

I.

Introduction

Before commencing this study it will help towards a fuller appreciation of the object of our discussion if the circumstances leading up to this composition are first described.

Over the last half century there has been a radical change, in both the secular realm and in the Church, in the attitude towards sickness and healing. When I was at a theological college over fifty years ago, we were trained in the traditional ministry of pastoral care, rooted in antiquity, which saw the work of the priest as one of prayer, preaching and the administration of sacraments. While this was typically centred upon life in the parish, with modifications it was equally applicable in various other contexts: in schools or colleges, in the armed forces, in prisons, and similarly with the sick at home or in hospital. The Gospel would be preached as relevant in whatever situation an individual found themselves, prayers were said for the grace of God to be with them in that place, and the sacraments were administered. Among the sick, this would have meant prayers for and thanksgiving after recovery, the regular distribution of 'sick communions', hearing confessions, the 'clinical' baptism of infants, and the care of the dying. There was also a specific sacrament of anointing, interpreted by the Roman Catholic Church as part of their last rites before death, but also promulgated in churches of other denominations as a sacrament of healing in severe illness, although not at that time in much general use.

This was a clear ministry for spiritual pastoral care, well-understood by lay persons, whether Christian or not, and universally accepted in secular institutions, whether in education, business, politics or medicine, each of which had their own particular requirements.

Nevertheless, shortly after commencing work whole-time in a research and teaching hospital, I found myself, following upon a chapel service one Sunday, challenged by a patient for using the customary prayer from the 1928 prayer book, which asked for God's 'blessing upon' the sick and suffering that 'they may be restored, if it be thy gracious will, to health of

body and mind . . .’ It was, I was firmly informed, always God’s will that we should be cured, so that if I, and other ministers such as myself, had sufficient faith in God’s promises, we ought to be curing people like Jesus Christ, and not using conditional prayers for healing.

This was naturally a hurtful accusation, although there were, of course, slick answers often used to deflect challenges of this sort. But in fairness, at first sight there appears to be cogency in the position adopted by my challenger and, increasingly, among others like her. Whereas the traditional pastoral care of the sick may be defended as consistent with the general tendency in scripture, it can be claimed on the other hand that a ‘ministry of physical healing’ has been plainly stated in the New Testament, by using such typical arguments as the following:

Firstly, Peter in summarising the work of Jesus described ‘how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil’ (Acts 10:38). Secondly, in Matthew’s Gospel we are told that he went throughout Galilee ‘healing every disease and every infirmity among the people . . . those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics’ and that, later, ‘many followed him and he healed them all’ – that is, without exception (4:23-24, 12:15). Thirdly, in each of the first three Gospels, the disciples were commissioned, and given power and authority similarly to exorcise and cure sicknesses (Matthew 10:1; Mark 6:7,13; Luke 9:1) and, indeed, we learn in the Acts that Peter, Paul and Philip continued to do so after the Ascension of Christ. Finally, their successors were promised that such signs would ‘accompany those who believe: in my name . . . they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover’ (Mark 16:17-18). Admittedly, these last words are generally thought to be a second century addition to Mark’s Gospel, but this plainly was the aspiration of third generation Christians which, by adding these words to the Gospel, they were claiming to be able to fulfil.

With such apparently clear statements and, indeed, promises before us, we cannot without good reason simply sweep aside a charge that we would be failing in our ministry if we, too, did not fulfil such promises.

Not very long after receiving this challenge, I found myself put on the spot, where a decision about these issues was unavoidable. A particular young woman lay in one of the wards in a coma caused by a brain infection, with her life in the balance. A senior administrative sister, who was a member of the same church attended by this young woman, approached me to say that the whole congregation had been praying for her and now many of them, with her parents, wished to conduct a service of healing at her bedside in the hope and expectation of a recovery. Now, to take part in such an activity myself would have clearly gone beyond the terms of my appointment, which was to minister to the sick in the manner already described and not to heal them; indeed, in a secular hospital it might well leave me open to criticism from my colleagues who were engaged to cure

them. In the event, the girl, when she regained consciousness, amazed the young nurse who told her that she had been very ill, by exclaiming, ‘Yes, and the Lord Jesus has healed me!’ But she was not cured, and remained permanently brain damaged and mentally impaired, one of the unfortunate outcomes anticipated in the medical prognosis.

This tragic event was my first experience of ‘charismatic’ healing and raised many questions, not least that if Jesus – who himself, it is claimed, cured physical illnesses – had in fact passed on such an authority to his immediate disciples, and promised the same power to their successors, why then does this not happen today?

One simple answer has been given: ‘it does happen, where there is faith’. There is no lack of books filled with accounts of those who have ‘miraculously’ recovered from ‘incurable diseases’, even at the point of death. Most of these descriptions, however, are what the medical profession term ‘anecdotal’ – that is, stories which, even when corroborated, have not received that level of enquiry considered essential to substantiate them as genuinely ‘miraculous’. Such investigations can be, and have been, rigorously pursued by the Roman Catholic Church at Lourdes, since they are most concerned that before any ‘miraculous’ cure is proclaimed, all other eventualities should have been excluded. The number of such authentic ‘miracles’, however, is found to be small, and does not even reach the percentage required in scientific investigations to achieve what is known as ‘the level of significance’ needed to ensure that an occurrence is no more than chance.¹ ‘Miraculous’ cures, then, are infrequent, even though ‘faith’ in these particular circumstances, as in the case I have quoted, ought not to be in doubt.

What, then, can be said? There is no doubt that many and great blessings have been received at Lourdes and other places, through prayer and the sacraments. At the same time it cannot in honesty be denied that, even so, this falls a long way short of what is described and promised in the Scripture passages quoted above.

Most writers, who realise that in actuality very few ‘miraculous’ cures do occur, have attempted in one way or another to reach an accommodation between the very positive statements in these quotations and what is experienced in the present day. This is usually attempted by psychologising or spiritualising the healings, or by arguing that in the cases that a physical sickness is not cured, a person is ‘made whole’. But this is no more than trying to have things both ways. In common parlance, and this is usually the level at which the subject is discussed, ‘healing’ means ‘to cure’ and not ‘to make whole’ either spiritually or psychologically, and in all the recorded cases of Christ’s own healings the sick person is indeed physically cured,

1. Joyce, C.R. and Welldon, R.N., ‘The objective efficacy of prayer: a double-blind clinical trial’ *The Journal of Chronic Diseases*, 18.4 (1965): 367-377, a not unsympathetic report, arrived at a similar conclusion.

whatever other benefits may have been received. It is precisely the virtual inability of succeeding generations miraculously to cure the physically ill which is the question at issue, and nowhere is this more clearly seen than by those who exercise a whole-time ministry, pastorally or medically, among the acutely physically ill. Have the promises then failed? Have we, perhaps, as the successors of the Apostles, neglected to fulfil our commission? Or do the New Testament healings mean something other than they are claimed to mean?

It was at this point, when I had read much and meditated long, that I came upon a small book which opened up a new perspective on the subject. It contained nothing but, as the title stated, *The Healings of the Bible*. It is the plain text unadorned – no discussion, no notes, no explanations.² For the first time, to my knowledge, all of the raw material had been gathered together and printed so that it could be studied, meditated upon and prayed over. It became my constant companion and the inspiration for this present work.

What, then, did such a close study reveal? An analysis of the bare text, without any need for further commentary, led to the following discoveries.

1. Healings were absent from the Epistles.
2. There is only one healing in the Sayings collection (Q) used in common by Matthew and Luke.
3. The majority of healing narratives are concentrated in Mark, the earliest Gospel.
4. The Markan narratives were significantly altered when incorporated into the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.
5. Matthew provides no more than one additional healing narrative, which is a variant version of one in Mark.
6. Although there are three new healings in Luke, they closely parallel those in Mark, and two repeat the Sabbath observance theme.
7. The three healings in John bear close resemblances to those in Q and Mark, and two again repeat the Sabbath observance theme. Yet Morton T. Kelsey is not uncharacteristic in writing in *Healing and Christianity* (described by the Student Christian Movement as ‘the first comprehensive history of sacramental healing’) that ‘there are forty-nine distinct instances of healing in all, not including duplications, *but this by no means represents the total*’ (p. 54, my emphasis)! To achieve these totals he has uncritically included all the generalising summaries composed by the authors of the Gospels written long after the events.
8. Mark admitted limitations in the healings of Jesus.
9. In contrast, Matthew and Luke state that ‘all diseases and all infirmities are cured’.
10. The healings in the Acts are noticeably different in character from those in the Gospels.

2. Woods, N.B. (ed.), *The Healings of the Bible*. 1958. London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1961.

Although some of these features individually may have already received notice, nevertheless, taken together they present a markedly different picture of the New Testament healings from that usually canvassed, and raise many questions. In particular, three observations may be made: firstly, that in the earliest documents, the letters of Paul and the Sayings source Q, the Gospel appears to have been preached virtually without even mention of Christ's healings; secondly, the healing narratives are not, as commonly assumed, widely distributed throughout the Gospels, but are principally derived from Mark or related sources; lastly, the healings curiously change their nature after the resurrection.

In the light of these new discoveries, the need for a critical re-evaluation of healing in the New Testament surely becomes essential, and it is this that will form the basis for the present study. But before proceeding to this examination, there are three commonly raised questions that need to be discussed in advance: (1) the 'problem' of miracles; (2) the question of interpretation; (3) the relevance of the New Testament today.

1.1. The 'Problem' of Miracles

It will be noticed that in this simple book to which I have referred, the title merely used the word 'healings' – the word 'miracle' occurring only in biblical quotations from the Authorised Version (AV) as a translation of Greek words used in a wholly different sense from that in which the word is used today. One author of a comprehensive and scholarly study of miracles began his discussion with the statement 'In a miracle the impossible happens'³, thereby capitulating to a definition of 'miracle' thrust upon us by rationalist or sceptical philosophies, some of which were current even before the time of Christ. Enthusiastic exponents of the new natural science in the heady days of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries themselves became enticed into similar forms of philosophy, which they believed supported their concept of the 'laws of nature', but today there are many scientists and medical practitioners who no longer feel that they are obliged by their profession to hold such views. There is, consequently, no reason why we too should allow ourselves to become boxed into this alien definition of 'miracle', least of all when we are about to study writers who would consider such an explanation as beyond their comprehension. They did not consider themselves to be dealing with 'impossibilities', but with actualities, so that we owe it to them to examine carefully what exactly they meant by the language they used, or chose not to use.⁴

3. Loos, H. van der, *The Miracles of Jesus*. Leiden: Brill, 1968. This provides an encyclopaedic coverage of British as well as Continental writing on miracles, which has a value beyond the writer's own speculations. See also Moule, C.F.D. (ed.), *Miracles: Cambridge Studies in their Philosophy and History*. London: A.R. Mowbray, 1965.

4. See 'The Vocabulary of Miracle' in Moule, op. cit., pp. 235-238.

In such a varied collection of writings as the New Testament, it is not to be expected that there would be any rigid consistency in the use of words, so that it is the more remarkable that the Greek expression *thaumasion* – ‘marvel’, which is nearest to our word ‘miracle’ – is used only once of the deeds of Jesus and then not directly, but in a summary passage (Matthew 21:15). Similarly *paradoxon* – ‘a surprising thing, contrary to expectation’ – although common enough in use outside the New Testament, appears there only once, and then merely in the exclamations of onlookers (Luke 5:26). The history of the use of *teras* – a ‘portent’ – is an indication of the attitude taken by the New Testament writers towards ‘wonders’. The word occurs not infrequently, but always in the phrase ‘signs and wonders’ which, by its use in the Greek Old Testament for the events of the Exodus, had become refined to mean ‘a vehicle of revelation’. This was also the usual sense of the word *semeion* – ‘sign’ – on its own, especially in the Gospel of John.

Perhaps the most characteristic term for the deeds of Jesus was *dunameis* – ‘mighty works’ – in the plural, although in the singular the word could have magical connotations. The ‘problem’ for his contemporaries was not that Jesus performed the ‘impossible’, but that, as his opponents accused him, he was a magician in league with Beelzebul. Just as we use the word ‘power’ (*dunamis*) to describe an invisible current like electricity, so in the first century magic was typically understood as a dynamic energy that could be tapped from occult sources, or was possessed by ‘charismatic’ figures. This ‘power’ could flow from their body or clothes, or be accessed by spells or manual acts. It cannot be escaped that all of these features are to be found in the Gospels, not least in Mark, although characteristically the writers sought to distance themselves from any taint of magic.⁵ Even so, whatever terms might be used, ‘miracles’ need not, and probably ought not, to be treated as a single discrete entity, but as a variety of different activities. Gerd Theissen has usefully grouped them into six categories, of which ‘therapies’ – that is, the healings – are one. The exorcisms he has classed separately, just as they have been distinguished from healings in Mark’s Gospel, and will be in this present study. Overall, he has also drawn a distinction between events such as the walking on water and the feeding miracles, which presuppose a belief in Christ’s divine nature in the light of the resurrection, and those that are without such presuppositions.⁶ The healings, or ‘therapies’, fall into this latter category and so may be regarded as historic, since they are attested by being mentioned in Jewish and other writings, and by appearing in

5. Hull, J.M., *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*. London: SCM Press, 1974.

6. Theissen, G., *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982. Summarised in Theissen, G. and Merz, A., *The Historical Jesus*, London: Fortress Press, 1998, pp. 281-315.

the New Testament both in the narrative and sayings tradition. They exist independently of any knowledge of the later resurrection, and are distinguished from parallels in pagan literature by invariably bearing a symbolic meaning.

Thus, with a clearer perception of healing within the context of the New Testament, we need not concern ourselves overmuch with the possibility or otherwise of ‘miracles’, but rather concentrate our attention upon the meaning of events which we have no reason to believe could not, or did not, happen.

1.2. The Question of Interpretation

The little book to which I have already referred, by printing the text of the healing stories unadorned, has assumed, as do many others, that nothing further is required for the understanding of the Scriptures. Unfortunately, even though one is committed, as I am myself, to the belief that the sacred authors should be allowed to speak for themselves, in the confidence that much of the theme of this book will become self-evident, it is an illusion to believe that the full significance of the Scriptures can be obtained without some assistance. In the first place, the New Testament was written not only in another language, but also at a time and in social conditions remote from our own. The nuances of meaning, the implications of the social and religious background, as well as the significance of an unfamiliar style of composition, may well be lost or misunderstood, if they are not pointed out.

Nevertheless, it has been my experience that not a few people are suspicious of New Testament criticism, prompted no doubt by the bad press given to the more extravagant, and thus newsworthy, claims of certain academics. The word ‘criticism’ itself, not least among those trained in other disciplines, can be taken in a pejorative sense to mean ‘fault-finding’, rather than in its proper sense as ‘skilled in textual and literary studies’. The general public, at least in the United Kingdom, are largely unaware of the advances that have been made in the understanding of the New Testament over the last century and a half, so that when random titbits of scholarship surface which appear to unsettle deep-seated beliefs, they are often met with shock and outrage. But there is now a widespread consensus among scholars of all denominations about undeniable facts that must underlie any reasonable discussion. A few may be mentioned here.

Although there may be good reason for attaching names to the Gospels, nonetheless the final authors remain unknown. The earliest Gospel, that attributed to Mark, depended upon the recollections and traditions of those who lived nearer to the events he described. The authors of the first and third Gospels independently had access to a large collection of

sayings of Jesus, now designated as Q, from the German *Quelle* meaning 'source', which they believed they should add to what they had found in Mark. They also were able to draw on their own special sources, usually referred to as M for Matthew and L for Luke. The writer of the Fourth Gospel could assume that most of his readers by that time, at the end of the first century, were already aware of the salient facts of Christianity, so that he was able to compose a spiritual commentary on the life and teaching of Jesus. Each writer interpreted the Gospel in his own way and addressed his writings to his own community of Christians (who in some cases had probably encouraged the author), a fact sometimes ignored in studies of the Gospel healings, which are often discussed as isolated units, whereas it is the use made of them within the context of each of the Evangelists' writings that is of the greater significance. These and other aspects of conventional scholarship will arise during the course of this study, in which it has been my intention not to trespass far beyond the limits of straightforward explanation into expressions of personal opinion or speculation.⁷

In order to ensure that I am indeed interpreting, and not pursuing my own theories, I have taken the unusual step of punctuating the discussion with a series of 'propositions'. They are 'propositions' since they invite readers to pause and consider for themselves whether these summaries accurately represent the meaning and intention of the authors or not. At the end, before presenting my own interpretation of the relevance of this scriptural tradition in the present day, a task that is always an essential requirement of any exposition of biblical teaching, I have collected together these propositions, so that they can be read as a summary of this line of reasoning, which must be considered in any deliberations about the teaching and practice of healing in the Church today.

1.3. Can the New Testament be Relevant Today?

Some twenty or thirty years ago, certain scholars began to argue both that the New Testament did not contain any historical facts about the life of Jesus, and that if it did, the beliefs of those in the first century were so remote from our 'enlightened' scientific generation, that they had become virtually meaningless. The belief in demons and magic, in a world where gods lived above the clouds with a hell beneath the earth, no longer made sense to an age that believed in reason, and dwelt in a vast and infinite universe.⁸ As might be expected, such ideas caused great

7. For the present state of critical opinion I have principally relied upon the latest 'Introduction'. Schnelle, U., *The History and Theology of The New Testament Writings*, trans. Boring, M.E. London: SCM Press, 1998.

8. Ninham, D., *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*. London: SPCK Publishing, 1978.

scandal at the time. But even though the dust has settled, the spirit of scepticism has lingered on, so that some would still ask, 'What is the point of discussing what was believed all those years ago about sickness and healing?'

If we reflect today on the great popularity of the sequence of films entitled *The Omen* (1976) and *The Exorcist* (1973), or the almost daily series on television containing aliens, vampires and witches, or solemn discussions about the existence of UFOs, or the regular appearance in newspapers and magazines of horoscopes, we may be a little more hesitant about making claims for our rationality. More specifically, in an age in which more people, so we are informed, consult 'alternatives' rather than scientific rational medicine, surely no discussion of sickness and healing can be turned aside as irrelevant or outmoded.

As the old adage says, 'Human nature does not change'. Quite apart from religious studies, the researches of medical sociologists have uncovered many uncomfortable facts about our present-day ideas about sickness. Disease, for example, is still widely interpreted as evil, invasive and predatory. Consider such common expressions as 'fighting against a disease', 'eaten away by cancer' (*cancer* in Latin means 'crab!'), 'struck down in the prime of life', suffering 'a heart attack' or 'a stroke' – struck by what, attacked by whom? These expressions should not be dismissed as mere figures of speech. In a study done with American university students, chosen specifically because they had no religious background, the majority saw disease as an objective evil, in much the way that Peter spoke of the sick as being 'oppressed by the devil' (Acts 10:38) and believed that it was a consequence of wrongdoing. In a French study, a great number of those canvassed interpreted disease as caused by an alien force – 'The Environment' – which they almost hypostasised; that is, they treated it as if it had a personal identity that threatened them.⁹ The devils under new names are with us still.

Rational medicine did not begin yesterday, but is founded upon the theories of Greek physicians before the time of Christ. They believed that it was essential first to diagnose the cause of an illness and then to apply, where possible, a specific remedy. And yet, so many of our 'alternatives' today seem to have turned this logic on its head by theorising about treatments first, and then applying them to symptoms. Not a few of them, indeed, are panaceas or cure-alls.

Among the 'alternative therapies' are to be found spiritual or faith healers, some of them indeed Christians, who claim to have special powers (or magical *dunamis*?). When observing their body language during healing

9. Cox, C. and Mead, A., eds, *A Sociology of Medical Practice*. London: Collier-Macmillan, 1975, pp. 174-175. Herzlich, C., *Health and Illness*, London: Academic Press, 1973.

meetings (or services!) or on television, it is often apparent that many of them behave as if their healing ‘powers’ were flowing out from them while in the act of ‘laying on hands’ – some indeed claim as much. Such claims and practices are to be found in the magical texts of the first century and earlier. We are not, then, immune in our scientifically ‘enlightened’ society from ancient superstitions.

So then, perhaps the time is ripe for a reconsideration of a tradition of healing, drawing its life-blood from Jesus Christ himself, which will be the task in the work before us.

SAMPLE