basic Training Seminar Student Workbook*, New Creation Publishing, 2007. The 2005 and earlier editions of the manual are no longer acceptable for use by anyone who wants to be certified by TPM.

⁶ “Deliverance movement” is a general description of various groups that emphasize exorcism. Smith no longer uses exorcism language and avoids terminology about demonic possession. See “Deliverance Ministry in Historical Perspective” <http://www.equip.org/articles/deliverance-ministry-in-historical-perspective>.

⁷ <http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=2>.

TPM's technique is to have the minister and the recipient agree to ask Jesus or the Holy Spirit into their session to help the victim understand the source of painful emotions.⁸ The recipient tries to follow the trail of the painful emotion back to the earliest memory of it. She is then asked to describe the experience and explain the feelings it causes now. The minister then asks the recipient to rate how true this description feels (on a 1 to 10 scale). If the rating is very high, the assumption is that the cause of the lie-based belief has been identified and the recipient is encouraged to re-experience the reality, emotions, and understanding she has of this event. Last, the minister encourages the recipient "to have an encounter with Jesus Christ through prayer, thus allowing the Lord to reveal His truth to the wounded person's heart and mind" (TPM website). Smith explains this as part of his belief "that we can have a personal relationship with the person of Jesus." He reports that individuals may then see a "visual of Christ" or perhaps identify words or some other realization that communicates a personal truth for them.

Smith enthusiastically reports numerous success stories, together with testimonials from professionals (pastors, psychologists, and therapists) and others who serve as Theophostic ministers. He defends himself from charges that this practice is not biblical both by providing numerous scriptural passages which he cites as harmonious with TPM's principles and by giving a statement of personal faith which follows the outline of the "Baptist Faith and Message." Having stated his own beliefs, he then adds that "you do not have to embrace my personal theology in order to apply the core principles of Theophostic Prayer."

A Lutheran Response

Many have raised concerns about TPM—from charges that it is un-Christian to questions about its psychological assumptions.⁹ However, it is important to note that Smith's personal statement of beliefs is generally orthodox from the perspective of classical Christian doctrine. He confesses belief in the Holy Trinity, the two natures of Christ, the inerrancy of Scripture, creation and fall, and justification by grace through faith. Smith is also willing to accept constructive criticism from fellow Christians.¹⁰ It is wrong to condemn Smith or TPM as entirely unchristian or thoroughly heretical. Nothing which follows is intended as a personal indictment of Smith as a Christian. Our sole concern is to identify areas where TPM is inconsistent with a Lutheran understanding of the Word of God.

1. TPM is based on the unscriptural belief that conversion is based on a human decision

Ed Smith explicitly affirms "The Baptist Faith and Message." Together with Baptist theology, TPM rejects baptismal regeneration (new birth given in Baptism), believing that conversion, or new birth (regeneration), results only from a person's decision to believe, as shown by the person asking Jesus to be his Savior.¹¹ Smith defines regeneration as "a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."¹² Regeneration and conversion are therefore somewhat dependent on the human person, and not on God alone. Jesus, however, teaches that new birth comes "by water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). Our conversion is *not* the result of human will: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh *nor of the will of man*, but of God" (John 1:12-13, our emphasis). St. Paul reminds us that God saved us "by the washing of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:4-6). New birth or conversion is dependent on God, whose Holy Spirit is at work in Baptism. This does not ignore saving faith, because new birth always includes faith, but faith itself is a gift: "By grace are you saved, through faith, and not of yourselves. It is a gift of God, lest anyone should boast" (Eph 2:8-9).

⁸ "The goal of our session would be to receive a decisive word from the Holy Spirit, which would, in turn, release her from the pain of the lies that were the true source of her emotional discomfort" (*Healing Life's Hurts*, 28).

⁹ For a strongly negative theological assessment of TPM from an evangelical perspective, see <http://www.gechurch.org/id5.html>. Another quite negative assessment from an evangelical Christian psychologist, David Entwistle, is published in *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 32, 1 (2004): 26–42. Elliot Miller, *op. cit.*, who cites the previous two studies, offers a much more positive evaluation, but one which still raises important areas of concern. Miller's evaluation seems to be particularly even-handed and objective and is recommended for further reading.

¹⁰ Elliot Miller's evaluation of TPM is very clear regarding Smith's openness to loving criticism.

¹¹ A decision to believe often involves a "sinner's prayer," such as, "Father, I have sinned by breaking your laws and I am sorry. I believe that your Son Jesus died for my sins. I invite Jesus to come into my life and be my Lord. Give me Holy Spirit to obey you. In Jesus' name. Amen."

¹² <http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=54>.

2. TPM has an unscriptural view of sanctification (the Christian life)

Smith's understanding of conversion leads to additional problems. Regeneration is more closely connected to sanctification (the Christian life) than to justification (forgiveness of sins): "Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him."¹³ Regeneration and sanctification are combined with justification and glorification in Smith's belief statement as parts of salvation.

Lutherans believe that new birth (regeneration) and conversion are the Holy Spirit's work. "The Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, made me holy [sanctified] and kept me in the true faith."¹⁴ Repentance and faith are the work of the Holy Spirit. The new life (sanctification) that follows is also the work of the Holy Spirit. "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). Good works are a response to God's gracious work in our lives.¹⁵

3. TPM exaggerates the power of the regenerate will and the possibility of healing in Christian life

Smith sees conversion and sanctification as acts of free will and says that TPM "assists in this sanctifying work."¹⁶ We must be saved, not only from sin, but "from ourselves" (from false interpretation of memory that prevent right choices).¹⁷ Our will must make the choice to believe the truth. Smith calls the human will "the second most powerful force in the universe.... Though God is of course the most powerful force there is, He has limited His omnipotence to our choosing."¹⁸ TPM also claims to result in "true freedom" from emotional ills and their behavioral results. It promises "effortless" change that is "complete and maintenance-free."¹⁹ TPM's promises feed the false belief that sanctification and emotional health are proof of a saving relationship with Christ. Smith says, "When people experience the presence of Christ, there is *always* miraculous change."²⁰ The inevitable corollary is that anyone who has not experienced miraculous change must not have experienced the presence of Christ. "Something or nothing always happens in a ministry session because of the person choosing." Like other promises of "divine healing," a failure to be healed can be blamed on the one who suffers.²¹

These are gross exaggerations of the power of the human will and the possibility of earthly healing. The newborn Christian does experience the gift of a renewed human will ("a new and right spirit" Ps 51:10), but the power of the regenerate human will is imperfect. The Christian remains subject to the power of sin, which continues throughout earthly life (Rom 7:21-25; 1 John 1:8). The Christian remains dependent on God's power and grace, not upon his own will: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:6). Moreover, TPM's false promise may cause Christians who have had life-long struggles with addiction, sinful habits, emotional trauma, and other challenges to doubt their salvation. It ignores St. Paul's admission that he could not conquer his sin (Rom. 7:14-15). No action of ours, including prayer, saves us from all the earthly effects of sin, such as physical and emotional turmoil (Rom 8:22-23; 1 Cor 5:1-4). God does provide miraculous healings where He wills, but He gives no promises that healing will *always* result from specific spiritual practices.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Small Catechism, Apostles Creed, 6 (*The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., hereafter KW [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], 355).

¹⁵ Augsburg Confession, VI, 1, KW 41.

¹⁶ <http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=54>.

¹⁷ <http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=39>.

¹⁸ *Healing Life's Hurts*, 34

¹⁹ Ibid., 60-61.

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

²¹ Ibid.

4. Smith's view of prayer confuses it with the Means of Grace²²

Smith's view of prayer, shared by many evangelicals,²³ sees it as the equivalent of a means of grace. The "sinner's prayer" often replaces Baptism in evangelical theologies of regeneration. So also, prayer is the center of the Holy Spirit's work in the evangelical understanding of the believer's ongoing life of faith. Right prayer becomes far more significant than the right use of the sacraments, or even the Scriptures, for many evangelicals. But prayer, while vital to the Christian life, is not the means by which we are saved, for salvation is entirely God's work in Christ. Prayer is the means by which the saved *respond* to God, not the means of salvation. God chooses us and invites us to pray in Jesus' name (John 15:16), to learn His language ("when you pray, say... " Luke 11:2), to seek His guidance and help (Philemon 1:6), and to give Him praise and love (Ps 67:3). Praying with Jesus, we meditate on the Word, often praying in God's own words (the Lord's Prayer and Psalms). We pray confidently for God's help, always remembering that His gracious will is what we need most.

5. TPM promises personal revelations for which there is no scriptural assurance

Smith believes that in TPM, Jesus will be present for healing from all emotional turmoil by providing a specific revelation of truth. He endorses the study of Scripture, but gives more attention to "experiential knowledge" of Jesus Christ, described as hearing or seeing a personal message from Jesus or the Spirit.²⁴ TPM "is a process in which the Holy Spirit reveals specific and personalized truth to the wounded mind of the one seeking freedom."²⁵

Every believer can and should seek "specific and personalized truth" for our lives, but there is no scriptural assurance to expect that such truth will be revealed in a miraculous fashion through a word or vision from the Lord. Such promises undermine the importance of God's written Word. Christians search the Scriptures and then seek to apply them to their lives (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 3:16).

Conclusion

TPM's website notes that a TPM "session has the potential of going astray...." Therefore the 12th principle of TPM is that "The written Word of God is the standard for validating what occurs in ministry."²⁶ This important disclaimer hopefully limits the potential for outlandish or dangerous conclusions to be drawn from TPM sessions. God the Holy Spirit may use TPM for good in the lives of individuals. False interpretation of past events *can* negatively influence Christians. In the "mixed bag" of truth and confusion within the church in this world, we realize that people may benefit from a prayerful examination of past experiences and assumptions which influence their daily lives. Similarly, as we pray the Holy Spirit may reveal truths of Scripture that can be applied to our lives. TPM has potential to help people just as various "secular" therapeutic approaches help people.

At the same time, no particularly devised approach to prayer will assure us of a special revelation beyond what God's Word has always provided.²⁷ Nor should we attribute to human will what only God's gracious will can accomplish in renewed minds and lives. It is wrong and spiritually dangerous to lead suffering individuals to believe that where they do not achieve "maintenance-free" relief from an addiction or emotional problem they have not really experienced the presence of Christ in their lives. Therefore we urge any Christian to be cautious about adopting TPM. Any Lutheran pastor who wishes to make positive use of TPM will have to revise the approach

²² "Means of grace" refers to the Word of God and the sacraments (Baptism and Communion) because through these "means" or "tools" God the Holy Spirit is at work, making known and delivering to us God's gracious, saving promises, and bringing about faith in those promises. Aside from Gustav Aulen in *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 355-356, Lutheran theology carefully avoids "means of grace" language for prayer. See e.g., Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: CPH, 1962), 324; Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: CPH, 1957), Vol. III:215ff.

²³ See footnote 3 above.

²⁴ "... Biblical instruction plays a vital role in the life of the believer. However, ongoing authentic encounters with the person of Jesus is [sic] just as important" (*Healing Life's Hurts*, 16-17). "Theophostic Prayer Ministry simply encourages people to listen as the Lord reveals His truth to their hearts and minds" (<http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=2>).

²⁵ *Healing Life's Hurts*, 12.

²⁶ <http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=2>.

²⁷ TPM's website mischaracterizes a comment from Martin Luther about the Holy Spirit preaching to us during our prayers. Smith cites this as endorsement of his assurance that in TPM Jesus will give a message to free the recipient of bondage to a lie. Luther, in fact, is speaking about praying the Lord's Prayer and pausing, meditatively, to contemplate all that God has to teach us in the petitions of that prayer.

significantly.²⁸ Above all, no ministry technique should distract us from the “one thing necessary” (Luke 10:41-42)—God’s saving love and His ultimate and eternal redemption promised to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

For Further Reading

CTCR. *Evangelism and Church Growth*, <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Evang-011.pdf> .

See esp. 9-12 on conversion.

Elders of Grace Church. “False Teaching: Theophostic Prayer Ministry.” <http://www.gechurch.org/id5.html>.

Entwhistle, David. “Shedding Light on Theophostic Ministry.” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 32, 1 (2004): 26–42.

Miller, Elliot. *An Evaluation of Theophostic Prayer Ministry (Position Paper PST001)*. (Charlotte, NC: Christian Research Institute, 2005). Available online: <http://www.theophostic.com/freepdfs/PST001.pdf>.

Links and Websites

<http://www.lcms.org/ctcr>

<http://www.theophostic.com/index.asp>

<http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=2>

<http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=54>

<http://www.theophostic.com/content.asp?ID=51>

²⁸ Note Smith’s reaction to revisions: “If [anyone is] not following the specific guidelines and principles taught by this ministry or if they are mixing TPM with some other form of counseling or ministry then they are NOT doing Theophostic Prayer Ministry.”