



Research article

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A SPIRITUAL DIMENSION TO ILLNESS, HEALTH AND HEALING

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ABSTRACT

Good health is highly prized –often more than anything else – and huge effort is put into achieving it. Religious practices have been associated with healing for millennia. The doctrine of healing is no new doctrine; it has been in the church from the earliest ages. God was —reviving this precious truth of divine healing to show that He is a real, personal Being.... that prayer is a power, a force, an answer—sufficient to prove that Christ is a saviour of the body as well as the soul. People pray for good health and for relief from illness. From my childhood I had heard of my dad testifying of how God saved me miraculously from the pangs of death during the early days of my birth in the hospital. This had left an indelible impression on my mind wondering at the tremendous power of God’s healing. As I grew, I learnt through experience that there is always a spiritual dimension to illness and healing. Many countries of the global South are seeing the growth among Christian groups and churches where healing is seen as a usual part of congregational life. The healing ministry also educates us on how the Christian mission related its role in the context of colonization and globalization. This paper deals with issues relating to illness, health and healing from perspectives of Christian faith& Medical Science.



INTRODUCTION

The words disease and illness are negative in that they literally mean, not healthy'. Illness also refers to a lack of health, but it further points to something faulty and deficient. Conditions of the mind or body that cause dysfunction, pain or distress to the individual afflicted or those in contact with the individual can be esteemed an illness. The term is also used to include disabilities, injuries, syndromes, infections, symptoms, deviant behaviour, and typical variations of structure and function.

In 1989, the Christian Medical Commission of the World Council of Churches Definition of health offered the following definition for health to WCC's central committee:

"Health is a dynamic state of well-being of the individual and society, of physical, mental, spiritual, economic, and social well-being- of being in harmony with each other, with the material environment and with God".¹

The Christian understanding of health, healing and the healing ministry is related to the Christian understanding of salvation. The early church took Jesus 'healing ministry seriously, and Christianity affirms the centrality of the church as a healing community and proclaims Christ as the healer of the world.'²

Healing in Aramaic means —making whole, when it applies to a human person, it means the restoration of the original state of a human person.³ In Hebrew, רָפָא (rapa') means to heal or make healthy. This word is used in the Old Testament to mean healing an infirm person. The fundamental meaning of this verb is to restore, to a previously enjoyed state of proper functioning. The object of healing may be individual or communal, and it may apply to nation or to nature. Healing does not simply mean an external makeover .It comes from within (i.e transformation and purification) and in turn brings about external changes. Spiritual healing is very wide topic. Specific approaches to spiritual healing present in diverse forms including: healing liturgies; anointing with oil; faith healing; music; and the laying on of hands. Let us confine our study to spiritual healing that occurs through individual prayer, faith and a personal relationship with Christ—the greatest physician.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

1.1 Health and Well-Being

Health and fitness are better than any gold and a robust body than countless riches. There is no wealth better than health of body, and no gladness above joy of heart.⁴ God accomplishes healing in all kinds of venues and in all kinds of ways. God heals through the work of creation, through the presence of Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit

¹ WCC, Healing and Wholeness-The Churches' Role in Health. The Report of a study by the Christian Medical Commission, World Council of Churches, Geneva,1990.

² DIFAEM and WCC, —Witnessing to Christ today: Promoting health and wholeness for all,German Medical Mission (DIFAEM) and WCC,2010.

³ St.John Paul II's insights, which are embedded in his talks,cf. Man and Women He Created them, trans.Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media),2006.

⁴ Ben Sira 30:14-16.



and through the prayers and support of the people of God. It is true, Biblical people prayed and experienced healing and ascribed their healing to God. We do well to celebrate that, to investigate it and learn from it, to appropriate it for our own lives; but we also do well to do so in a realistic context. Life and death, illness and healing, are universal human phenomena. Healing is not the guaranteed right of certain people of faith; it is God's surprising gift to all people everywhere. Healing was expected through prayer, petition, and supplication to God.

Psalms 6 is the prayer of one —shaking with terror. A person in great distress who turns to God for healing.

“God.....Be Gracious to me ,
Heal me.” (Psalms 6:2)

Something happens to the one praying psalm 6. The prayer experiences not only the shaking terror of illness but also the acceptance and release of healing.

“The Lord has heard my
supplication.” (Psalms 6:9)

People who were ill were now well. This happens in every culture and every age. Healing happens. Healing changes everything. The healing that Christ has brought for us extends from the spiritual over into the mental, emotional and physical planes.

1.2 Jesus' Healing Ministry

Jesus' healing ministry was closely linked to the ministry of healing people from illness. The Miracles of Jesus include faith healing, exorcisms, resurrection of the dead

and control over nature.⁵ Miracles are used to attest to the reality that God is the all-powerful one and only God that he claims to be. Jesus' healing ministry was closely linked to the ministry of healing people from illness. According to the Gospel of John, only some of the miracles and actions of Jesus Christ were recorded (John 21:25) The Miracles of Jesus include faith healing, exorcisms, resurrection of the dead and control over nature. New Testament Recorded Miracles of Jesus with corresponding Scripture passages

- Cures the nobleman's son (John 4:46-47).
- Casts out an unclean spirit (Mark 1:23-28).
- Cures Peter's mother-in-law of a fever (Mark 1:30-31).
- Heals a leper (Mark 1:40-45).
- Heals the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5-13).
- Raises the widow's son from the dead (Luke 7:11-18).
- Cures two demoniacs (Matthew 8:28-34).
- Cures the paralytic (Matthew 9:1-8).
- Raises the ruler's daughter from the dead (Matthew 9:18-26).
- Cures a woman of an issue of blood (Luke 8:43-48).
- Opens the eyes of two blind men (Matthew 9:27-31).

⁵ Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (InterVarsity Press, 1999), 263.



- Loosens the tongue of a man who could not speak (Matthew 9:32-33).
- Heals an invalid man at the pool called Bethesda (John 5:1-9).
- Restores a withered hand (Matthew 12:10-13).
- Cures a demon-possessed man (Matthew 12:22).
- Heals a woman of Canaan (Matthew 15:22-28).
- Cures a deaf and mute man (Mark 7:31-37).
- Feeds at least four thousand people (Matthew 15:32-39).
- Opens the eyes of a blind man (Mark 8:22-26).
- Cures a boy who was plagued by a demon (Matthew 17:14-21).
- Opens the eyes of a man born blind (John 9:1-38).
- Cures a woman who had been afflicted eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17).
- Cures a man of dropsy (Luke 14:1-4).
- Cleanses ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19).

1.3 Healing and Eschatological Hope

The purpose of healing may also be seen in an eschatological sense.⁶ Michael

⁶ Johnson, Dave. —Healing in the Lowland Philippines: some considerations for Discipleship. In *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 17, 2(2014), 171-186.
http://www.academia.edu/9067676/Healing_in_the_Lowland_Philippines_Some_Considerations_for_Discipleship

Brown (1995:218) notes⁷ that —the ministry of Jesus and his followers was a ministry of restoration and emancipation, to culminate ultimately in the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom 8:19-23; 2 Co 5:1-5; Rev.21:4; Ac 3:19-21). In divine healing, there is a sense of hope that the day will come when sin, sickness and evil be no more.

Peter tells the people that the time of universal restoration has not yet come. For now, Jesus —must remain in heaven (Acts 3:21). Although the healing presence of Christ is present now in the proclamation of the disciples, the full saving or healing of Israel and the nations, promised in God’s Messiah, must await God’s good time. Peter proclaims the hope of restoration, but for now Israel (and we) must wait in hope. Healing in Christ’s name is given and promised now. The perfect healing of all the world (including each of us) remains a future hope. —And He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall be no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.⁸

2. MEDICAL SCIENCE AND DIVINE HEALING

2.1 Medical Science and Divine Healing

One of the most prominent points of contention is the relationship between divine healing and medical science. Is trusting God for healing require refraining from seeking

186.http://www.academia.edu/9067676/Healing_in_the_Lowland_Philippines_Some_Considerations_for_Discipleship

⁷ Brown, Michael L. *Israel’s Divine Healer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1995).

⁸ Revelation 21:4



the care of physicians or to abstain from medical remedies?

Paul Tillich, whose theology of healing is rooted in the concept of salvation asserts that sickness can be deeply rooted in mental anguish and estrangement, which manifests itself in the physical body. He then raises the question: If ultimate healing comes through the salvation of Christ, should people seek psychologists, and doctors for help? He practically answers "Sometimes."⁹ Thus, he supports dealing with the human condition with modern science, but ultimately acknowledges that the strongest, most profound healing occurs through the spiritual pursuit of salvation through Jesus Christ. Tillich's developed Christology and his practical openness to the natural sciences could further illuminate the healing theology of Christian Science.

Medicine is a boon from God, and God Himself has been pleased to use medical men over and over again in healing. Let us consider the story of Hezekiah. Isaiah treats Hezekiah's infection with a poultice or plaster made of figs and fig leaves. Such herbal remedies are used everywhere in the world. God placed wonderful medicinal properties in herbs and minerals. Creation is God's own work. Sometimes people forget that simple truth. In the Bible, God never refuses to make use of the means of creation. God gives those to human beings to use wisely and well. To reject the gifts of creation in healing, the gifts of medicines and physicians and human wisdom, is to reject the gifts of God. The Bible commends Luke as a "beloved Physician". God has

allowed mankind to learn much about science and medicine. He has given doctors for our benefit. God expects us to use the blessings of medical knowledge He has given us. Use the medicine and knowledge available, and bathe it with prayer. God can and does step in, at His will. When God heals, He heals completely and without charge! It is always right to appeal to the 'Great Physician'. He is always in! Healing is no less God's work when done at the Clinic than when it happens unexpectedly and mysteriously without medical explanation. The important truth is that God is our healer no matter how or where healing happens. Trusting is that, we open ourselves more fully to God's work of healing.

Those who would reject physicians in their zeal for healing through prayer alone would do well to consider the words of the ancient Hebrew wisdom teacher Ben Sira (himself a faithful believer in the biblical God:

"Honour physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the king....

The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them

And he gave skill to human beings that he might be glorified in their marvellous works.....

Give the physician his place, for the Lord created him;

⁹ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955) 37.



do not let him leave you, for you need him.

There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians,

for they too pray to the lord that he grant them success in diagnosis

and in healing, for the sake of preserving life.”¹⁰

God is our healer no matter how or where healing happens. Trusting in that, we open ourselves more fully to God’s work of healing.

3 THE HEALING EFFICACY OF PRAYER, FAITH AND CHURCH MINISTRY

3.1 Prayer

“More things are wrought by prayer Than this world dreams of.” (Alfred, Lord Tennyson; from *Mortd’Arthur*)

The story of Hezekiah proves the very fact. Despite the prophet’s announcement that he would die, Hezekiah turns to prayer, imploring God for mercy. And God relents: “I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you.”¹¹ Prayer plays an important role in the story in Mark 5:21-43, as it continues to do for all who seek healing in the midst of distress. Believers who are in distress rightly pray expectantly, because we are assured that God wills good for us (Mark 1:32-34; Luke 12:32; John 10:10). Still, prayers might be surprised, as were the charters in the story, either positively, receiving more than we could have thought to ask for, or negatively, being given not the

cure we desire but rather a different kind of healing that brings peace and blessing even in the midst of illness. It is this Jesus to whom prayer is made in the seventh-century Mozarabic Office for the sick, which calls Christ both doctor and medicine—the doctor who has been given power to “heal the diseases of body and soul,” but also God’s own medicine, given to humankind to “cure us” and bring us into “heaven’s Kingdom.”

Christ, medicine of the heavenly Father

And truest doctor of the human family’s health,

to the humble prayer of thy provident people in thy power grant favour.¹²

Prayer tells us more about God than about ourselves. God wants relationship with us, so in good times and bad times we will talk to God and God will talk to us. God does not become a God of love and healing because of our prayer. But our prayer opens us to the God of love, who desires our healing.

3.2 Faith

“Faith can move mountains.” (Matthew 21:21)

Faith plays an essential role in the healing process. Through faith a person becomes healthy and whole and is restored his/her original state. There is a reciprocal relationship between faith and healing. In the Bible, healing comes as the result of faith (Mark 5:34), healing produces faith (Mark 1:27; Acts 9:42), and the faith of the family

¹⁰ Sirach.38:1-14

¹¹ II Kings 20:5

¹² Cited in Charles W. Gusmer, *And You Visited Me: Sacramental Ministry to the Sick and the Dying*, rev.ed.(Collegeville,MN:Liturgical Press,1990),xvi.



(Mark 9:23-24) or the community (Mark 2:5; James 5:15) is instrumental in the healing of one of its members. God can, however, also heal through Jesus Christ in the face of unbelief (Mark 6:1-6) or when there is no overt expression of faith at all (John 5:2-9). Ecstatic or “supernatural” healing, apart from faith in the God of the Bible, can lead people astray, becoming destructive and idolatrous as it promises gratification without obedience (Deut.13:1-5), or, in New Testament terms, participation in resurrection without participation in the cross.¹³ In saying, —Your faith has made you well. Jesus defines a healing that offers both physical renewal and a saving reconciliation with God, self, and others. Healing in Christ overcomes the alienation that derives from being social outcast (the Samaritan Leper [Luke 17:19] , or, ritually unclean (the haemorrhaging woman [Luke 8:18]) Faith is a gift granted by the Holy Spirit and it grows and increases abundantly when a person trustfully endures afflictions and trials as it is seen in grave illness and also in someone who is at the end of life’s journey.

When our soul is purified in pain and suffering, it brings us closer to God, by glorifying God in us. When St. John of the cross was imprisoned for nine months, his imprisonment did not destroy him; rather his pain and suffering were transformed by his faith and trust in God and His loving presence in the time of spiritual suffering. St. John of the cross finds his dark night to be a pathway to “perfect union with god

through love.¹⁴ He believed that if we believe the test of dark night, our soul is not purified. In his dark night of the soul, he did not so much wrestle with the dark night itself; rather he sought God in the darkness. In this process of seeking, he deepened his relationship with God. The process of transformation is only possible, when a person ascends to God, even if the promise is beyond the current human horizon. Faith as such always walk side by side with hope guided by charity which is the foundation of the three theological virtues. As faith and hope are mutually complimentary, so are faith and healing. 3.3 Church Ministry Healing is part of the ongoing ministry of the church. After Pentecost, the early church carried on Jesus healing ministry as part of preaching the gospel (Acts 3:1-10; 4:30; 5:16; 8:7; 9:34; 14:8-10; 19:11-12; cf. Mk 16:18; 1 Co 12:9, 28, 30; Jas 5:14-16). The New Testament records three ways that God’s healing power and faith were imparted through the church:

- a. The laying on of hands (Mk 16:15-18; Ac 9:17)
- b. Confession of known sin, followed by anointing the sick with oil and the prayer of faith (Jas 5:14-16)
- c. Spiritual gifts of healings given to the church (1 Co 12:9)

Healing comes not apart from, but along with, forgiveness and salvation (Mark 2:9-12). Like forgiveness and salvation, God’s healing is free, given without condition. (Acts 3:6) Thus, both biblically and

¹³ Cf. Frederick J. Gaiser, *Healing in the Bible*, (Baker Academic: USA, 2010).

¹⁴ Kierankavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez (eds) *The collected Works of St. John of the cross*, revised ed. trans. (Washington, D.C. ICS publications, 1991), 358.



in practice of the church, healing will be found in the context of the gospel, as part of the ministry of word and sacraments. Prayers for and services of healing should be a normal part of that ministry, complementing the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Healing in the church is a communal activity, involving mutual prayer and support, drawing those who are ill into community of the gospel. sometimes, it will be necessary or appropriate for the church to bring God's healing care to the isolated individual, even as Jesus came to "seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). If Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, then there is every reason to believe that God still heals today.

CONCLUSION

A.B.Simpson echoed,

"The atonement of Christ takes away sin and the consequence of sin for every believer who accepts Him"; therefore, healing "was included in the gospel of Jesus Christ, as purchased and finished for all who accepted Jesus fully." Salvation includes both spiritual and material benefits."¹⁵

The scriptures are clear that God demands total allegiance, whether he heals or not. Although we rightly seek full health from God, we do not do so as a demand, as a condition of our belief or response; rather, we give ourselves up in faith to God, knowing that to lose our life for Christ's sake is to find it (Matt.10:39). Because the Lord is a God of promise and surprise, health and renewal can be confidently prayed and hoped

for, though these are not to be sought manipulatively. God's healing is a gift to the person healed; the person becomes a gift to the community, able to continue in his or her vocation of loving God and neighbour. The person who faithfully prays and is not healed is also a God's child and can be a powerful witness of God's love. We should pray expectantly, knowingly that abundant life is God's will and desire for us (John 10:10) and God responds to the expression of human need (Exod.3:7-10; 2kings 20:5).

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¹⁵ A.B.Simpson, "The Gospel of Healing:Common Objections," *word,work and world* 5.3 RIC,80-81.