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Christ our Healer

The idea of Christ as Healer is the third part of the Fourfold Gospel. Yet just as Christ's sanctifying graces are simply a specific aspect of His saving grace, just so with His healing power. That is, Christ is the Savior of the whole person, both the spiritual and physical parts. Were it not so, would there have been any reason for Christ to have *physically* resurrected from the dead? Indeed, His victory over death implicitly suggests His role as healer—ultimately in our resurrection, but which means it should not be surprising to have a taste of that truth in this life.

This paper will explore that idea. We will start by examining the relationship between divine healing and the atonement, where we argue that divine healing, as a healing of the whole person, is a sort of special revelation and thus comes particularly through the blood of Christ. We then consider Scripture's claim on how this healing is to be obtained and, in particular, how and why this is related to the local church. Finally, I close with a testimony of an incident in which this doctrine became a reality in my own life, for this aspect of the gospel, like all others, cannot be thought of as mere academic theology. It is, or at least should be, powerful and life-changing.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF DIVINE HEALING AND THE ATONEMENT

The Scriptures teach that Christ's death paid the penalty for sin, for He “bore our sins in His body on the tree” (1 Pet 2:24) and thus became “the propitiation for our sin” (1 John 2:2). Since the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23)—and not merely spiritual death, but physical death—then it follows that Jesus' atoning sacrifice satisfied the requirement that we die as well. Thus Paul can say, “as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads

to justification *and life* for all men” (Rom 5:18, ESV, emphasis added). Ultimately, that life is finally and perfectly granted to the believer in his or her own resurrection to glory. It would be absurd to claim that because we will be made perfectly righteousness in the resurrection that we should therefore not expect to be made righteous in any measure in this life. In the same way, it would be absurd to claim that because the resurrection will fully bring eternal life and final deliverance from death (and so related illness, weakness, and disease) that we should therefore not expect deliverance from death and disease in this life. This is the theological and Scriptural basis for Simpson's argument that Christ is the savior of the whole man. He writes,

Man has a two-fold nature. He is both a material and a spiritual being. And both natures have been equally affected by the fall. His body is exposed to disease; his soul is corrupted by sin. We would therefore expect that any complete scheme of redemption would include both natures, and provide for the restoration of his physical as well as the renovation of his spiritual life. (Simpson, *The Gospel of Healing*, 20-22)

Jesus is not the savior of part of a person only but rather of the whole. In fact, it is a recent horrible philosophical, not theological, error that has persuaded many Christians that human beings are essentially souls and that our bodies are somehow only accidentally related to us, as if by analogy we are to our bodies what a driver is to a car. That heresy has found its way into the popular culture and the church by way of Descartes, not Scripture (Gilson, 99-178).

Against this, the church has always held that the body and the soul are intimately linked, that a soul without a body is in an *unnatural* state (cf. 2 Cor 5:4). This was so deeply held that Thomas Aquinas, while discussing the question of whether or not believers should offer prayers to departed saints, considered the following objection to the Catholic church's position:

Further, *the soul of Peter is not Peter*. If therefore the souls of the saints pray for us, so long as they are separated from their bodies, we ought not to call upon Saint Peter, but on his soul, to pray for us: yet the Church does the contrary. The saints therefore do not pray for us, at least before the resurrection. (*Summa Theologica*, IIb.83.11, emphasis added)

Ignoring the debate over whether or not we really should ask for the intercession of departed saints or whether they can or do pray for us (as this is unrelated to our present discussion), it is fascinating that Thomas accepts the premise that souls in heaven are not full persons. In fact, in his defense of the practice, he says that Catholics pray to the persons and not merely to their souls “in order to indicate our belief in the resurrection” (ibid.). The point is that human persons, by nature, have always been held to be body-soul composites; therefore, if Christ is the savior of the soul, as He certainly is, then He *must* be the savior of the body, both in this life and the next. As this salvation was achieved through the atonement, then it is clear that the atonement provides the basis for physical healing.

One finds another important point regarding this doctrine in Isaiah 53:5, where the prophet writes, “by [Jesus'] stripes, we are healed.” This verse is often interpreted by many evangelicals to refer only to spiritual healing, that is, to justification from sin. Thomas Constable seems to feel the pressure of this interpretation in his exegesis of these verses when he writes,

Does [the atonement] include physical healing? Is there healing in the atonement? Does what the Servant did guarantee physical healing for every believer? Ultimately it does. Eventually we will experience good health since poor health is one effect of sin. But immediately it does not in every case. We have yet to enter into all the benefits of Christ's death for us, and must continue to struggle with some of the consequences of the Fall until we see the Lord. (Constable, 260)

While Constable's comments are certainly true as far as they go, one must wonder about his hesitation to offer a simple affirmation as New Testament does (cf Matt 8:16-17; 1 Pet 2:24). Yes, we “must continue to struggle with some of the consequences of the Fall until we see the Lord,” but if Christ has paid the penalty for our sin, and if His gift is eternal life; if Christ is the savior of the whole person, then should we not *expect* at least a taste of that benefit of salvation in this life? To ignore this part of salvation seems to accept the old gnostic idea that only the spirit is good, that God cares nothing for the body. Such a view is beneath Scripture, and just as

much, such a view is beneath the cross and resurrection of Christ. To answer Constable's questions, then, the answer must not merely be, "Ultimately it does," but rather "Yes, it does."

That affirmation, furthermore, strikes me as very fitting. While it is evident that healing comes in many ways—i.e., through doctors, general spiritual health, etc.—it is equally evident that, within the body of Christ, healing through the ordinary means prescribed by Scripture is an act of special revelation. When the Holy Spirit heals Jesus' body (both literally and referring to the church), He is demonstrating His power over death and thus saying something about both His power and our ultimate fate. Such healing, then, is best understood as an act of divine self-disclosure, and any and all such acts have their roots in the blood of Christ. If, then, healing in the body of Christ *is* in any sense an act of special revelation, then it must, again, be regarded as being rooted in the atonement.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAYER AND ANOINTING BY ELDERS

Given the truth of the above, the practical question arises, "How do I receive this promised healing?" God is sovereign, and so He can, and does, grant healing in various circumstances completely at His will. He may heal through a missionary or evangelist to demonstrate His power. He may heal in response to the private prayers of either the believer or even the unbeliever for His own pleasure. God, in this regard as in all others, is perfectly free and unlimited. But as indicated above, He has provided a normal means for access to this grace, and that is through the prayers and anointing of the church elders.

This provision is found in James 5:13-16, which says,

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

It is difficult to imagine how James could have been much clearer. If someone is sick, they should “call the elders of the church to pray over them with oil in the name of the Lord.”

There are three points that should be emphasized in these words. First, James is not merely offering a helpful suggestion. In the parlance of hospital chaplaincy, James is not “exploring spiritual resources for coping.” He is, rather, prescribing a treatment. If the Christian wishes to be healed, he has his divine doctor's orders. Second, James does not say to ask just anyone in the church to pray. Certainly the prayers of the church are beneficial, but they ought not be offered to the exclusion of the actual prescription James has given. Instead, there is a certain procedure to be followed. The sick are to call “the elders,” and it is *they* who are to offer prayers for healing. Moreover, the elders are to pray “with oil in the name of the Lord.” This emphasizes both by word and symbol that it is not the elder or even faith that brings healing, but Jesus Christ, the Lord of the body, who Himself has conquered death in His own body, who is doing the healing. Finally, James promises a provision. Just as a medical doctor prescribes a certain medication with the full expectation of a particular result, so James states simply and directly that “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.” Put simply, the sick person may fully expect healing.

There is, however, a caveat in all of this. James raises the possibility that sins might need to be forgiven in the midst of this discussion, likely in recognition of the fact that sometimes (not always) sin is a result of divine discipline. We cannot and should not expect God to heal if the sickness is a result of our own moral and spiritual failings—not, anyway, unless and until those failings have been dealt with. Thus James says to “confess your sins . . . so that you may be healed.” Confession of sin is necessary, not as some sacramental rite, but because if a person has unconfessed sin—especially if they are living in that sin—then they are not righteous in any practical sense. That is to say, they are not living in a right relationship with God.

THE MINISTRY OF HEALING IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

It should be evident from the above, then, that the local church has a divine call to intentionally practice the ministry of healing. The church that does not practice healing the way James describes it is like Esau when he sold his birthright for a pot of porridge. Many churches, I am afraid, have given up a ministry of power and victory over sin and exchanged it with a ministry of education, as if the reason people sin is that they simply do not know enough (a very (post)modern notion). Biblical sermons based on the Word of God are important, as is heartfelt, genuine, biblical worship. We cannot, however, permit our churches to devolve into mere seminaries, with the pastors and elders devolving into mere professors.

Rather, the church should embrace the fact that she is the body of Christ here on earth. And as Jesus' body in heaven is perfect and free from sin and disease, then it is fitting He as her head would want the same for His body on earth. Indeed, Scripture plainly says that Jesus wishes for His bride to be presented to Him pure, radiant, and blameless (cf. Col 1:22; Eph 5:27). But if she is to become pure, the church must draw on Christ's purifying power. We are not cleaned and healed by our will or even commitment to serve Him but by abiding in Him, by His work and His power—a truth that brings us right back to the atonement. We are washed in His blood, and so long as we live at the foot of the cross, He will make us into what He wants us to be.

One final qualification needs to be noted, however. As Constable noted above, as much as we have been saved and are being saved, a portion of our salvation is still future. We still struggle with sin and death in this life (cf. Rom 7:14ff). It may well be that God permits those in His body to become sick. If He does so, this is not because He wants our death or is unfaithful to His promise, but rather because God knows that it is in our weakness that His strength is made perfect (2 Cor. 12:9). It is when we are sick and overwhelmed that we find ourselves turning to Him, finally in desperation, and in that moment (whether God chooses to heal or not) we learn

that not only is He our healer, but He is absolutely sufficient for all that we need. Healing, then, is God's prerogative. He uses it to bring Himself glory and to draw His church closer to Himself. Precisely the same is true also when healing does not come. In those moments, we say with Paul, “Your grace is sufficient,” and our faith in Him grows deeper.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF CHRIST AS HEALER

In *The Fourfold Gospel*, in discussing what divine healing is, Simpson says,

[Divine healing] is founded, not on the reasoning of man, or the testimony of those who have been healed, but on the Word of God alone. All the testimony that could be gathered from the whole universe would not establish the truth of such a doctrine, if it is not to be found in the Scriptures. All the deductions of the human intellect are worthless if they are not rooted there. This truth rests on God's eternal Word, or it is merely human. (Simpson, *The Fourfold Gospel*, 438-41)

He is surely correct, and while it is essential that any doctrine be founded on Scripture before human testimony, given the very fleshly or bodily nature of this doctrine, the warning is all the truer here. But if the above suffices for such an argument, it remains that the nature of this doctrine demands that it ought still to be a normative part of the Christian's life, and perhaps of the minister in particular. For truth is not merely for acknowledging but for experiencing.

As a large part of my job includes praying for people's healing on a daily basis, I am blessed to have seen Christ show Himself to be healer on many occasions. But it is what I have seen Christ do in my own life that had impressed itself most deeply on my heart, and one healing in particular stands out. I had struggled from sleep paralysis for several years. This is a condition where the mind wakes up from sleep but the body does not. In such state, I could open my eyes and look around, but I had no control over my body—not even my own breathing. When we enter the phase of sleep during which we dream (REM sleep), our brains release two chemicals—gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) and glycine—that paralyze our muscles during that phase (this process protects us from acting out our dreams and so from harming ourselves or others).

The problem for those who suffer sleep paralysis is that they become more or less conscious during this phase of sleep, and I can say from experience that it is a terrifying event. This would happen to me sometimes multiple times in one night and usually at least once a week. I remember one night in particular in which I had an episode. I was so nervous about having another that when I did fall asleep, I had a nightmare about being paralyzed, only to wake up in a panic to an actual episode!

One night, my wife asked me, “Chris—you're a chaplain. You pray for people all the time. Have you ever thought to pray about this?” I was shocked and embarrassed to realize and admit that I had not. I had researched the condition and sought medical remedies, but I had never taken my concerns to True Healer. There in our bed, my wife prayed for me. The following Sunday, we went to the elders of our church, and in accordance with James 5, we asked them to anoint me with oil and pray for my healing.

That was over a year ago, and from that day, I have not had a single instance of sleep paralysis. I have absolutely no doubt that Christ healed me completely and instantly. But I also believe and wonder that had I asked Him to heal me before, I would have saved myself many, many nights of fear and frustration. In this, Jesus taught me in a dramatic way that theoretical knowledge of the truth, even Divine Truth, is insufficient. It is not power. We are not gnostics, saved by special knowledge. We are Christians, saved by living, saving, sanctifying, healing, and sovereign Christ. I cannot say it better, then, than Joseph Scriven did when he penned the following words:

*O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry,
Everything to God in prayer!*

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