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# W. V. Grant's Faith-Healing Act

## Revisited

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**Paul Kurtz, editor**

Late in March of this year, I was surprised to receive a form letter from the Reverend W. V. Grant, addressed to "Dear Brother Kurtz." He informed me that he would be holding a healing service in Rochester, New York, at 7:00 P.M. on April 8 and invited me to attend. The letter read: "Please accept this letter as your personal invitation, and come expecting many miracles from God." A special colored envelope graced with Grant's picture was included, and a P.S. had been added to the letter urging me to "enclose a \$20.00 'prove me' offering, and hand it to me personally when I call for it. You will receive a special gift. If you have any special requests, enclose them as well."

Some well-meaning religious believer had undoubtedly sent my name and the names of practically everyone on FREE INQUIRY's masthead to a wide range of evangelists, and we have been swamped with almost daily appeals from Jerry Falwell, Ernest Anglely, Peter Popoff, Jimmy Swaggart, and other divines. Grant's letter intrigued me because FI had devoted extensive space to Grant's ministry in the Spring 1986 issue. I now had the opportunity to observe him first-hand. Since Rochester is only sixty-five miles from the FREE INQUIRY offices in Buffalo, five staff members and I joined two students from the Rochester area to attend the healing session. Inasmuch as I had strongly criticized Grant in the media, I thought it advisable to wear a disguise. Adorned with a flowery mustache, dark glasses, and a cane, I would claim to be blind in one eye to see what Grant could do. The colored Grant envelope, now containing \$20.00, was in my pocket.

Since the young staffers were hungry, we stopped at a Burger King on the way for some refreshments and didn't arrive at the Dome Arena until 5:45. I had hoped we would be earlier. By this time the entire first section was filled with people, most of them elderly, some in wheelchairs, many others with crutches and canes, and one woman was hooked up to an oxygen tank.

Mary Beth Gehrman, a charming young woman from our staff, led me by the arm as we took two seats in the center section. Other members of our team had spread out around the auditorium and in the bleachers. When we arrived, we noticed Grant moving about among the congregation. He came to the altar shortly before six-thirty and asked people to come

forth with their special offering envelopes. I hobbled up with Mary Beth. Grant took my envelope but barely looked at me, or anyone else. About four hundred people brought up similar envelopes in the next half-hour in response to repeated calls. If each envelope contained \$20.00, that meant at least \$8,000 from only one appeal. Meanwhile, Grant retired backstage and his associate minister, David Pitts, held forth.

When Grant returned to conduct the service, he moved directly into the audience. He would go up to a person and call out his or her first name only. This was a departure from his usual practice of using the full name, and we thought he might be purposely doing this to avoid the possibility of investigators' making a follow-up study. He would then give their doctors' names and describe their illnesses. He would disclaim that he had any prior knowledge, often asking, "Did you speak to me before?" and the person would say no. The messages allegedly came from God. "Kathleen," he called out, walking up to one woman. He said her doctor was "Dr. Beecham" and that she had a "tumor" that would be healed. "Bless Jesus," she intoned.

A man, "Henry," was in very bad shape and could hardly stand up. He said that he was suffering from a severe heart condition and was not even well enough to undergo bypass surgery. After Grant touched him, he fell back and lay on the floor for several minutes, until his wife and others came to pick him up. Although Grant pronounced him healed, the man could hardly catch his breath as he made his way back to his chair.

"Karen" was on a portable oxygen tank. Grant asked her to remove the tubes inserted in her nose and said that her heart and lungs were diseased. He "healed" her and told her to run, which she did, praising Jesus all the way. Five minutes later, as attention moved elsewhere, she was back again on her oxygen and experiencing great difficulty in breathing. Grant had several people get out of their wheelchairs and push him about, proclaiming them healed.

At the beginning, Grant said that the entire service was free and that no admission would be charged, though at least *half* of the three-and-a-half hour service was devoted to raising money. Two booklets for \$3.00 (which were sold earlier in the lobby for 50 cents each) was his first appeal. He then tried to get people to register for a Bible course—absolutely free, but

\$64 for the reading material. The main fund-drive appeal was for people to donate the largest bill in their wallet or to write the largest check they had written all month. "God will give you back one hundred times your money," he said. "Your best offering is the biggest bill you have. God *knows* about that \$50 bill in back of grandma's photo." We saw many \$20 and \$50 bills offered by the people around us. We estimate that at least half of the 2,000 or more people present stood up to contribute. The last request was for 140 special envelopes that had been distributed. Grant asked that everyone put \$140 in this envelope. "If you take the envelope and don't give the \$140, you will be sinning," he admonished. "It is an oath you are making to God. There is absolutely no pressure to give anything—but we don't want to cheat you out of a blessing, either."

**I**n analyzing the evening's proceedings, we found that the only people Grant called out and healed—about twenty—were those who came to the auditorium early and sat in the front sections. We discovered that he had personally come into the audience to collect their envelopes and talk to them. Did he gain knowledge of their names, their doctors' names, and their illnesses by supernatural means, or had he and his confederates carefully worked out a system of remembering this information? We observed at least three different people who appeared to be giving him hand signals as they followed him about.

An amusing part of the healing session was near the end, when Grant said he would heal everyone in the auditorium. He said that 114 people in the audience had sugar diabetes, and he asked them to stand up. We counted about 65, but he insisted that there were *exactly* 114 and that they would all be cured. (See the letter on page 3.) He then said 888 people had arthritis; now several hundred stood up, though not 888, and he pronounced them all healed. He then asked everyone to come forth for a personal blessing, and practically everyone lined up to receive it. In the hustle and bustle of the closing minutes, members of our team attempted to contact as many of those who had been "healed" as they could, and they got the names and addresses of many of them for a follow-up study. What we found confirmed what Randi had earlier discovered. All those who were asked to leave their wheelchairs had been able to do so on their own power before Grant's ministrations; although they had arthritis or a limp, they were capable of locomotion. Mary Beth and other members of my staff had gone to the restrooms on several occasions and through the auditorium to scout out information.

At first I used my cane, but as Grant's sham became more evident, I knew that he would not call me out and gave up the limp. As we returned to our seats, Mary Beth looked at me in horror and said "Your mustache is coming off." Evidently the mayonnaise from Burger King had done the damage. I couldn't get the mustache to stick, so I yanked it off. Shortly thereafter, Grant came up to an elderly man with a crutch who was sitting right next to me. Mary Beth again gasped, because she thought I would be recognized without my disguise. Grant took the man's crutch and hurled it onto the stage. He apparently assumed that the man was lame. He told Grant that he was a devoted follower and watched him on television every week. Grant pronounced the man completely healed.

## Does W. V. Grant Heal?

Grant's followers declare that he is responsible for numerous miracles. The mortician proves that he is not: "At a Sunday service last month Sequill Frago came to Rev. W. V. Grant in a wheelchair. Grant declared that 'Dr. Jesus' was treating the 78-year-old man's cancer. Within 10 days, Frago was dead." (From a syndicated story in the March 24, 1986, *Dallas Morning News*.)

After Grant had moved away, I asked the man about his ailment. He said he had injured his right leg in an automobile accident, but that it had been getting better.

"How does it feel now?" I asked him.

"Much better," he said.

"If that is the case," I said, "then you don't have to go up to get the crutch." He responded that he would retrieve it just to be safe. At that point I told the man that I considered the entire proceedings to be a sham, and I explained how I thought Grant got his information. The man appeared shaken. I said, "Use your common sense, don't be taken in."

After several minutes he looked at me and said, "Wait a minute, why shouldn't I accept what Grant said? After all, he cured *you*. You came in limping with a cane, and now you're able to walk around perfectly well without it. You even look younger." It must have been the lack of my mustache.

At that point, Mary Beth and I had to laugh. Later, when I told Randi on the phone about my problem, his advice was: "Kurtz, please, please never eat mayonnaise with a false mustache. Any magician knows that elementary principle!"

**O**ur CSER teams made two further investigations of Grant to confirm his method of receiving information. On April 15 Randi and I, with eight companions—including a TV film crew from a Rochester station—descended on the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Although Grant's team spotted several of us and actually had the TV crew ejected halfway through the evening, we were again able to confirm his method of operation, which was similar to that used in Rochester. Willie Rodriguez, a young magician working with us, reported that Grant personally met and talked with "Andrew," an elderly black gentleman who said he had fallen off a ladder ten years ago and had difficulty walking. Grant seated him in a wheelchair, and Rodriguez volunteered to bring it up front if the man was called out. Later Andrew was called to the front by Grant, and the information he had volunteered earlier was repeated to the audience. Yet the thousands present were led to believe that he was healed as he rose from the wheelchair.

Similarly, Don Henvick had gone incognito to a Grant healing session in Philadelphia on April 19. He reported that Grant had indeed questioned him about his fictitious illness and his doctors, and that Grant called him out and later repeated this information to the entire audience as if it were a revelation from God. Henvick also confirmed that most of the information Grant spewed forth that evening came from those who had come earlier with their offering letters. ●

## Don Henvick: Healed Five Times!

**D**on Henvick, a member of the Bay Area Skeptics, proved to be a valuable part of the faith-healing research team. Volunteering his services for the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion, Don dressed in various disguises, even going so far as to shave his beard and head. He was able to present a convincing and tempting target for the faith-healers. In Stockton, California, he was called out of the audience as “Tom Hendry,” a fictitious name, by the Reverend David Paul and was healed of a “broken home and alcoholism.” In San Francisco, the Reverend Peter Popoff succumbed as well, calling out our man as “Tom Hendry” and curing him of the same problems. In Anaheim, Don scored again when Popoff fell for another of his aliases, this time calling him out as “Vergil Jorgenson,” and attempted to heal a bogus “serious arthritic condition.” Subsequently, Popoff broadcast both of these healings on his shows, apparently so enthralled by Henvick’s acting abilities that he even featured Don’s Anaheim healings on three successive programs. Popoff again fell for Henvick’s charms in Detroit, where Don was dressed in drag as “Bernice Manicoff,” suffering from “uterine cancer and edema” and confined to a wheelchair. Her doctor was Dr. Kurtz. Don provided

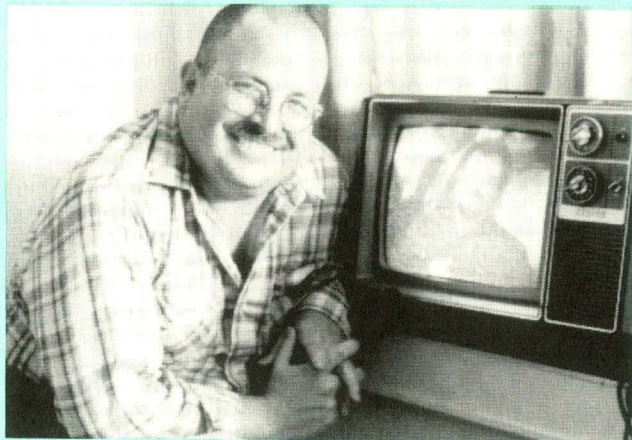


Photo by Ivars Lauersons

this information to Popoff before the healing session and Popoff again called him out—this time as “Bernice”—and healed him.

Don Henvick also went to Philadelphia on April 19, where the Reverend W. V. Grant approached him before the performance and questioned him about personal details. Later that evening he called him out during the service as “Abel McMinn,” cured him of a “prostate condition and arthritis” and identified Dr. Lambert as his physician, whom Don had invented for the occasion.

As detailed elsewhere in this issue, other “healees” planted by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Religion were Ivars Lauersons, Marty Post, and Steven Schafersman. The reason that CSER used this



ploy in the course of its investigation was to show that there were only two conclusions to be drawn: Either God was informing Grant and Popoff through the “gifts of the spirit” and giving them wrong information or the Reverends Grant and Popoff were obtaining the fictitious information before the service began and were feeding it back by deceitful means. Either God was lying to the faith healers or the faith-healers were lying to everybody.

—James Randi



Don Henvick as “Bernice Manicoff.”