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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

SPIRITUAL HEALING: AN ENQUIRY

by HUGH J. BLAIR

THE following paper was originally presented to a Graduates Fellowship group and later to a group of ministers and elders of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. The subject with which it deals is one of widespread interest, and we are glad to reproduce it here. The author, a well-known minister of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, is a contributor to "The New Bible Commentary".

THE subject of faith healing, or spiritual healing, as it is more wisely and accurately called, is one that has come very much to the fore in recent years. It is, of course, not a new thing, but it has received a new emphasis: a great many books on the subject have been published; some evangelists and others have achieved a considerable reputation through it; healing services are held regularly in some churches; and the churches as a whole have been led to examine and re-examine their attitude to the whole difficult and controversial question.

What I have to say on the subject must necessarily be more in the nature of an enquiry than a dogmatic statement, for where so many Christians have widely-divergent views, and where the intricate relationship of body, mind and spirit has to be considered, it would be rash to attempt a complete and final statement. But I hope that some of the things I have to say, particularly with reference to the teaching of Scripture, may be of some help to those who are perplexed by the whole question.

At the outset, I want to make it quite clear that I can find no Scriptural justification for meetings for mass healing, where people come forward in crowds and are healed with a touch by someone with a "gift" for healing.¹ It is possible that there are cases of healing in such mass meetings, but I think investigation would show that many of these are cases where the complaint was largely neurotic and mental in the first instance. The conduct of such meetings suggests that there is more of mass-hypnotism in them

¹ We gather that, in keeping with modern technological advances, healing may now be received by remote control if the invalid touches the wireless or television set at the healer's invitation. ED.

than true healing. It is well known that hypnosis has a value in treating certain complaints, and there are professional hypnotists who practise that method of treating nervous disease. But they do not masquerade under the guise of religion. Modern science is discovering increasingly how much the state of the body is dependent on the mind, and is using that knowledge to accomplish what might once have been called miracles. But that is not spiritual healing.

And yet, having said all that, I must go on to say that it does seem as if there are some in these days who have been given a special gift of spiritual healing. There are well authenticated cases in some of the vast amount of literature which has been published on the subject. There was a group of ministers in Glasgow a few years ago, who practised, and probably still do practise healing through prayer. And most of us have known of cases which had been given up by the doctors, where recovery to health came in answer to prayer. Facts like these make it impossible to say that there is not direct, divine healing. (Indeed, all healing is divine healing: "I treated him ; God healed him" might be said by every physician.)

But many questions remain to be answered. And for me one of the most urgent and compelling is, How are we to explain the cases, so pathetically numerous, where a cure does not take place? There have been many cases where there has been bitter disappointment. Why? Some exponents of spiritual healing have their answer ready. The faith of the patient, or the faith of those who sought healing for him was not strong enough. That is not only a cruel answer: it goes contrary to all that I believe about the sovereignty of God and the genesis of human faith. To say that there are certain things which God is prevented from doing by man, to say, "God cannot do this unless you believe", is to make God less than God, and is to forget that faith, like every other spiritual grace, is the gift of God.

There is another answer, which most exponents of spiritual healing will reject, but which I believe to be the true one. Healing is not granted because it is not God's will. It is true that both sin and sickness are contrary to God's will. Sickness came with sin, but now that it is here God can use it to fulfil far higher purposes than perfect health might do. God's will for man is something far higher than *mens sana in corpore sano*. Perfect health is not God's highest will for us any more than indefinitely continued life in the body is God's highest will for us. Are we to say that

a brave and cheerful invalid whose faith burns brightly in the midst of suffering is providing a poorer manifestation of faith in enduring suffering than if he had used his faith to enable him to escape the anguish and be as other men? I find it impossible to believe that.

When we come to consider the relevant Scripture passages, we must give careful attention first to Christ's miracles of healing and to His commissioning of the apostles to continue His work of healing the sick as well as preaching the gospel. It must be agreed that the healing miracles were an essential part of Christ's ministry and that the power of healing was transmitted to the apostles. But it should be noted that the New Testament makes it quite clear that the healing miracles, like all Christ's miracles, were 'signs'. They were the evidence that God's new order, brought in with the coming of the Messiah, was in action. Hoskyns and Davey in *The Riddle of the New Testament*, p. 120, put it like this: "The physical miracles are external signs of the supreme Messianic Miracle, the rescue of men from the grip of the powers of evil—from sin. The supreme Messianic Miracle to which the miracles point is the salvation of men by the power of the Living God exercised through the agency of the Messiah." And C. S. Lewis says the same thing in his own way when he writes in *Miracles*, p. 131: "Every particular Christian miracle manifests at a particular place and moment the character and significance of the Incarnation". The miracles of healing in the New Testament were special signs of the power and presence of the Living God among His people. Is there a clue there to the great incidence of miracles of healing in these days when men have grown blind to the presence of the Kingdom—and the King—in our midst? Or, as they were signs accompanying His First Advent, are we to take them now as signs, among many others, that His Second Advent is near at hand?

The crucial passage on spiritual healing is, of course, James 5: 14, 15: "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him." On the face of it, that passage seems to give unqualified support to the practice of spiritual healing. But is it certain that the sickness referred to is physical sickness? Following a suggestion of Rev. Herman Hoeksema in his book, *The Perfect Prayer*, pp. 136 ff., I am satisfied that what is referred to in James 5: 14, 15, is not physical sickness but

spiritual weakness, and the healing is quite literally "spiritual" healing.

The two Greek words translated "sick" in these verses are ἀσθενέω and κάμνω. The radical meaning of ἀσθενέω is 'to be weak', and a study of the instances given in Grimm-Thayer's Lexicon shows that in the New Testament it frequently means 'weak in faith', or 'weak in spiritual perception', and by no means always 'weak in body'. The other word, κάμνω, occurs in only two other passages, Revelation 2: 3 and Hebrews 12: 3, and means 'to grow spiritually weary or faint'. It seems, therefore, that from the point of view of vocabulary there can be no objection to taking this passage as referring to spiritual weakness.

A further consideration is that affliction in a broad sense has already been referred to in v. 13—"Is any among you afflicted? let him pray". Is that to be narrowed down in v. 14 to one particular case of affliction? And, even more significantly, the afflicted person in v. 13 is urged to pray for himself, but the "sick" man in v. 14 is to be prayed for by others. It cannot be that he is too ill to pray, for apparently he can appeal for the help of the church. But might it not be that his faith has burned so low that he cannot pray for himself, that his spiritual malady is so serious that others must be called to pray on his behalf?

The anointing with oil has usually been interpreted to refer to the use of the medicinal help that is available, just as the Good Samaritan used oil and wine for the traveller's wounds. But oil in the Bible is frequently a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and it can conceivably be used here to signify the spiritual renewal that the Spirit brings. The very fact that it is the elders of the church who are to be called to aid the 'sick' suggests that it is spiritual restoration that is required, for theirs is primarily a spiritual function.

The practice of Extreme Unction by the Roman Church is perhaps worthy of note here. That church does not anoint a man so that he may recover: he is anointed because he is going to die. However mistaken the Roman doctrine of Extreme Unction may be, it shows that that Church has always interpreted this verse to apply to spiritual weakness.

It is significant that the subsequent context is concerned with the forgiveness of sins—"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. . . . Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins". It is

our duty to pray for the sick, but we must never forget the greater malady and the greatest cure. And the healing of the soul will never be refused. If we apply verse 15 to physical sickness, we may often find its promise false, for the prayer of faith does not always save the sick, nor is he always raised up from his bed of weakness. But the far greater boon of spiritual restoration is sure to those who seek it for themselves and for others. For God has promised, "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely".

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