

**‘LAY THEIR HANDS ON THE SICK, AND THEY WILL RECOVER’ (MARK 16.18):  
THE HEALING MISSION OF THE CHURCH.**

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**Jesus’ miracles<sup>1</sup>**

1. Jesus’ miracles can be taken literally or figuratively.
2. *Literally*: Jesus did perform those miracles – they are a proof of his claim to be God (and subsequently of the truth of Christianity)
  - 2.1. Even if this was the case, we should take into account the fact that faith is required.
  - 2.2. Sometimes Jesus declares that *he can not* perform miracles because there is not enough faith.
  - 2.3. Miracles are not the way in which Jesus gave the supreme demonstration of his love for us: he did not come down from the cross
  - 2.4. The Resurrection itself could be considered the final ‘miracle’ but that too is something we believe on the basis of witnesses (with many contradictions) – it is not as if each of us saw Jesus alive – it is not a miracle for us now.
3. *Figuratively*: whether or not they happened literally, in the Gospels they perform a narrative function.
  - 3.1. The Gospel presents Jesus as calling humanity to follow him, not just through the roads of Galilee, but to Jerusalem and, through his cross, to the Father
  - 3.2. This is why he asks us to follow him and teaches us about the kingdom
  - 3.3. However, the situation of humanity is not just one of *ignorance*, but of *illness*
    - i. We cannot hear the call
    - ii. We cannot see God’s action in our midst
    - iii. And even when/if we hear and see we cannot walk, follow
    - iv. We are alienated not only from God but from each other
  - 3.4. Thus the miracles of healing are figurative: they tell us something about the nature of salvation.
    - i. To be saved is not just to be *informed, instructed*
    - ii. But to be created again – cf. the miracle of the healing of the man born blind and Jesus mixing his saliva to soil to make some mud
    - iii. Healing is related to the restoration of the capacity to be in relation with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Mostly quotations from Watts F, ed. *Spiritual Healing: Scientific and Religious Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, 2011, especially: Fraser Watts, “Conceptual issues in spiritual healing”, Justin Meggitt, “The historical Jesus and healing: Jesus’ miracles in psychosocial context”.

4. The Gospel of Luke sees Jesus as the physician (4.23 and 5.31) and describes his healing activity as a “therapy” (4.23) – a word which coincidentally in our modern language designates the activity of mental health professionals, whom we call “therapists” and whose foremost medium for healing is *words*.
  - 4.1. Indeed, the image of Jesus as a healer, as a “therapist”, is always associated with him being designated as *the* prophet: we are told that the words that come out of his lips are “gracious”. “Gracious” can have a variety of meanings but, in the context in which the expression is used, it refers to the passage from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah Jesus reads in the synagogue: his words are gracious because they have the power to comfort the poor, free the prisoners, restore the sight of the blind, release us from the burdens that oppress our lives and our hearts (4.18f).
  - 4.2. In a nutshell, Jesus’ words are ‘gracious’ because they heal. Indeed, this is the context in which for the first time Jesus calls himself a “physician” in the Gospel, somehow obliquely. The people from Nazareth marvel at his words and are eager to benefit from his miracles. Jesus however perceives their disappointment when he declares: “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’” (4.23).
5. Against a purely figurative understanding of the miracles, the Gospels testifies that Jesus wanted to heal people
  - 5.1. he does not want to be seen as a miracle-maker
  - 5.2. this is why he tries to ask for secrecy, takes people out of the village to heal them
  - 5.3. also in more than one occasion, he heals people because he is moved to compassion (with the leper and the Syrophenician woman).
6. They are not just figurative – or a proof of his divinity – they are the result of God really having pity on us, wanting to bring us comfort and relief.
7. Then the historicity and authenticity of the miracle traditions is well established
  - 7.1. The historical Jesus was thought by his contemporaries, including both supporters and critics, to be an effective healer and exorcist.
  - 7.2. Non-Christian sources, both Jewish and pagan, also depict Jesus as a figure famed for his ability to heal and exorcise
8. However the historicity of the miracle traditions does not necessarily mean that Jesus carried out what would be called a miracle by a modern reader.
  - 8.1. The judgement of a twenty-first-century person on what exactly constituted a miracle would be markedly different from what would have been considered inexplicable in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.
  - 8.2. And in purely medical terms, it is very difficult even just to establish what kind of disorders were suffered by those whom Jesus healed.
    - i. The gospels are notoriously short on detailed clinical description and medical terminology. We can only guess at what is being described.
    - ii. The descriptions of the predicaments of those healed adhere to clear oral and redactional conventions in their depiction of symptoms.
    - iii. A specific symptom, such as blindness, can have a myriad of possible causes, physical, organic as well as psychological.

9. There is a sense in which we can say that
  - 9.1. Whether or not Jesus did *cure* people
  - 9.2. He always *healed* them.
10. Distinction between curing and healing.
  - i. Curing is the strategy of destroying or checking a pathogen, removing a malfunctioning or non-functioning organ, restoring a person to health or well-being,
  - ii. whereas healing is the restoration of meaning to life. It is the strategy of restoring social and personal meaning for life problems that accompany human health misfortunes.
11. This distinction is meaningful:
  - 11.1. it does not deny that Jesus might have *cured* some people, that is restored the physical health of people
  - 11.2. At a time when medicine was very primitive and mostly ineffective (cf. woman with blood haemorrhage) people ordinarily sought for cures in spiritual healers.
  - 11.3. Today we would always go to see a doctor first because medicine has become (and will become more and more) able to *cure*
  - 11.4. But there always remain a need for *healing*.
12. The mission of healing belongs to the mandate given by Jesus to his disciples and hence to the Church:
 

Matthew 10:1, 7-8 "*Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. [...] As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.*"
13. The apostolic church considered the mission of healing an important aspect of its mission:
  - 13.1. Miracles of healing are attributed to the apostles in the book of Acts (cf. for example Acts 3.1-10)
  - 13.2. The disciples routinely prayed for people's healing and anointed them:
 

Mark 6:13 'And they [the Twelve] were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them'.

James 5:14–15 "Is anyone among you sick? 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 offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him".
  - 13.3. Besides being a symbol of divine blessing and its use for consecrations, olive oil was *a key medicinal remedy* in ancient Israel and the wider Mediterranean world, used for wound healing, pain relief, and skin conditions.
  - 13.4. There is a sense in which the anointing of the sick might have been understood originally as *both medical and spiritual* – as if today might be giving an antibiotic with a prayer (that is seeking not only to *cure* but also to *heal* someone).

- 13.5. The main way in which the Jesus' healing mandate was handed over from the Apostles to the church took this form, the *anointing of the sick*, which even became one of the seven sacraments in the Catholic tradition.

## The Anointing of the Sick

14. However, especially after the IV century,
- 14.1. the understanding of the anointing of the sick gradually evolved from a ritual of healing to a sacrament for the dying (the so-called 'Extreme unction' or 'Last Rites').
  - 14.2. The anointing was performed no more for the healing of the sick but rather as a preparation for death.
15. An important factor in this change was the choices made by Jerome (+420) in his Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate:
- 15.1. In some of Jesus' healings, the Gospels use the Greek verb *σώζω* (*sōzō*) which means "to save," "to rescue," and "to heal"
  - 15.2. In these cases, instead of translating "to heal", Jerome opted for "to save":
  - 15.3. Cf. Mark 5:34, the healing of the Woman with the Issue of Blood
    - i. Greek: *ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε* (*hē pistis sou sesōken se*)
    - ii. Meaning: "Your faith has healed you."
    - iii. Vulgate: *Fides tua te salvam fecit* ("Your faith has saved you")
16. This led to a shift: what was to be expected from the sacrament was not so much the *healing* of the body but the *salvation* of the soul.
- 16.1. Those involved in the ritual of the anointing ceased to expect that healing would result, focusing instead on the need for forgiveness of sin and an individual's preparation for death and the life to come.
  - 16.2. Gradually, healing came to be seen as a 'conditional and occasional effect' of Extreme Unction, a rare by-product of the practice rather than its primary goal.
17. It's somewhat ironic then that the standard histories of theology still attribute the movement away from a strong doctrine of miraculous healing to the influence of the Enlightenment, almost a millennium later.
18. This shift was sanctioned by the XIII century theologian Thomas Aquinas:
- 'Extreme Unction is a spiritual remedy, since it avails for the remission of sins . . . now the effect of the sacraments is the healing of the disease of sin'.<sup>2</sup>
- 18.1. For Aquinas sin is the problem that both pastors and theologians should stress, rather than physical sickness.
  - 18.2. As a result, much of his discussion of healing focuses on spiritual, inward healing, the healing of sin.
  - 18.3. From this viewpoint Jesus' healings and miracles serve a primarily instructive purpose, either for
    - i. validating Jesus' claims to divinity or

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<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theologica* iii-Supp. 29.4

- ii. for helping people to have faith in him,
 

“The grace of healing is distinguished from the general working of miracles because it has a special reason for inducing one to the faith, since a man is all the more ready to believe when he has received the gift of bodily health through the virtue of faith.<sup>3</sup>
- 19. No single cause by itself suffices to explain the diminishing role of healing in the period between IV and XIII centuries:
  - 19.1. The idea that sin and physical sickness are closely related. Sin is the real problem physical healing takes a clear second place to healing from sin and separation from God.
  - 19.2. An inward-looking trend beginning around the time of Augustine. Internal, spiritual problems – sin, guilt, and the like – would be viewed as far more serious than external, physical problems – focus on *salvation*.
  - 19.3. One of the reasons why the church gradually spiritualized the ritual of ‘anointing with oil’ might have been that in many cases it didn’t work as a means for bringing about physical healing!
- 20. The medieval Church never explicitly denied the possibility of miraculous healings. Presumably this is the reason why ‘Enlightenment rationalism’ and ‘secular humanism’ are so often associated with the church’s changed stance towards miraculous healings.
- 21. The Reformation (XVI century) abolished the sacrament of Extreme Unction because it was not considered sufficiently vouched by Scripture (for the Reformers the only ‘Gospel’ sacraments were Baptism and the Eucharist). In so doing, the Reformers abandoned the last traditional ecclesiological reserve for a theology of healing.
- 22. John Calvin writes in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that
 

“The gift of healing disappeared with the other miraculous powers which the Lord was pleased to give for a time, that it might render the new preaching of the gospel for ever wonderful’.<sup>4</sup>

  - 22.1. Calvin affirmed a doctrine known as ‘dispensationalism’: different gifts are given by the Spirit during different periods of salvation history in order to serve different functions. We should not expect that all the gifts (namely the gift of healing) available to the church in New Testament times should still available today.
- 23. The rise of modern science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought growing scepticism about miraculous events, undercutting the belief that God sometimes acts directly as an agent to bring healing.
  - 23.1. Modernity’s contribution was to make previous implicit scepticism into a matter of explicit principles and arguments.
  - 23.2. the doubts were now extended even to the miraculous healings ascribed to Jesus.
- 24. According to the theologian Rudolf Bultmann (+1976) many aspects of the worldview that dominated the New Testament are simply no longer live options for contemporary men and women.

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<sup>3</sup> Summa Theologica, ii-i.111.4

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, Institutions IV.19.15

The idea of wonder as miracle has become almost impossible for us today because we understand the processes of nature as governed by law. Wonder, as miracle, is therefore a violation of the conformity to law which governs all nature, and for us today this idea is no longer tenable.<sup>5</sup>

- 24.1. Bultmann introduced a new meaning to the term 'wonder'.
  - i. A wonder is an event that is not in contradiction to the laws of nature
  - ii. but is seen, through the eyes of faith, to be an act of God.
  - iii. If we replace the out-of-date notion of miracles with the idea of wonders,
    - 'it is really possible for the Christian continually to see new wonders. This world process, which to the unbeliever must appear as a sequence of events governed by law, has for the Christian become a world in which God acts'.<sup>6</sup>
- 24.2. it doesn't really matter whether healings actually occurred or occur today, much less how they occur; what matters to us today is seeing with 'the eyes of faith', which is a task for the existing subject before God.

### **Anointing of the Sick and prayer for spiritual healing today.**

- 25. Can we still pray for healing when
  - 25.1. Theologically and spiritually the church seems to have become sceptical about whether healing still is part of its ministry?
  - 25.2. Scientifically we are sceptical about the very notion of anything that might be seen as an exception to the law and regularities of nature?
  - 25.3. No serious Christian today would recommend prayer for healing *instead* of seeing a doctor.
- 26. Some preliminary considerations
  - 26.1. The ambiguity over the meaning of the Greek word *sozo* in the Gospels miracle narrative can be intentional: Jesus did not want just to *cure* people but also to *save* them.
  - 26.2. The use of oil in the anointment of the sick can also be seen as both an attempt to cure (the oil was considered a remedy) *and* a prayer for healing
  - 26.3. Which means that resorting to medicine for curing today still calls for a more holistic, included spiritual, approach to healing.
  - 26.4. Significantly, since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has recovered the original meaning of the sacrament which is not called any more 'Extreme Unction' or 'Last Rites', but 'Anointing of the sick', and is routinely administered to people who want to pray for the restoration of health.
- 27. Hence the theology and spirituality of *healing*, that is the ministry of healing and spiritual practices that explore the meaning of health and illness and new pathways to healing.
- 28. Spiritual healing does not have anything to do with the placebo effect– although even placebo has been shown to be inexplicably effective (as seen especially from its opposite, the *nocebo* effect).

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<sup>5</sup> Bultmann, R., *Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, Johnson, R. A. (ed.), San Francisco: Collins, 1987, p. 257; cf. pp. 256–69.

<sup>6</sup> Bultmann 1987, p. 266

## **SHARP FAITH**

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- 29. Spiritual healing is based on the acknowledgment that illness and health depend on factors which are not just physiological, but inseparably psychological, emotional. Spiritual, and social.
- 30. In particular, spiritual practices for healing bring
  - 30.1. Meaning
  - 30.2. Hope
  - 30.3. Comfort
  - 30.4. Keep us in the present moment – day by day
  - 30.5. Sustain our patience
  - 30.6. Gives us strength.