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Healing in the New Testament

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The church has always seen itself as the bearer of the Good News from God which brings salvation to a sin-sick humanity. This salvation has been rightly understood in its most comprehensive sense. It includes the re-establishment of broken relationships with God and with the human community, it includes the gift of understanding and insight, it includes the Spirit-generated willingness to become a servant of one's neighbour, it includes the gift of peace experienced internally, in community, and even in the social and political realm, and last but not least, it includes the blessing of physical and emotional well-being.

It is the contention of this paper that this latter aspect of salvation, the gift of physical and emotional health, has often been neglected in the church's proclamation and ministry, or at least has received short shrift. It is not within the scope of this paper to investigate the causes of, or the appropriate remedy for, this situation. This paper will deal only with a very limited and yet a very fundamental question: What does the New Testament have to say about healing? A study of this subject should have important implications for the church's agenda. What these implications are, however, we must leave to others to pursue.

Disease in the ancient world usually had, as it still has today, enormous social and economic consequences. A person suffering from leprosy, menstrual "uncleanness", deafness or an impediment of speech, would be marginalized. A blind or paralyzed person would almost inevitably be poor and consequently hungry. Healing for such a person would have life-altering, not to say life-giving, implications. Healing would

bring the possibility of reintegration into society. It would bring economic, physical, and emotional independence, and so it would restore to the afflicted the sense of dignity and self-respect which comes with self-sufficiency. It is primarily because of these consequences that healing was sought.

Of course, such sought-after consequences of healing may be achieved also in ways which do not entail the actual removal of the illness. Paradoxical as it may sound, healing does not need to result in a cure. Paul, for instance, had learned to be content in whatever state he found himself. Although he had three times pleaded with God for a physical cure, such a cure was not forthcoming (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Yet Paul matured through the experience and became a still more committed follower of Christ. In this one may see, perhaps, a "healing" of a deeper and more impressive kind.

It is astonishing to what extent Jesus was remembered as one who healed specific people from particular physical ailments. The following list is a fairly complete summary of the evidence gathered from the gospels. The references are presented in chart form to facilitate recognition of how the various gospels agree with, and differ from, one another in their inclusion and arrangement of specific healing accounts. It is particularly noteworthy that the Gospel of John includes only three such instances of healing.

Precise identification of the sickness is not always possible, since the descriptions are often vague, alluding to the obvious symptoms rather than to their underlying physical, spiritual, or psychological causes.

Table One

Healing Miracles of Jesus

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Fever	8:14-15	1:29-31	4:38-39	
Leper	8:1-4	1:40-45	5:12-16	
Paralytic	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:17-26	
Withered hand	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Officer's servant	8:5-13		7:1-10	4:46-54
Hemorrhage	9:20-22	5:25-34	8:43-48	
Two blind men	9:27-31			
Deaf-Mute		7:31-37		
Blind at bethsaida		8:22-26		
Sick at bethzatha				5:1-9
Man Born blind				9:1-7
Crippled woman			13:10-17	
Man with dropsy			14:1-6	
Ten Lepers			17:1-11	
Blind	20:29-34	10:46-52	18:35-43	
Bartimaeus				
Servant's ear			22:50-51	

Specific ailments such as deafness or blindness are sometimes seen as aspects of demon possession (e.g. Mark 9:17; Matthew 12:22; Luke 13:11). To say that a person is sick is almost the same as to say that he or she is demon possessed (e.g. Mark 1:32), so that healing can be effected by expelling the demon which causes the illness. The two common Greek verbs for "to heal" occur in the description of the exorcisms of demons (e.g. Matthew 15:[22]28; Matthew 17:18 par.; Luke 6:18; Luke 7:21; Luke 8:2). It follows that an exorcism can be considered an instance of healing, too. Again it is surprising how frequently Jesus is remembered as one who exorcised demons, and again it is noteworthy that in the Gospel of John this is never the case.

Table Two

Exorcisms Performed by Jesus

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Man in synagogue		1:21-27	4:31-37	
Garasene demoniac	8:28-34	5:1-20	8:26-39	
Possessed mute	12:22-23		11:14	
Syro- phoenician	15:21-28	7:24-30		
Epileptic child	17:14-20	9:14-29	9:37-43	
Mute demoniac	9:32-34			
Demoniac	12:22-23		11:14	

The ultimate way to give life and to bring "healing" is to raise someone from the dead. Jesus is reported to have raised at least three persons from the dead, and each of the gospels contains at least one account of such a raising.

Table Three

Jesus Raising People from the Dead

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Jairus' daughter	9:18-26	5:22-43	8:40-56	
Widow's son at Nain			7:11-17	
Lazarus				11:1-46

In addition to reporting specific instances of healing, the gospels many times relate in a general way that Jesus healed people and exorcised demons. This leaves the impression that the actual healing miracles recorded represent a mere fraction of Jesus' total healing ministry. Again it is noteworthy that the Gospel of John makes not a single reference to such a general healing ministry of Jesus.

Table Four

Summary Statements about Jesus' Healing Ministry

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Healing at evening	8:16-17	1:32-34	4:40-41	
Preaching tour	4:23	1:39	(4:44)	
Leper's report		1:45	5:15	
Gathered crowd	4:24-25	3:7-13	6:17-19	
Preaching tour	9:35-36			
Answer to John	11:2-6		7:18-35	
Before the feeding	14:14		9:11	
Woes to cities	11:20-24		10:13-15	
By the sea	12:15			
Jesus and Beelzebul	12:24-32	3:22-30	11:15-23	
Blessed eyes	13:16-17		10:23-24	
Rejection at home	13:53-58	6:1-6	4:16-30	
Herod's fear	14:1-2	6:14-16	9:7-9	

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Answer to Herod			13:31-33	
At Gennesaret	14:34-36	6:53-56		
Many others	15:29-31			
Leaving Galilee	19:1-2			
In the temple	21:14			

What is impressive is not only the sheer number of references to Jesus' general healing ministry, but also the way in which some of these references are presented. Matthew, in distinction from Mark and Luke, emphasizes that Jesus healed not just the occasional person, but that he healed "all" or "every one" (Matthew 4:24; 14:35; 4:23; 9:35; 8:16; 12:15; 4:24; 4:14; 15:30 and 19:2). Jesus' sermon at Nazareth in Luke (4:16-30) is especially significant for two reasons. First, it marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in the Gospel of Luke, and secondly, it is based on quotations from Isaiah (especially Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6) and so it connects Jesus' ministry of healing with the eschatological outpouring of the Holy Spirit which the prophets anticipated.

Not only is Jesus known to have healed many people, the gospel writers (except John, of course) also relate that he commissioned his disciples to continue his healing ministry.

Table Five

Jesus' Commissioning to Heal

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Calling the twelve	10:1	(3:14)	(6:13)	

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Sending the twelve	10:1-15	6:7-13	9:1-6	
Sending the seventy			10:9	
Markan appendix		16:15-18		

Jesus himself clarifies the significance of his healing ministry. It is the beginning of the kingdom of God (Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20), and it marks the victory over Satan (Luke 10:18 "I saw Satan falling from heaven"). Accordingly, when Jesus commissioned his disciples to heal, he also commanded them to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near.

Those who were privileged to witness Jesus' healing ministry are called blessed because their eyes can see the time of salvation which the prophets could only anticipate (Matthew 13:16-17); Luke 10:23-24). The healing ministry of Jesus must accordingly be seen in light of such Old Testament passages as Isaiah 26:19; 35:3-6; 58:6; 61:1-2; 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37; 5:1-15. Similarly, the alarmed question of the demons, Matthew 8:29, "Have you come here to torment us before the time?" indicates that Jesus' exorcism of demons spells the beginning of the final judgement connected with the coming kingdom of God. The healing ministry of Jesus is thus understood to give a foretaste of the coming kingdom of God.

The disciples' healing ministry is unthinkable without Jesus. It is Jesus who sends his disciples out and gives them the authority to teach, preach, and heal. This they can do only by his power (cf. Matthew 17:16-20). The healing of the lame man (by Peter) and the exorcism of the divining spirit (by Paul) are said to have been accomplished in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:6; 3:16; 4:7-10; 16:18), that is to say, by his power and not by their own.

Similarly, Paul knows that he cannot claim credit for what he has accomplished. He readily acknowledges that it is Christ who works miracles through him (Romans 15:18-19). James, too, insists that healing is actually effected by the risen Lord, not by the elders, and that prayer offered in faith is a vital component of the healing process (James 5:13-18). When healing

results, therefore, the glory belongs to God, not to the human agent.

Proclamation and healing go hand in hand. On several occasions the crowds came to Jesus in order both to hear Jesus and be healed by him (Luke 5:15; 6:18). Jesus calls those blessed who *hear* what he says and *see* what he does (Matthew 13:16-17; Luke 10:23-24). When John the Baptist desires confirmation that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus sends the messengers to tell John what they *hear* (namely, the gospel preached to the poor) and what they *see* (namely, the healing ministry of Jesus, Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23). Correspondingly, Jesus sends his disciples both to preach and heal (Matthew 10:7-8; Luke 9:1-6, 11; Luke 10:9; Matthew 4:23-25; 9:35). In the same vein Paul proclaimed the gospel in word and powerful deed alike (Romans 15:18-19 "What I have said and done, by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit"). Salvation is experienced in both hearing and seeing. Proclamation and healing regularly go hand in hand.

To experience healing is to experience salvation. The Greek word which we commonly translate "to save" occurs some eighteen times in the healing miracles of Jesus. This word can be used interchangeably with the two Greek verbs which are translated "to heal". In fact, the Greek word "to save" is itself sometimes translated "to heal" (Acts 4:9 RSV). The close association of these verbs suggests that the healing of the body can be understood as an integral part of the whole salvation which the coming kingdom of God brings to humanity. Healing is "to do good", "to save life" (the Greek word *psyche* can be variously translated as "life" or "soul"). No wonder that healing of physical ailments is more important even than observing the rules of the sabbath (Mark 3:1-6).

Healing can be experienced also in the announcement of forgiveness of sins. Sickness is not necessarily a result of sin. In John 9 Jesus, at least, questions such a direct connection between sin and sickness. Nevertheless, it is common experience even today that the burden of sin and guilt almost inevitably has crippling effects on people's lives, paralyzing them not only in mind and attitude, but in body as well. It is to be expected, therefore, that in such instances the authoritative announcement of forgiveness brings multi-dimensional healing, whether or not such healing includes the actual removal of the physical

causes or symptoms of the affliction. Here it is impressive to note that repeatedly, when such persons were brought to Jesus, his first response to them was an announcement of forgiveness (Mark 2:1-12).

Also in James (5:13-18) healing is seen in the context of the forgiveness of sins. Both in his healing and in his forgiving of sins the ministry of Jesus signals the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. That kingdom is experienced already here and now in the forgiveness of sins and in healing.

The healing of Jesus is also an experience of God's mercy. It is especially Matthew who emphasizes this point. Several times the sick plead for mercy as they request his help. "Have mercy on us, Son of David," cry the two blind men at Matthew 9:27, and the two blind men at Matthew 20:30, 31 appeal to him in the same words. The similar appeals of the Canaanite woman at 15:22 and of the father of the boy at 17:15 receive an immediate response from the merciful Jesus. According to Matthew 20:34 Jesus is moved with compassion as he touches the eyes of the blind, and in Matthew 14:14 it is compassion which prompts Jesus to heal the sick.

Not surprisingly, such deeds of mercy are commended also to the followers of Jesus. There is a Beatitude for those who practice mercy (Matthew 5:7). Twice (9:13 and 12:7) Matthew quotes Hosea: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Healing may also be seen as liberation, especially liberation from the bondage to Satan and demons. This is emphasized especially in Luke (13:16; 5:13; 8:29; Acts 10:38). *Mutatis mutandis* it would be appropriate to regard any form of liberation from oppression as an experience of healing.

Healing is also intimately connected with faith. In the healing miracles, "faith" usually means the unconditional trust that Jesus is able to help. The words of Jesus "your faith has saved you" (e.g. Mark 5:34a) best illustrate this. Healing can thus be understood as an "answer" to faith. Both Peter (Acts 3:16) and Paul (Acts 14:9) are reported to have healed a person on the basis of faith. In fact, Mark (6:5-6, cf. Matthew 13:58) records an occasion when Jesus, because of the absence of such faith, could not do any miracles.

In Acts, however, healing usually leads to faith rather than the other way around. So, for example, Luke reports that

all the inhabitants of Lydda and of the plain of Sharon were converted when they saw Aeneas healed (Acts 9:35) and that many came to faith because the raising of Tabitha became known in all of Joppa (Acts 9:42).

In the early church it is virtually taken for granted that acts of healing are performed in the name of Jesus. Since the healing ministry of Jesus signals the beginning of the kingdom of God, it follows that this ministry is intended to be continued until the kingdom has fully come. The earliest church certainly felt convinced that Jesus intended them to continue a ministry of healing and care for the whole person, not just for people's souls.

According to Acts healing played a prominent role in the early church. Peter twice refers to Jesus' healing ministry (Acts 2:22; 10:38) and Luke records seven specific instances on which Peter and Paul healed or raised a person from the dead.

Table Six

Peter's and Paul's Miracles of Healing in Acts

Passage	Agent	Place	Subject
3:1-10	Peter	Temple	Lame Man
9:32-35	Peter	Lydda	Aeneas
14:8-10	Paul	Lystra	Lame Man
16:16-18	Paul		Divining Girl
28:7-8	Paul	Malta	Publius' Father

Table Seven

Peter's and Paul's Raising of the Dead in Acts

Passage	Agent	Place	Subject
9:36-42	Peter	Joppa	Tabitha
20:7-12	Paul	Troas	Eutychus

In addition, Luke indicates that Peter and Paul performed many other signs and wonders, including healing, no doubt (Acts 5:15-16; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11-12; 28:9), and so did others, such as the apostles (2:43; 5:12-15), Stephanus (6:8), Philip (8:6-7, 13), and Barnabas (14:3; 15:12).

In Paul's letters healing plays a much less prominent role. Paul never refers to healing performed by Jesus or to the fact that Jesus commissioned his disciples to heal. Paul himself has not left a single record of a specific act of healing performed by him. There is at least a hint that he did heal people (as Acts reports), but he does not draw special attention to that, and he does not underline the miraculous nature of such acts. Nevertheless, from passages such as Romans 15:18-19; 1 Corinthians 2:4-5; 2 Corinthians 12:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:5 it is safe to conclude that healing ministry did play an important role for Paul himself and for the members of his congregation.

As for the rest of the New Testament, it is only James who mentions a healing ministry specifically. From the foregoing one may conclude, however, that healing was an almost universal phenomenon in the earliest church. Various New Testament authors drew special attention to this aspect of the kingdom of God and some emphasized the miraculous nature of such healings more than did others. Closer inspection of the Johannine Gospel reveals that on each occasion the Johannine healing narrative serves as the basis for teaching a spiritual truth, so that the significance of the physical healing itself fades into the background.

When the gospels report actual instances of healing performed by Jesus, they rarely underline the miraculous nature of those deeds of healing. Evidently what is most important is that Jesus and his disciples healed, rather than that they did so in a miraculous fashion. Nor does Paul draw special attention to the healing as a miraculous feat, and the same can be said of James (5:13-18). It is only in the Book of Acts that the miraculous feature of the healing miracles is emphasized. Practically everywhere else the heart of the healing miracles is to be found not in the fact that they are miracles, but in the fact that they provide healing.

In any case, miracles as such do not prove much of anything in antiquity, nor do they now. Even in Jesus' day, the fact that a person healed and expelled demons could not be taken as proof that such a person was especially sent by God. In fact, the charge was levelled against Jesus, that he himself did his miraculous deeds not by the power of God, but by the power of Beelzebub. Correspondingly, Matthew 12:27 intimates that others, besides Jesus, were casting out demons. These others were most likely not even followers of Jesus.

Healing can also be seen as a sign pointing to a fuller wholeness. As we have repeatedly observed, the Gospel according to John attaches relatively little importance to the acts of physical healing as such. Alongside the account of the raising of Lazarus John records only three healing miracles, and he does not give any additional, general information regarding the healing ministry of Jesus, such as we find in the synoptic gospels. Furthermore, John does not seem to indicate that anyone other than Jesus performed healings, either before or after his resurrection. Nor does John record any commissioning of the disciples to conduct a healing ministry and to proclaim the kingdom of God, as the synoptic gospels do. But most importantly, John does not refer to Jesus' acts of healing as miracles, but as signs (John 4:54; 9:16; 11:47; 12:18). In fact, John always uses the term "sign" as a description of what one might otherwise call a miracle (John 2:11; 6:14; 2:23; 3:2; 7:31; 12:37; 20:30-31).

In the Gospel of John, at least, the healing miracles are important not so much because they bring healing, but because they are signs which point to something much greater. The important thing for John is not that a man gained his physical sight, but that his eyes were opened so that he could recognize and acknowledge Jesus. In the Gospel of John, at least, blindness and receiving sight are used in the transferred sense. They stand for unfaith and faith, respectively. When Jesus gives life to the sick man at Bethzatha (John 5:1-9) by giving him sight, this illustrates that the Son makes alive and raises those whom he wishes, just as the Father does (5:21). This points to Jesus as the one who does much more than heal sickness. The healing episode at Bethzatha reaches its climax in the dialogue in John 5:17-30. Here it becomes clear that the healing is intended to point to the greater gift of life eternal, which far transcends mere physical healing.

Healing is also on occasion regarded as a tool for advancing the propagation of the Gospel. Luke in Acts sees the value of the healing miracles not primarily in the fact that they are healing miracles, nor does Luke consider it their primary aim to break the power of sickness and death. Rather, Luke is concerned to show that the miracles can serve to catch the attention of the people so that they become eager to hear the message that is being proclaimed. In this way the acts of healing function primarily as attention-getters. They are valued not so much as gifts and blessings received from a gracious and caring God as they are prized as effective means for preparing the ground for the planting of the Good News. Thus Philip's healings made the crowd receptive for his proclamation (Acts 8:6-7). The many signs and wonders performed by the apostles, similarly, attracted new members (Acts 5:12-14).

Accordingly, Luke does emphasize the miraculous aspect of the healing miracles. He reports that the shadow of Peter has healing powers (Acts 5:15), as do the handkerchiefs of Paul (Acts 19:11-12). From this perspective it is entirely congruous, as we have seen above, that in Luke and Acts faith regularly follows, rather than precedes, experiences of healing. In passing one might note how widely Luke's interest in miracles differs from that of John as this has been outlined above.

From its beginning the church has considered healing as an integral part of its life. Barely two decades after Jesus Paul indicates that healing belonged to the function of the congregation (see especially 1 Corinthians 12:9-10, 28, 30; Galatians 3:9 and James 5:13-18). Care of the sick was considered a natural component of the work of the church. The twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians obviously has in mind deeds performed by the members of the congregation. Paul takes it for granted that the congregation had the power (and therefore the responsibility) not only to preach but also to heal. The performance of such deeds of power evidently is not just seen as a function of the apostolate, it belongs to a much wider circle of members in the congregation.

In James the elders as the leaders of the congregation are responsible for the healing ministry, while in Paul this is the task of those in the congregation who have received the appropriate charismata enabling them to do this. Nevertheless,

in each case members of the congregation perform a healing function.

Although Paul does not specifically say so, there is little doubt that the "signs and wonders" which he frequently alludes to included acts of healing. The deeds of power so prevalent in the church of Galatia are an expression of the fact that God has poured out on them the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:5). Such deeds are evidently not considered rare or extraordinary by Paul. Such things are to be expected wherever the Spirit of God is operative.

The variety of charismata provided by God is in keeping with the character of the service which the congregation is obligated to render. Again, word and deed belong together. Proclamation goes hand in hand with acts of love and mercy, including acts of healing.

Since the healings of Jesus and those of many others, such as Peter and Paul, are recorded as miracle stories, it is often thought that modern-day healing which employs the tools of science has little or nothing to do with that which Jesus and his disciples performed. It is true, of course, that sometimes sick folk appealed to Jesus for healing after, and because, medical science had failed them (e.g. Mark 5:25-26). Still, there is no necessary conflict between employing medical means on the one hand and, on the other, turning to a healer who draws on other resources. In antiquity there is no sharp distinction between these various means of delivering health care, nor, it is suggested here, need there be such even today. There is at least a hint (James 5:14; Mark 6:13) that medical means and spiritual healing can go hand in hand.

We need to affirm that there is no contradiction between prayer for healing, on the one hand, and the use of medical insight, on the other. Healing accomplished by employing medical insight and resources can nevertheless be ascribed to God and can therefore be described as miraculous. It is not the manner or means in which healing is done, that makes the difference, but the fact that it is done in the name of, and in obedience to Jesus. Essential in such healing is that it includes the proclamation of the Good News which Jesus came to bring, and that ultimately all healing is received out of the hands of a merciful and loving God.

The ministry of healing is an integral part of the task of the church. When salvation is understood too narrowly as justification and forgiveness of sins, one loses sight of the fact that God is concerned with the well-being of the total person, body and soul. Preaching and healing belong together so inextricably that one without the other does not really make a person well. This paper has done no more than lay the groundwork for a reassessment of the church's role in bringing healing to the nations (Revelation 22:2).

Finally, Jesus saw the realization of the kingdom of God primarily as something belonging to the future. Nevertheless, he announced that the kingdom of God had come near in and through him, and that his saving powers provided a foretaste of that kingdom. Final salvation and healing, of course, are a matter of hope and trust in God who will at the appropriate time accomplish what no human effort can achieve.

Meanwhile, one's theology of healing needs to include a theology of the cross. God does not heal all suffering, in fact, Jesus challenges those who would be his disciples to take upon themselves his cross and so follow him. Jesus himself set the example when he willingly drank the cup, and Paul had to learn that even in response to repeated prayer, God often does not remove the cause of suffering.

Characteristically for Paul, the power of God is experienced not as triumphalism, but in weakness. In fact, God's power is "made perfect" in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Just so, Christ is the power of God precisely as the crucified one (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). If there be any grounds for boasting, therefore, Paul will boast only in his weakness (2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:5).

Jesus the healer in the end does not take advantage of his own powers, but willingly remains helpless in his passion (Matthew 27:42; Mark 15:31; Luke 23:35). In fact, the synoptic gospels recount that he was subjected to a taunt for that very reason (Mark 15:30-31; Matthew 27:42; Luke 23:35). He saved others, himself he cannot save! "Physician, heal yourself!" (Luke 4:23).