

## Preface

Over the last twenty years there has been a great surge of interest in the healing ministry: healing services have become familiar in many churches; groups are meeting to pray for the sick; the Church of England has published a report *A Time to Heal*, and for the first time authorised forms of service have been made available. All this is to the good and must be commended. And yet this ferment of activity seems not to have been matched by an equally fresh or energetic study of healing in the New Testament, which ostensibly forms the basis, and is still claimed as supplying the inspiration, for the ‘revival’ of this ministry.

This lack of rigour unfortunately leaves a nagging suspicion that this upsurge of interest in the churches has arisen not so much out of new theological insights based upon Scripture, but more as a reaction to the present obsession with physical health and emotional well-being in society at large, which has resulted in diet and exercise taking the place of fasting and penance, and counsellors stepping into the shoes of priests and pastors. ‘Caring’, health, freedom from pain and stress, and psychological integration have taken on ‘spiritual’ dimensions and quasi-religious objectives. When the practitioners of ‘alternative medicine’, so we are told, now outnumber those in conventional medical practice, it is perhaps not surprising that some clergy see their own future as ‘counsellors’ rather than pastors, and the purpose of the Church as providing spiritual and emotional solace rather than salvation.

One hears with dismay assertions such as ‘Healing is central to the Gospel’ which, if intended as a résumé of New Testament teaching, is at least factually inaccurate, if not worse; or that ‘the healing ministry is a normal activity of the Church’, whereas the ‘normal’ services of the Church, such as baptism and the Eucharist, have traditionally always themselves been understood as ‘healing’ services. The prevalent judgment that ‘we are all sick and need healing’, by choosing to adopt the figurative metaphor rather than the reality it represents, is more a reflection of popular sentiment than a frank admission of the actual condition of humanity when standing in the presence of God.

I am not aware that there has ever been a serious critical study of healing in the New Testament as a discrete subject. Of course, the healings have usually been included in vindications of ‘miracles’ against the onslaughts of rationalism, or they may perhaps have been considered in the light of modern medicine or psychiatry. New Testament criticism, on the other hand, has tended to treat them as units of the oral tradition to be compared with parallels in the pagan world. Books on the practice of Christian healing, while paying lip-service to the scriptural miracles, often make vague generalisations such as that Christ’s healings were ‘works of compassion’, or that the Church has ‘received a commission to heal’, or of our need for ‘faith’, on the authority of a few selected texts often quoted out of context. But none of them addresses the essential questions, which are: ‘How did the first Christians themselves interpret the healings?’ or, perhaps of even more significance, ‘How did Jesus himself intend them to be interpreted?’ ‘Was the interpretation of the various writers always the same and, if not, which should be accepted?’ ‘What evidence is there for healing in the early Christian communities?’ These are not arbitrary questions, since any practice of an authentic healing ministry in the present-day church must be based upon the answers to these questions, else there is the risk that it will end up as no more than the expression of groundless aspirations, or a chimera.

It is, then, the purpose of this study to arrive at a clearer understanding of what Scripture actually tells us about healing – not, I may add, what we imagine it says or hope that it might say, not what we may have been led to believe it says, or indeed what we have sometimes been taught that it says, but what the sacred authors actually wrote and, more to the point, what they meant by what they wrote.

But the study of Scripture can become a remote and barren activity unless the results can be shown to be consistent with our contemporary understanding of the nature of the world, in this case with medical science, and to be applicable in everyday life. The present exposition of New Testament teaching has consequently been followed by two concluding, though nonetheless supplementary, chapters relating the scriptural principles of Christian healing to medical and church practice. This may sometimes have led to speculations and expressions of personal opinion from which I have endeavoured to steer clear in the main body of the work, which has at every stage striven to be an objective study of the evidence.

Yet, although dependent upon the findings of conventional New Testament scholarship, this book is nonetheless addressed more particularly to the general reader who is interested in a subject much under discussion at the present time. To this end the technicalities of biblical criticism have been kept to a minimum or, where essential, explained, and the text of the healings has been printed in full, to avoid what I myself find the

tiresome necessity of having constantly to break the continuity of a line of reasoning in order to look up a reference. The book is then, in a word, self-contained, and might be found convenient as a source book for group discussion.

In conclusion, I must express my especial gratitude to Professor Christopher Evans who, on reading an earlier version of this study, pointed me in the right direction, and without whose guidance this book would never have been written. I was also encouraged by my former head of college, the late Very Reverend Sydney Evans, especially in my relating the biblical evidence to current medical thinking. Dr Elizabeth Harris wisely counselled the omission of several unnecessary technicalities and the need for a practical conclusion. There is, however, no room to record, even should I be able to remember, the countless occasions on which I have learnt from discussions with my colleagues, lay and medical as well as clerical. It remains merely to confess that any errors in scholarship and interpretation, as well as in opinions, must lie not with them, but at my own door.

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