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# HEALTH, SICKNESS AND HEALING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

## A Brief Theology

Judith L. Hill

### I. Introduction

Here in Africa the question of healing has always been one of great importance. So many people suffer from a variety of diseases and illnesses, some of which are eminently treatable (or even preventable) if only there were medicines and health professionals available.<sup>1</sup> Other health problems are not so easily addressed, such as the AIDS pandemic and its consequences.

In the search for better health for Africans, a variety of solutions have been attempted. The traditional healers as well as the sorcerers are ever-present and frequently consulted. Sometimes, well-wishers from other parts of the world offer African states the wonders of Western medicine. Unfortunately, the donors have occasionally forgotten that the vital economic and scientific-industrial infrastructures necessary for sustaining the technology are often lacking on the African continent.

Others work tirelessly and sacrificially at promoting primary health care, attempting to educate the populace so that they can spare themselves from the most easily avoided diseases and infections.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lydia Polgreen, "An African Doctor Returns to Heal His Ravaged Homeland," in *New York Times* (December 16, 2006). The article highlights the difficulties, even in the most basic aspects, in attempting to provide the health care necessary for the survival of the Central African population, where the mortality rate has fallen by ten years over the last decade, now only at 42 years.

Still others take a different approach. They feel overwhelmed by the immensity of problem of health care in Africa and, as a result, tend to downplay this present life and simply emphasize eschatological joys and glorious, heavenly bodies.

In contrast, the supporters of the Health and Wealth Gospel fervently proclaim healing in the atonement and a theology that announces prosperity and good health in this life for all those who believe in Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Their healing services and evangelistic campaigns in African cities are almost always filled to overflowing by those seeking the physical health that they have not found elsewhere.

But what does the Bible have to say about health, sickness and healing? Can believers expect health and (if necessary) receive healing? Is it God's plan to eliminate disease and sickness? To find answers to these and similar questions, we will look particularly to New Testament theology. On the basis of the biblical evidence, we will formulate a NT theology of health, sickness, and healing.<sup>3</sup>

Biblical theology is by nature descriptive rather than prescriptive. It takes what is present in a given author, describes the theological impact of the data and then organizes the results into some sort of coherent whole. It is not terribly surprised or embarrassed by the fact that different NT authors have distinct perspectives. NT theologians see each writer as an individual contributor to the whole.

Since the Bible is not a textbook of theology, the relevant data for a theology of health, sickness and healing are widely scattered. For the OT, we will present only the most basic understanding of its contribution to the topic. For the NT, however, we will attempt a brief description of the relevant theology of each writer. This method has the advantage of not silencing the individual authors but allowing us to see the contribution each person makes to the whole, as the work of each one reinforces and supplements the thoughts of the others. In proceeding by genres, we have the opportunity to look (somewhat) diachronically at the NT,<sup>4</sup> allowing us to move forward in time from the deeds and teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, on

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<sup>2</sup> For bibliographic indications and a critique of the healing component of the Prosperity Gospel, see Douglas Moo, "Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel," in *Trinity Journal* 9:2 (Fall 1988), pp. 191-209. See also D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), pp. 148-169.

<sup>3</sup> Our NT Theology will be developed on the basis of the second half of the Christian canon. Nevertheless, its roots are to be found in the OT, where the NT writers themselves founded their theology. For this reason, we need to start in the OT, even if we cannot do more than mention a few points there before proceeding to the NT.

<sup>4</sup> The Gospel of John, with its probable date in the 90's, throws off this calculation somewhat.

through the founding and strengthening of the church (Acts and the Epistles) and, finally, on to the earnest expectation of the return of the Lord as described in the book of Revelation, written near the end of the first century AD.

### **Excursus on the Old Testament Evidence: A Brief Survey of Its Theology of Healing**

Since this study centers on the NT, we must limit this preliminary section to a few obvious implications drawn from the OT with regard to the issue of health, sickness and healing. These few statements are, however, foundational to understanding the NT. The writers of the NT were committed to what we know as the OT as their Sacred Scriptures (2 Tim. 3.14); and, with the probable exception of Luke, they each grew up in a synagogue setting where the Bible (the law, the prophets and the writings) would have been read faithfully. Thus their own theology had already been shaped by what Scripture recorded of God's character and his dealings in history. Their theology was then further molded by their contact with Jesus and by their personal reflections on the implications of the New Covenant.

The first and most important point to underline in an OT theology of health, sickness and healing is that God himself created the first human beings, Adam and Eve (Gen. 1-2). Therefore, as designer of the human body, God thoroughly understands its workings, as David pointed out:

*For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.  
My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place.  
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,  
your eyes saw my unformed body.<sup>5</sup> (Ps. 139.13-16)*

A second fundamental concept from the OT is that sickness and death are among the ongoing results of the Fall, when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). Sickness and death were not part of the "very good" creation God fashioned (Gen. 1.31). But these negative effects were indeed what he said would happen as a consequence of human disobedience. Pains from labor—whether from

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<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the biblical citations in English are from the New International Version. Those in Greek are from the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the UBS *Greek New Testament*. The Hebrew comes from the BHS.

working in the fields or from bearing children—became a reality when the first couple did what God had forbidden. In a NT comment on the Fall and its aftermath, Paul explained that “*just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, ... in this way death came to all men, because all sinned ... [D]eath reigned from the time of Adam...*” (Rom. 5.14).

In the third place, and related to the issue of the Fall, the Old Testament writers were aware that sickness (even to the point of death) could be a disciplinary measure on the part of God toward an erring member of his family. In the Song of Moses, God proclaims himself to be the only all-powerful God: “*I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal*” (Deut. 32.39). The “wounding” may be part of God’s discipline,<sup>6</sup> but the healing also comes from the same almighty God, as further evidence of the caring relationship he maintains with his creation.

Very often, the prospect of God’s discipline is expressed in conditional statements. From the beginning of Israel’s journey with Yahweh toward the Promised Land, God emphasized through Moses that he was interested in their obedience to him and would be able to protect them if they would but trust him and follow his instructions: “*If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you*” (Ex. 15.26). This same idea of sickness as discipline is reiterated in the conditional commands given to Moses at Sinai (Ex. 23.25f.).

Fourthly, and as already intimated in the previous point, the OT highlights God’s sovereignty and his ability to heal. No sickness, not even death, is beyond his capability to overcome. God called himself “*the LORD who heals you*” (Ex. 15.26). Moses took Yahweh at his word and called upon him to heal his sister Miriam of her leprosy, which God did (Num. 12.13f.). David the psalmist described God as the one who “*heals all your diseases*” (Ps. 103.3). The prophet Elisha prayed to the Lord, and the Shunamite’s son was raised from the dead (2 Kings 4.32-35). According to the OT evidence, then, God can and does heal; but it should be noted that death still “reigned” (in the apostle Paul’s terms), for God did not always choose to heal.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hebrews 12.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Mayhue, *Divine Healing Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), p. 144, notes some of the OT saints whose illnesses were not cured by God: Isaac (Gen. 27.1); Jacob (Gen 32.25; 48.1); Ahijah (1 Kings 14.4); and Elisha (2 Kings 13.14). To that list, we can add some NT

One of the psalmists<sup>8</sup> enlarged the idea of healing to include dimensions other than the physical, when he spoke of the Lord as the one who “*heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds*” (Ps. 147.3).<sup>9</sup> King Solomon, in his prayer of dedication for the Temple, said that if God’s people would turn to him in humility and repentance, then God would “*hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land*” (2 Chron. 7.14), perhaps opening the possibility that “healing” here includes the ideas of ecological healing<sup>10</sup> and political stability. Once again the accent is on a right relationship to God as being a precondition for candidacy for the healing activity of the sovereign Ruler of the universe. God may not always grant healing, but being in right relationship with him is the first step God asks of his people.

In the prophets, healing was frequently linked with the social, political and spiritual aspects of life. Hosea 14.4 promised spiritual blessings to the repentant: “*I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.*” In the same book, God described his relationship with his people as that of healing them (Hos. 11.3), which, in the context, is perhaps a reference to delivering them socially and politically from slavery in Egypt. In Jeremiah, we find the language of curing and restoring being used for the spiritual relationship that Israel (Jer. 3.22) and Jeremiah himself (Jer. 15.19) had with God. “Healing” is needed in order to choose the right values in life, as Jeremiah seems to say in the context of chapter 17:

*Cursed is the one who trusts in man,  
who depends on flesh for his strength  
and whose heart turns away from the Lord....  
But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,  
whose confidence is in him....  
Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay  
is the man who gains riches by unjust means.  
When his life is half gone, they will desert him,*

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personalities as well: Paul (2 Cor. 12.7-10); Trophimus (2 Tim. 3.20); and Timothy (1 Tim. 5.23).

<sup>8</sup> No ascriptions are given for Psalms 146-150. Throughout this article, the numbering of the psalms and their versification follows the English text.

<sup>9</sup> Although this article is dealing primarily with physical aspects of health, the fact that God is Creator, not only of the entire animate and inanimate universe, but most specifically of humankind, guarantees his interest in all aspects of human welfare and of the future of the planet as well. Cf. Rom. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the plague of locusts mentioned in the preceding verse, 2 Chron. 7.13.

*and in the end he will prove to be a fool....  
 O LORD, the hope of Israel,  
 all who forsake you will be put to shame.  
 Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust  
 because they have forsaken the LORD,  
 the spring of living water.  
 Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed;  
 save me and I will be saved,  
 for you are the one I praise. (Jer. 17.5, 7, 11, 13f.)*

The OT writers thus underlined the fact that God can indeed heal his people in every aspect of their life.

A final point in this rapid survey of the OT deals with the Jewish anticipation of well-being the Age to Come. At that time, Messiah would come as a healer, and sickness would be a thing of the past for God's people. This aspect is most clearly and frequently observed in Isaiah's lengthy prophecy. In the context of the messianic age and restoration, God spoke of binding up the bruises of his people and healing the wounds that he himself had inflicted (Isa. 30.26). In that time of eschatological redemption, physical healing would characterize Messiah's activities:

*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
 and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
 Then will the lame leap like a deer  
 and the mute tongue shout for joy. (Isa. 35.5f.)<sup>11</sup>*

The Suffering Servant of Yahweh prepared the way, bearing the punishment that was due to others:

*Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,  
 yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.  
 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our  
 iniquities;  
 the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds  
 we are healed. (Isa. 53.4f.)*

At that final glorious time, the year of the Lord's favor, there would be joy instead of the sadness that surrounds those who suffer. God himself would act through his Servant:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,*

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<sup>11</sup> Note that Jesus, when talking to the messengers of John the Baptist, refers to this verse as one of the indicators that he was indeed the Messiah. Cf. Mt. 11.4f. in the discussion of the Synoptic Gospels.

*because the Lord has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor... (Isa. 61.1f.)*

This favor would include the physical well-being of God's people, according to Isaiah's description of life in the new Jerusalem in the Age to Come:

*Never again in it  
an infant who lives but a few days,  
or an old man who does not live out his years;  
he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth;  
he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. (Isa. 65.20)*

In the Age to Come, the ransomed of the Lord expect to enjoy all that he has prepared for them. Indeed, even the curse of Eden will be reversed: "*Before she goes into labor, she gives birth; before the pains come upon her, she delivers a son*" (Isa. 66.7). Health and healing were anticipated as part of the eschatological blessings God's people would one day receive.

Here, then, is a brief overview of the OT material which the NT writers had in their theological background as they considered what to say about God's work in the New Covenant. Obviously, they would be inspired by God to write what he intended to communicate, but the following points are the basic elements that were already in the thinking of everyone associated with Judaism and its Scriptures.<sup>12</sup>

- God is the Creator of the human body.
- Sickness and death are results of the Fall.
- Sickness can be a disciplinary measure imposed by God.
- The sovereign Lord is able to heal in all aspects of life.
- The Age to Come, ushered in by Messiah, would be a time of healing and of reversing the curse of Eden.

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<sup>12</sup> A survey of intertestamental literature, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, goes beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, there are indications in the NT that the attitudes of some first-century Jews were not as clearly balanced as what the Old Testament intimates. For example, in the story of the healing of the man born blind, Jesus needs to correct a (seemingly common) misperception that physical misfortune was necessarily a result of personal sin (Jn. 9.1-3). In Mark, Jesus has to emphasize that spiritual healing is even more significant than physical healing (Mk. 2.1-12).

## II. Moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament

We proceed now to the NT, though it is important to keep in mind that NT theology cannot in any way be detached from the OT. The ideas enumerated above with respect to the OT theology of healing provide the conceptual framework for the NT writers, who not only reaffirm those fundamental OT values but also quote the OT directly.<sup>13</sup>

In looking at the question of health, sickness and healing in the NT,<sup>14</sup> a further note of explanation needs to be given as to the limits of this particular study. Although the major tenet of God as the Creator of the human body was already announced from the very beginning of the Bible (Gen. 1-2), the significance of the material body later became an issue in the culture surrounding the church, especially in circles interested in Greek philosophy and Gnostic ideas, in the

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<sup>13</sup> Quotations relevant to the topic of healing from Isaiah are found in Matthew, Luke, and 1 Peter. See the discussions that follow.

<sup>14</sup> Before beginning a systematic look at the NT, it may also be helpful to point out one of the ambiguities interpreters face in considering the NT evidence. Whereas certain verbs (and their cognates) are generally rather clear in their intent (for example, *ijavomai* and *qerapeuvw*), the verb *swv/zw* and its cognates (*swthriwa* and *swthvr* primarily) are quite a bit wider in their meanings. Only the context can help the translator and exegete to see whether "heal" or "save" (or some other variation) is the actual intent of the biblical author in a given verse. Thus, BAGD has two main definitions for this verb *swv/zw*: "1. preserve or rescue from natural dangers and afflictions" and "2. save or preserve from eternal death, from judgment, and from all that might lead to such death, e.g. sin, also in a positive sense bring Messianic salvation, bring to salvation." Thus, the lexicon recognizes two main categories, one basically physical, one spiritual. But beyond these definitions, BAGD adds a third definition that highlights how difficult it can sometimes be for NT scholars to arrive at the proper understanding of this verb: "3. Certain passages belong under *u*definitions 1 and 2 at the same time." A certain ambiguity thus exists with respect to the verb and its cognates, and it is not always clear (perhaps particularly in the Gospels) whether the writer uses the verb for physical healing or spiritual healing. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. and aug. by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago/London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979). With respect to the Lukan corpus, see the study of *sw/vzw* in Ben Witherington III "Salvation and Health in Christian Antiquity: The Soteriology of Luke-Acts in Its First Century Setting," in I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 145-166.

centuries on either side of the composition of the NT.<sup>15</sup> This article, however, will not examine the question of the significance of the material body.<sup>16</sup>

Some other aspects that have relevance for the topic of health, sickness and healing are similarly beyond the scope of this article. These include circumcision, which was looked at very differently by the Jews (for whom it was a covenant sign; Gen. 17.9-14) and by the Greeks (for whom it represented physical mutilation<sup>17</sup>). Similarly, the concept of physical and mental suffering caused by persecution (even to the matter of Jesus' crucifixion) will fall outside the limits of the present study. The same is true for the incarnation. Finally, we will not undertake a study of the greatest physical miracle of the NT, the resurrection of Jesus to unending life.<sup>18</sup> Other examples of the dead being raised will, however, fall within the overall scope of this article, as will exorcism as an example of healing.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> To illustrate the difference in interests as represented in the NT writings, one needs only look up the term "Body" in the three volumes of the InterVarsity dictionary on the NT. In Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), the heading "Body" does not appear at all. In Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), we find ten columns of text devoted to "Body" and a further eleven columns treating "Body of Christ." In the third volume, Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (eds.), *Dictionary of the Later NT and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), the section on "Body" is merely cross-referenced to "Psychology."

<sup>16</sup> Note the excursus on the body in Paul's writings, at the end of this article.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Paul's stinging comment in Gal. 5.11f. In the era of hellenization under Antiochus Epiphanes, some Jews, because they wished to identify more closely with the Greek culture, had their circumcision surgically reversed (1 Macc. 1.15).

<sup>18</sup> In the NT, the chief actor in the resurrection of Jesus is sometimes noted as being Jesus himself (αἰνανεσθηῖν αὐτὸν; Mk. 8.31); sometimes the resurrection is described as being the act of God the Father (ἐγερθη; Mk. 16.6).

<sup>19</sup> This article is based on the conviction that the NT records can be believed and that actual miracles of healing took place. See also the remarks of Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pp. 428-443, concerning the reliability of the accounts of the miracles in the book of Acts. For a different viewpoint from a NT scholar, see the three introductory chapters on miracles in John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. II: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; NY: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 509-645. These three chapters are followed by three others that have relevance to our study, as Meier looks at the exorcisms, healings and raising of the dead performed by Jesus, pp. 646-873.

### III. The New Testament Evidence: The Synoptics

When we come to the Gospels, we are primarily looking at the ministry of Jesus as healer, for Jesus himself is the focus of the Gospels and the gospel. All four Evangelists give examples of Jesus as a healer (and, in the Synoptics, an exorcist). The Synoptics also note that the disciples were to practice the same ministry.<sup>20</sup> Although these similarities exist among the Gospels, it is also useful to note the distinctions in the separate Gospel accounts before attempting a synthesis.

#### A. *The Gospel of Mark*<sup>21</sup>

In the first ten chapters of his Gospel, Mark averages more than one healing pericope per chapter, indicating how important this aspect of Jesus' ministry was to him. Of the four canonical accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus, only Mark puts the healing ministry of Jesus so near the opening of his Gospel narrative (Mk. 1.21-34, 39, 40-45). In so doing, he emphasizes from the very beginning Jesus' power over demons (Mk. 1.25, 34) as well as his healing of physical maladies (Mk. 1.30f., 33). According to Mark's Gospel, the exorcisms and healings demonstrate the authority of Jesus: he is more powerful than evil spirits (Mk. 1.27), and his healing of the paralytic (Mk. 2.7-12) displayed his (further and surpassing) power to forgive sins. Mark, however, does not himself comment on the healings nor record many comments by Jesus.<sup>22</sup> For the most part, the healing miracles are simply presented as narrative fact, with the reader left to draw his or her own conclusions. Mark does, however, record some of the reactions to the miracles, as the following examples demonstrate:

*The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." (Mk. 1.27)*

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<sup>20</sup> Mk. 3.13-15; Mt. 10.1; Lk.10.9, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Mark's Gospel appears to be the source of many of the pericopes in Matthew and Luke. We therefore begin with it as the foundation. In addition, it should be noted that because Mk. 16.9-20 is unlikely to be original (and thus is not to be considered inspired Scripture), two verses that might otherwise be part of the discussion (Mk. 16.17f.) will not be included in this article. For the question concerning textual criticism, see, for example, Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsch Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), pp. 102-107.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus seems to shun the publicity that the healings and exorcisms would ordinarily bring, often enjoining silence or at least restraint (Mk. 1.25, 34, 44; 5.43; 7.36; 8.26). This observation led W. Wrede to posit what came to be called The Messianic Secret. See G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the NT*, rev. by Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 178-180, for a debunking of Wrede's position.

*Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk. 2.6f.)*

*This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mk. 2.12)*

*Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (Mk. 3.6)*

*And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." (Mk. 3.22)*

Mark, to a greater extent than the other Gospels, gives details as to how some of the miracles were performed. The most striking pericopes in this respect are those concerning the healing of the deaf-mute and of the blind man at Bethsaida.

*... Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!"). (Mk. 7.33f.)*

*[Jesus] took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. (Mk. 8.23-25)*

Thus Mark appears to put some emphasis on technique, and yet the technique varies from one miracle to another. Sometimes such indications are missing altogether, as, for example, when Jesus simply announced the healing (through exorcism) of the Syrophenician's daughter (Mk. 7.29) and proclaimed the restoration of sight for blind Bartimaeus (Mk. 10.52).

Although the accent in Mark's Gospel is on Jesus, the Evangelist also records the fact that the immediate disciples of Jesus (Mk. 6.13) and some unnamed others (Mk. 10.38-41) similarly performed miracles in Jesus' name.

The evidence pertinent to the topic of healing in Mark's Gospel can now be summarized in the following points:

- Jesus was a powerful healer and exorcist.

- Jesus used various methods in healing.
- The disciples of Jesus also healed people and cast out demons.
- The miracles of healing were variously received, sometimes stirring up controversy.<sup>23</sup>

### **B. The Gospel of Matthew**

Matthew's Gospel, which has grouped many of the healings performed by Jesus into chapters 8 and 9, differs from the Gospel of Mark in that Matthew has provided some commentary<sup>24</sup> on the healing ministry of Jesus. For example, Matthew includes the following brief statement of Jesus' action in healing and then adds his own commentary:

*When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took our infirmities and carried our diseases." (Mt. 8.16f.)*

In verse 17, Matthew clearly links Jesus' ministry of exorcism and healing with Isa. 53.4: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...." According to Matthew, then, the link with the OT is clear: Jesus is the healer who was promised by the prophet; he is the (coming) Messiah, the Servant of Yahweh. In addition, Matthew has fashioned the Isaianic text to suit his own purposes. Whereas the MT of Isa. 53.4 used "our infirmities" (WnyEl;j;) and "our sorrows" (Wnybca`aokjm`y), and the LXX had "our sins" (ta;~ aJmartiva~ hJmw`n) and "feels pain" (ojduna`tai), Matthew (Mt. 8.17) has opted to present lexical choices more clearly oriented toward the concept of physical suffering: "infirmities" (ta;~ ajsqeneiva~, weaknesses) and "diseases" (ta;~ novsou~, sicknesses). Furthermore, the context immediately preceding this quotation relates the stories of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mt. 8.14f.) and the healing of "all the sick" (pavnta~ tou;~

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Hiebert, "Spiritual Warfare and Worldview," in William D. Taylor (ed.), *Global Missiology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Iguassu Dialogue* (Globalization of Mission: Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), pp. 174f., makes the valid point (which he substantiates through a survey of John and Acts) that so-called "power encounters" may lead to belief on the part of some, but "they also excite the enemy to greater opposition, leading to persecution and death" (p. 174). Cf. also Daniel Marguérat, "Magie, Guérison et Parole dans les Actes des Apôtres," in *Études Théologiques et Religieuses* 72/2 (1997), pp. 200, 203.

<sup>24</sup> This is consonant with Matthew's pattern with respect to all that takes place in Jesus' life and ministry.

kakw'~ e[conta~; Mt. 8.16). These pericopes underscore again the fact that Jesus' ministry of healing was in the realm of the physical.<sup>25</sup>

The readers of this Gospel would not have been surprised to see Matthew connecting Jesus to the OT in this way, for Jesus' fulfillment of the OT prophecies is Matthew's constant theme.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, these readers had already read the pericope that Matthew placed at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, a pericope which included another quotation from the messianic prophecies of Isaiah, introduced by the usual fulfillment formula: "...to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah..." (Mt. 4.14). The quotation chosen by Matthew indicated that Messiah would be able to bring positive changes in the conditions of life for the people: "... the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Mt. 4.16). In Isaiah (Isa. 9.1f.), this prophecy predicts the coming messianic Age.

In Matthew (Mt. 4.15f.), the verses are quoted as an indication of the overall nature of the public ministry that Jesus was about to begin. The connection with the healing theme here is dependent on the understanding of the contrast—the "before" and "after"—for the people so described. The negative aspect of darkness and death has been overcome by the light that has dawned. The Matthean context (Mt. 4.17-25) of this Isaiah quotation points toward the idea that the "before" and "after" transformation foreseen by Matthew is probably both spiritual (with Jesus' teaching and preaching ministry) and physical (with healings and exorcisms<sup>27</sup>).

In this teaching and healing ministry of Jesus (Mt. 4.17, 23-25), Matthew records that Jesus received a very favorable response:

*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, the epileptics and the paralytics, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. (Mt. 4.23-25)*

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<sup>25</sup> The spiritual dimension is not left out of the picture, though, for Matthew also says that Jesus performed exorcisms, driving out evil spirits with a word (Mt. 8.16).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the numerous examples of OT fulfillment noted in the first two chapters of the Gospel: Mt. 1.22f.; 2.5f., 15, 17, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Exorcisms actually seem to straddle both categories: spiritual and physical.

When, however, the reader arrives at the bulk of the Matthean healing pericopes, which are grouped in chapters 8 and 9, the Evangelist notes a broader variety of responses to Jesus' actions.<sup>28</sup>

*Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region. (Mt. 8.34)*

*At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" (Mt. 9.3)*

*When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men. (Mt. 9.8)*

*The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." (Mt. 9.33)*

*But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons." (Mt. 9.34)<sup>29</sup>*

John the Baptist was, however, somewhat uncertain as to how to react to Jesus, and so he sent messengers to Jesus to ask him whether he was the Christ. Jesus replied that his ministry accurately reflected the messianic prediction of Isa. 35.5f. (and other similar verses): "Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor'" (Mt. 11.4f.).

Another distinction between Mark's account of healings and what is recorded in Matthew's Gospel is that Jesus' use of "techniques" in Mark receives no emphasis in Matthew. This can be seen, for example, by comparing the stories of Jesus' analysis of the healing of the demon-possessed boy, immediately after the Transfiguration. Mark mentions the technique of prayer; Matthew underlines the inner quality of faith:

Mark 9.29—"He replied, 'This kind can come out only by prayer.'"<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In some instances, Matthew does not specifically relate the reaction.

<sup>29</sup> This same conjunction of reactions by the people and the Pharisees (Mt. 9.33, 34) occurs once again in Mt. 12.23, 24: the people are amazed and wonder if Jesus is David's Son, but the Pharisees again say that Jesus exorcised demons by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons.

Matthew 17.20—“He replied, ‘Because you have so little faith...’”<sup>31</sup>

In fact, the two most graphic healing accounts in Mark (in terms of their reference to technique) are completely omitted by Matthew.<sup>32</sup> Yet, in other places, Matthew adds details that Mark lacks, as to how the healing was performed: “... *he drove out the spirits with a word...*” (Mt. 8.17). And sometimes Matthew copies Mark’s indications, as, for example, Mk. 1.43 is paralleled by Mt. 8.3: “... *Jesus reached out and touched the man.*”

We can therefore summarize the findings from Matthew’s Gospel as follows:

- Jesus was a healer and exorcist.
- His miracles elicited a variety of reactions.
- Little emphasis is placed on the technique of performing the miracle.
- Explicit links with the OT demonstrate that Jesus was the promised healing Servant of Yahweh.

### C. The Gospel of Luke

As for Luke, whom Paul identifies as a doctor (Col. 4.14), he begins his account of Jesus’ public ministry in a manner similar to Matthew’s introduction of the public ministry of Jesus. Both writers start off with a programmatic statement to define Jesus’ ministry. For Luke, this proleptic overview of Jesus’ ministry is indicated in what Jesus read in Isa. 61.1f., for the congregation at the synagogue of Nazareth.

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners*

<sup>30</sup> A large number of manuscripts add, “and fasting” to this statement. The strongest among them are <sup>45vid</sup>, a<sup>b</sup>, and A. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that this longer reading is original. Cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> Keith Warrington, *Jesus the Healer: Paradigm or Unique Phenomenon?* (Carlisle/Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2000), p. 94, n. 72, cites with favor the comment of G. F. Hawthorne, “Faith: The Essential Ingredient of Effective Christian Ministry,” in M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige (eds.), *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), to the effect that Matthew’s formulation here can be considered a clarification of Mark’s, since prayer expresses faith.

<sup>32</sup> These are the Marcan healings cited earlier: the deaf-mute (Mk. 7.33f.) and the blind man at Bethsaida (Mk. 8.23-25). See the analysis of this phenomenon by Heinz Joachim Held, “Matthew as Interpreter of the Miracle Stories,” in Gunther Bornkamm et al., *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 246ff.

*and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* (Lk. 4.18f.)<sup>33</sup>

Jesus then states for the Jews of Nazareth that he himself is the fulfillment of this OT prophecy: "*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*" (Lk. 4.21). Both spiritual and physical healing is evident in the remainder of chapter four of Luke's Gospel. Interestingly, Luke's narrative delays until chapter 18 (vv. 35-43) a pericope of Jesus healing a blind person. It is actually the final healing miracle of the Gospel, as if to underscore the fact that Jesus had indeed fulfilled Scripture and the program God had set for him.<sup>34</sup>

Luke used some of Mark's material<sup>35</sup> in illustrating the healing ministry of Jesus, but he also included other pericopes that are unique to his Gospel, such as:

- ❖ The widow of Nain's son was raised from death. (Lk. 7.11-17)
- ❖ A crippled woman was straightened. (Lk. 13.10-17)
- ❖ A man with dropsy was healed. (Lk. 14.1-6)
- ❖ Ten lepers were cleansed. (Lk. 17.11-19)

In addition, Jesus mentioned a healing that had taken place in the (OT) Scriptures, the healing of Naaman the Syrian (Lk. 4.27; cf. 2 Kings 5.1-14). Like the writers of the Gospels, Jesus accepted the fact that God had in the past used healing, even of non-Jews, as part of his overall dealings with humankind. Here we note once again that the OT perspective on God's sovereignty is ingrained in all actors and writers of the NT.

Luke also stresses that the ministry of healing (of which exorcism is a part), whether accomplished by Jesus himself (Luke 11.14-22) or by his disciples (Luke 10.17-19), is an attack on Satan's kingdom.<sup>36</sup> Jesus thereby announced the arrival of the more powerful Kingdom of God.

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, in order for the physical healing aspect of Isaiah's prophecy ("*recovery of sight for the blind*") to have been included in Jesus' reading at Nazareth, Jesus would have had to read from the LXX, since the (extant) Hebrew text does not include this phrase.

<sup>34</sup> See, however, the more generalized description of Jesus' ministry in Lk 7.21: "*At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.*"

<sup>35</sup> For example, Mk 1.21-34 // Lk. 4.31-41.

<sup>36</sup> Others are also involved in the miracles of healing (Lk. 9.49f.), but Luke does not specifically use that pericope to underscore the defeat of Satan.

*Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub.... But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils." (Lk. 11.17f., 20-22)*

*The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." (Lk. 10.17f.)*

A resumé of the evidence in the third Gospel can now be presented to enable us to grasp the Lucan theology of health, sickness and healing:

- Jesus' ministry is defined from the start as having a healing dimension.
- No situation is too difficult for Jesus to overcome.
- The benefits of Jesus' healing ministry are not limited to the Jewish people.
- Healing demonstrates Jesus' power over Satan's forces.

#### ***D. Summary for the Synoptic Gospels***

Before proceeding to the Gospel of John, it may be helpful to combine our findings and observations concerning the healing ministry of Jesus in the Synoptics.

- Jesus was a healer and exorcist.<sup>37</sup>
- Healings and exorcisms were considered an indication of spiritual power (over Satan or the effects of sin).
- Jesus' disciples also performed exorcisms and healings.
- Healing a sick person was clearly distinguished from performing an exorcism.<sup>38</sup>
- Jesus did not follow any one pattern for his healing ministry.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> On exorcism, see the conclusions of Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), pp. 225-228. For the conclusions of Warrington concerning Jesus as a healer, see his study, *Jesus the Healer*, pp. 160-163.

<sup>38</sup> See in this regard the comments of David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1997), p. 306, with reference to Mk. 6.13 and the disciples' ministry.

- The result of an attempted healing was always a success,<sup>40</sup> regardless of the means used.
- His healing ministry evoked in the crowds a sense of admiration and wondering whether Jesus was indeed the awaited Messiah.<sup>41</sup>
- Jesus' ministry of healing was considered by the Synoptists to be the fulfillment of the (OT) messianic Scriptures concerning the Golden Age and the Servant of Yahweh.<sup>42</sup>
- Jesus' own understanding of his ministry was that he had come to inaugurate God's reign.<sup>43</sup>

#### IV. The New Testament Evidence: The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John represents the reflections of a mature apostle.<sup>44</sup> In many ways, it should be studied along with the rest of the Johannine literature (1, 2 and 3 John and Revelation). Yet it is also a theological essay on the ministry of Jesus and

<sup>39</sup> This is true in terms of technique, terminology, the emphasis (or not) on faith, the group of people served, and so forth. Such an observation makes it difficult to accept the facile manner in which some form critics (for example, Wrede and Bultmann) categorized the large variety of miracle stories that exists.

<sup>40</sup> Mk. 8.22-26 has Jesus healing in two stages, but it is not at all clear that this is because Jesus failed on his first attempt. The context of the entire pericope rather suggests that it is illustrative of the reactions of the disciples to Jesus himself. *Contra* this interpretation, see Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 421f; Nor should Mark's comment in Mk. 1.34 ("... and Jesus healed many who had various diseases") be compared unfavorably to the parallel in Mt. 8.16 ("... *ijjesu* healed all the sick."). The reason for the difference between "many" in Mark and "all" in Matthew is likely to be found in the Aramaic mother-tongue of the writers. Cf. Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1:1-8:26* (Word Biblical Commentary 34A; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), p. 66. Gundry, *Mark*, p. 88, points out as well that several words are used together in the context of Mk. 1.34 ("*many*" *ubisi*, "*all*," "*various*") to emphasize the "wide range of Jesus' ability to heal."

<sup>41</sup> Mk. 7.37; Mt. 12.22f.; Lk. 5.26; 7.16; 8.43. The reactions of the leaders, however, were not always so favorable.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. I: *Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the message Jesus sent to John the Baptist (Lk 7.18-23 par.) and Jesus' comment on the source of his power to drive out demons (Lk. 11.20 par.).

<sup>44</sup> This statement and the following one, which labels the Fourth Gospel a "theological essay," are not in any way intended to deny divine inspiration for the Scriptures.

therefore rightfully falls here toward the beginning of the NT. The distinctive character of the Fourth Gospel means that it needs to be investigated separately from the Synoptics.

John's Gospel contains only four miracles of healing, each one of which emphasizes a particularly spectacular aspect of Jesus' power as healer.<sup>45</sup>

- ❖ An official's son is healed at a distance. (Jn. 4.46-54)
- ❖ A lame man is healed after thirty-eight years of infirmity. (Jn. 5.1-15)
- ❖ A man is healed of congenital blindness. (Jn. 9.1-12)
- ❖ Lazarus is brought back to life. (Jn. 11.1-44)

In presenting these healings (including a resurrection), John shows that Jesus has no equal. No obstacle that can be imagined is too great for him to overcome. Even death could not stand in the way of God's plan.

John himself as author does not comment on these miracles. Indeed, there is no transition at all between the first two healings on the list; in John's narrative, one leads right into the other.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, these miracles set up a reaction on the part of bystanders that, in turn, allowed Jesus to present truth to the hearers (and readers). For example, after the first two miracles listed above, the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest. Jesus then had opportunity to explain his relationship to his Father and to tell who it is who bore witness to him (Jn. 5.16-47). After the pericope of the healing of the man born blind, John presented the conflict of the Pharisees and Jesus, in which Jesus the Healer clearly demonstrated that the Pharisees were the ones who were truly blind (Jn. 9.13-41). The raising of Lazarus opened the final chapter in the Jewish plot to get rid of Jesus (Jn. 11.45ff.).

The Gospel of John shows Jesus as the consummate healer, the one who reflects all that his Father is, as the Creator and Life-Giver. John also includes an important comment from Jesus about the nature of sickness: "*His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life'*" (Jn. 9.2f.). Jesus thus refuted a popular concept linking misfortune directly to personal sin. Jesus here put sickness (and other forms

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<sup>45</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, rev. by Walter M. Dunnell (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 192.

<sup>46</sup> John merely comments that the miracle of the lame man occurred "*some time later*" and in a different city (Jerusalem rather than Cana; Jn. 4.46, 54; 5.1).

of suffering) into their proper perspective.<sup>47</sup> Everything, he stated, is under God's sovereignty and moving toward a single goal: God's ultimate glory. That glory may, in point of fact, come through a situation of misfortune or through a miracle of healing.

As far as the question of technique is concerned, John's Gospel notes that, in healing the blind man, Jesus used spittle and mud, as well as having the man bathe in the Pool of Siloam (Jn. 9.6f.). For the lame man to walk, he gave a command (Jn. 5.8), as he also did in the case of Lazarus (Jn. 11.43). For the official's son, Jesus merely declared that the healing was operative (Jn. 4.50). As was true in the Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel sets no simple pattern for how a healing takes place. The overwhelming impression one receives is that technique has very little of a substantive nature to do with the healing. Jesus suited the technique to the occasion, because the real power came through him, his Father having given him that authority.

In summary, then, we can see the following elements in John's Gospel:

- Jesus as healer is not limited by space, time, preconditions or even death.
- Techniques are not significant as far as the actual result is concerned.
- Jesus heals as a manifestation of the authority with which the Father has invested him.

These, then, are the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. The various pericopes record the stories where Jesus and his disciples healed, raised the dead and exorcised demons. Healing was a frequent factor in Jesus' ministry but was truly significant only because it demonstrated who Jesus was (the promised Messiah, a compassionate healer) and announced the coming of the messianic Age and Kingdom, when Satan's control would be overthrown. Jesus' power was always sufficient for the miracle to be performed. Further, he gave priority to the needs of the person rather than being impeded by the question of whether the healing would take place on the Sabbath. Compared to his Jewish opponents, Jesus had a more far-reaching agenda: releasing those who were captive to various illnesses and demons; demonstrating his authority; showing that Satan's defeat was sure and that the Age to Come was already a reality; and, most importantly, bringing glory to his Father. The healings produced a variety of reactions by the participants and observers: joy, bewilderment, amazement, praise to God, and anger, among other reactions. Jesus obviously had a program to follow that was not dependent on how either the person healed or those around him or her would react.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. also Lk. 13.1-9, where Jesus indicates that misfortune is a part of life in a fallen world and not necessarily linked to individual sin.

Furthermore, Jesus did not heal all who were ill<sup>48</sup> but acted in each situation so that his Father would be glorified.

### V. The New Testament Evidence: The Book of Acts

The book of Acts is a transition point between the Gospels (in which the ministry of Jesus is detailed) and the Epistles (which contain instructions for the church). For that reason, we can see in Acts an affirmation of the healing ministry of Jesus, as a part of the “miracles, wonders and signs” which Peter cited as evidence that Jesus was appointed and anointed by God (Ac 2.22; 10.38). Other than a possible allusion in Hcb. 2.4, these verses are the only ones outside the Gospels that mention Jesus’ healing ministry. Thus the historical healing ministry of Jesus himself, though definitely acknowledged, seems not to have been a major factor in the ongoing witness of the church.

Peter stressed Jesus’ ministry to the God-fearer Cornelius, saying that Jesus’ healing ministry both attested God’s approbation (Ac. 2.22) and was an aspect of what Peter called “doing good,”<sup>49</sup> as Jesus healed those whom the devil held under his own power (Ac. 10.38). As in the Gospels, so here in Acts, there is an awareness that sickness is not from God but from Satan, just as the evil spirits are. Though sickness is a constant factor in human existence since the Fall, it is not what God had wanted for humankind.

The book of Acts further confirms that what Jesus had foreseen for his disciples, namely, a healing ministry,<sup>50</sup> was indeed being carried out by the

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Mk. 6.5-6 and Jn. 5.3ff. for examples of pericopes in which some sick people are apparently left unhealed. Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 106-107, notes that Jesus’ aim was not relieving physical hurts, although he often did so with compassion. His principal mission was to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Jesus himself suffered physically, even to the point of death, in order to provide resurrection and eternal life for anyone who would believe in him.

<sup>49</sup> “Doing good” (eujergeteww) is a term that can have the technical sense of being a benefactor, such as was known in the Greco-Roman world. See Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (First Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World; Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster Press, 1994), p. 34f. Similarly, Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1998), p. 358, n. 127. It may be that this fact of “doing good” was stressed when Peter addressed Cornelius because the centurion himself was a generous benefactor; cf. Ac. 10.2, 4, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Mt. 10.8.

believers even after Jesus' ascension (Ac. 5.12-16). But in performing the miracles of healing, resurrection and exorcism, the believers all refer back to Jesus and/or to God, who provided the power. The apostles did not expect to heal in their own right but in dependence on God. Luke sometimes describes how, as a sign of that relationship of dependence, prayer is offered or the name of Jesus is invoked for a miracle of healing.<sup>51</sup> The experience of non-Christians demonstrated, however, that, in and of itself, the name "Jesus" had no magical potency. The Jewish exorcists who attempted to (mis)use Jesus' name found that they themselves were overcome by the demons they had tried to exorcise (Ac. 19.13-16).

The book of Acts makes a clear distinction between the apostles who performed miracles and the non-Christian wonder workers. Simon the Sorcerer (mageuwn, working magic) was himself thoroughly astonished by the "great signs and miracles" the deacon/evangelist Philip accomplished in Samaria (Ac. 8.9-13). Elymas, a Jewish sorcerer (οἱ μαγοί~, magician, presented as a translation of *Elymas*<sup>52</sup>), attempted to hinder Paul's ministry and was struck with blindness at Paul's word. The apostle accused Elymas of deceit and trickery and of being a child of the devil (Ac. 13.6-12). Thus there is no confusion in Acts between those who really are loyal to Jesus and to the one true God and those who are out merely to improve their own material prospects or social standing.

Just as was true in the Gospels, so also the book of Acts gives evidence that sometimes faith was a key element in a healing miracle (Ac. 14.9).<sup>53</sup> But the person being healed was not always the one who expressed that faith, as is evident from resurrection miracles.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, prayer was a frequent element mentioned in the healings of the book of Acts (Ac. 9.40; 28.8), but it was not always mentioned and sometimes would not necessarily have been offered on that particular occasion or with those particular people in mind (Ac. 5.15f.; 19.11f.).

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<sup>51</sup> Ac. 3.6, 16; 4.10; 9.17, 34; 13.11; 16.18. At times, the believers' prayer for miraculous intervention is addressed specifically to God rather than invoking Jesus' name. Cf. Ac. 4.23-30, where the one addressed in prayer is successively noted as God (θεοῦ~), Sovereign Lord (despovth~, Master), and Lord (kurioῦ~).

<sup>52</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 297, says with regard to Acts 13.8: "Elymas is more probably a word of Semitic origin, akin to Arab. *'alim*, 'wise', 'learned,' which Luke explains by adding οἱ μαγοί~ ...".

<sup>53</sup> For the Gospels, see, for example, Mk. 5.34; and in contrast Mk. 6.5f.

<sup>54</sup> The dead person obviously had no opportunity to express faith in order to be raised to life. Ac. 9.40; 20.9f.; cf. Lk. 7.14f.

We have already noted Peter's statement that Jesus' healing miracles were a means of demonstrating that God had enabled Jesus to break the devil's hold over human beings (Ac. 10.38). It should also be noted that, according to Acts, sickness (and thus the need for healing) is sometimes the divinely appointed consequence of a person's own actions. Such was the case with Elymas, whom Paul cursed (Ac. 13.11), and also with King Herod, who accepted for himself praise that should have gone to God alone. Herod was immediately stricken by the angel of the Lord and died soon thereafter (Ac. 12.21-23).

The following conclusions, then, can be drawn concerning health, sickness and healing in the book of Acts:

- The apostles affirmed the validity of Jesus' ministry of healing but did not often refer to it in their preaching and teaching.
- The apostles themselves carried on a ministry of healing (including raising the dead and performing exorcisms).
- The apostles' healing ministry was carried on in the name of Jesus and in dependence on God.
- The faith of the beneficiary of a miracle of healing and the prayer of the apostle for that healing are sometimes mentioned as factors in healing.
- False healers and magicians or sorcerers succumbed to God's greater power operative through the apostles.
- Some sickness was attributed to the devil's power, some to the consequences of a person's own misguided choices. Some appears to be due to natural causes in a fallen world.

## VI. The New Testament Evidence: The Pauline Epistles

We begin here by establishing the major axes of Paul's thought, trends that reflect yet again what was said in the OT. First of all, Paul affirms that everything in life is ultimately under God's sovereignty; and, in that sovereignty, God always acts for the good (Rom. 8.28).<sup>55</sup> Of great comfort to the believer is the fact that, because of God's sovereignty, nothing at all, including demonic forces and death, can separate the Christian from God's love (Rom. 8.35-39). Here it is important to note that Paul does not say that the believer is forever separated from "*trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword*" (Rom. 8.35).

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<sup>55</sup> The ultimate good, of course, is God's glory, not necessarily a temporal or physical benefit to the believer. See the sermon of Daniel B. Wallace, "Do All Things Really Work Together for the Good? Romans 8:28 in Its Context." The sermon is available at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

Such difficulties may indeed be part and parcel of the believer's experience; he or she may actually fall sick and be in need of healing. What Paul does, however, say in this passage is that the experience of sickness does not demonstrate that God's love has been withdrawn. There is not "*anything ... in all creation [that] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Rom. 8.38). God is sovereign and thoroughly committed to his children.

A second overarching principle for Paul is that God, in his sovereignty and omnipotence, is able to provide all that is necessary to meet every need the believer has, including of course the need for health: "*And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 4.19). Yet in the very context of this verse of assurance, Paul reminded the Philippians of his own personal experience. God's choice for Paul had sometimes been that he learn to be content in situations of hunger and want: "*I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want*" (Phil. 4.11f.). Certainly Paul's testimony in 2 Cor. 11.23ff indicates that he had ample experience in the area of physical suffering: floggings,<sup>56</sup> exposure to death, beatings with rods and whips, stonings, shipwrecks, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, and more. Yet Paul continued to believe that God met all his needs.<sup>57</sup> God's provision was possible but did not necessarily mean an avoidance of hardship.

The third major principle undergirding the Pauline theology of health is that, while Paul does not in any way denigrate the physical dimension of life,<sup>58</sup> he subordinates the physical domain to the higher, spiritual purposes that God has. It is interesting to note that nowhere in the extant Pauline epistles do we have any record that Paul prayed specifically for the physical, financial or material needs of the people to whom he wrote, even though the inclusion of such a prayer would have

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<sup>56</sup> Paul's reference is in fact to what he calls "the forty lashes minus one." The Pharisees, not wanting to exceed the prescribed 40 lashes through miscounting, decreed that only 39 could be given. Such rulings on the part of the Pharisees were considered a "hedge" around the Law of Moses, so that people would not violate its standards.

<sup>57</sup> The letter to the Philippians was written after the letter we call 2 Corinthians.

<sup>58</sup> Rather, he rejoices in what God has given. See, for example 1 Tim. 4.3-5, where Paul describes false teachers: "*They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.*"

been considered good form according to hellenistic letter-writing conventions.<sup>59</sup> Many prayers for the recipients' spiritual health can, however, be found in the Pauline corpus.<sup>60</sup> Paul put the accent on the spiritual, because he understood that the Kingdom of God is primarily spiritual: "*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (Rom. 14.17; cf. 1 Cor. 15.50). With this perspective and the idea of all eternity before him, Paul can put his life into proper focus. He may suffer now, and his body may be failing; but better things lie ahead. And besides that, his inner spiritual life is being strengthened daily.

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Cor. 4.16-18)*

These three principles, then, establish the parameters of Paul's thinking about life, health, sickness and healing: God's sovereignty, God's provision and the fact that the most important dimension of life is the spiritual dimension. With that background in mind, we can now look at the details of Paul's theology as it related to healing.

Was Paul himself a healer? Although the book of Acts clearly states as much,<sup>61</sup> Paul himself never mentions the healing aspect of his ministry in his writings, at least not directly. Allusions to God working through Paul with power may, however, include oblique reference to miracles of healing that were performed.<sup>62</sup> Certainly Paul believes in the ability of God to heal and to work through believers as channels for miraculous healing. This is demonstrated by the fact that he himself asked God for a miracle of healing (2 Cor. 12.7f.).<sup>63</sup> Paul also included the gift of

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<sup>59</sup> On wishes for good health, cf. Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Library of Early Christianity 5; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 73.

<sup>60</sup> Cf., for example, Eph. 1.15-23; 3.14-19

<sup>61</sup> Cf., for example, Ac. 28.7-9.

<sup>62</sup> Rom. 15.19; 1 Cor. 2.4; 2 Cor. 12.12; 1 Th. 1.5.

<sup>63</sup> The "thorn in the flesh" has been variously interpreted, but it seems best to understand it as a physical difficulty of some sort. Cf. Colin Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*

healing in the lists of spiritual gifts he outlined for the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 12.9, 28, 30). Healing of a sort that clearly demonstrated God's power was integral to Paul thinking and not to be shunned. But neither were miracles to be shamelessly sought after, as Paul accused the Jews of doing (1 Cor. 1.22).<sup>64</sup>

Despite the fact that God could and did heal, Paul's theology did not claim that healing was necessarily the norm. As mentioned above, Paul himself sought relief from his "thorn in the flesh." God, however, did not relieve him of that problem but instead taught Paul how to understand the "thorn" as a part of God's pedagogy for him.

*To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12.7-10)*

In addition, as another example of the fact that God does not always heal, Paul's colleague Trophimus had to be left at Miletus because he was too ill to travel (2 Tim. 4.20). Clearly, Trophimus had not experienced a miracle of healing. As for Epaphroditus, the envoy of the Philippian church to Paul at Rome, he too was ill but recovered sufficiently to be able to travel (Phil. 2.25-30). The tone of Paul's letter, however, gives the impression that Epaphroditus had not experienced a sudden and dramatic miracle of healing but rather that he had gone through a rather lengthy recovery period. Such is also the impression given in Galatians, where Paul describes the time when he himself was sick and had to be cared for by the people of Galatia (Gal. 4.13-15).<sup>65</sup> Healing occurred, but it was a healing in which time was a major factor. Miraculous and instantaneous healing is not necessarily to be the case for every believer, according to Paul's theology.

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(Tyndale NT Commentary; Leicester/Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press/Eerdmans, 1987), p. 206.

<sup>64</sup> The reference here may be to the Pharisees (Mk. 8.11f.) who were unwilling to commit themselves to Jesus unless he first astounded them with what they considered to be sufficiently clear signs from heaven.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. the discussion of this passage in Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 308-313.

Furthermore, Paul speaks in positive terms of Luke, the doctor (Col. 4.14; 2 Tim. 4.11; Phm. 24), never disparaging his coworker's professional training. Doctors and medical means of healing are also useful and do not contradict Paul's belief in miraculous healing. Paul himself suggests a medicinal remedy to Timothy, to treat a chronic illness, rather than advising him to seek a miraculous cure (1 Tim. 5.23). In Pauline theology, then, healing is real and may come through a miracle, but it may also come through time and medicine—or it may not come at all.

Physical care for one's own physical body is a normal human function (cf. Eph. 5.28f.). Giving the body undue consideration and priority, however, can lead one astray, as when Paul says that the opponents of the gospel have their stomach as their god (Phil. 3.19). The body is an instrument to be honed for use in this present life ("*physical training is of some value...*"); yet godliness is even more important, since it looks forward to eternity as well ("*...but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come*"; 1 Tim. 4.8). This perspective means that physical health (or sickness) is not the most important consideration for a believer. The Christian's relationship to God is far more significant.

Finally, we can note that Paul sees life as a spiritual battle.<sup>66</sup> In that battle against "principalities and powers,"<sup>67</sup> false miracles propagated by Satan and his agents may play a part, in order to lead people astray (2 Th. 2.9-12). Although Paul described these counterfeits as particularly characterizing the time of the "lawless one," he also acknowledged that his own time could be called "the present evil age" (Gal. 1.4) and said that in "later times" there would be people who would "follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Tim. 4.1). Finally, as an indicator that sickness can have spiritual causes, Paul also warned the Corinthian church, where the practice of fellowship meals and the Lord's Supper were problematic, that disregard for spiritual principles had already led some of them into sickness and even death:

*For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. (1 Cor. 11.29-32)*

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<sup>66</sup> Eph. 6.10-12; 2 Cor. 10.4.

<sup>67</sup> Eph. 6.12, KJV.

We can now briefly summarize Paul's contributions to a theology of health, sickness and healing in the NT:

- Healing itself as well as the spiritual gift of healing are real and have their source in God.
- Counterfeit miracles emanating from Satan also exist.
- God can and does heal any disease or sickness, but in his sovereignty he does not *always* heal.
- Normal physical and medical care of the human body should be undertaken as well as the soul's spiritual care.
- One's spiritual life needs to take precedence over the physical aspects of life.
- Sickness and suffering can be part of the normal vicissitudes of life in this fallen world, or they may represent God's discipline or Satan's buffeting.

These six points, then, give a brief résumé of Paul's position on healing, at least to the extent that his letters reveal his thinking on the subject.

## **VII. The New Testament Evidence: The General Epistles**

These eight letters and tracts are often studied together as a set, but each one is actually distinct. Therefore we will treat them separately by author.

### ***A. The Epistle to the Hebrews***

Apart from references to Jesus as fully participating in "flesh and blood," even to the point of death (Heb. 2.9, 14; cf. 10.5), the (anonymous) author of the Epistle to the Hebrews shows little interest in the topic of the human body and health. It is possible, however, to understand Jesus' (and the apostles') miracles of healing in the more general reference to the evidentiary nature of the "signs, wonder and various miracles" that took place to corroborate the message of salvation (Heb. 2.4). The "gifts of the Holy Spirit" mentioned in the same verse may also include the gift of healing, but there is no specific delineation of what the author has in mind as to the content of those gifts.

The book of Hebrews does, however, make the point that what is difficult in the present may be a sign of God's discipline. Hebrews 12.13 may have implications for physical healing, for physical maladies may indicate a spiritual problem that God is correcting through his discipline:

*Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. (Heb. 12.10-13)<sup>68</sup>*

Finally, the author of the letter to the Hebrews, as was also the case with Paul, reminds the readers that better results are to be expected from what is spiritual than from what is merely physical. To concentrate exclusively on what pertains to the body (health and healing) would be a mistake: *"Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for your hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them"* (Heb. 13.9).

The subject of healing is not prominent in the Epistle to the Hebrews, but we can summarize our findings as follows:

- Miracles were part of God's way of confirming the testimony of the gospel.
- Problems in life (including sickness) may be part of God's discipline.
- A healthy spiritual life is more important than the present physical life.

### ***B. The Epistle of James***

As for a theology of health, sickness and healing in the Epistle of James, one rather general statement occurs in chapter 4 and then a longer and more significant passage appears in the final chapter.

In James 4.14, the author comments on the brevity of life: *"What is your life? You are a mist that appears a little while and then vanishes."* James' point here is that the believer needs to recognize his or her dependence on the Lord and on his sovereign plan. God himself is in control of life and death. Sickness or death could strike at any moment. That is part of the reality of life in a fallen world. Our lives ultimately depend on God's grace.

The final chapter of James has a didactic passage that directly addresses the subject of healing, with clear implications for pastoral theology:

*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the*

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<sup>68</sup>These verses echo texts from the OT and the Apocrypha: Isa 35.3; Prov 4.26; Sirach 25.23.

*Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he 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 man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. (James 5.13-18)*

The context of these verses in chapter 5 of James is prayer: prayer when one is in trouble (“experiencing bad things,” kakopaqevw, v. 13), when someone is in poor health (“experiencing weakness,” ajsqenevw, v. 14), when sins are confessed (vv. 15f.) or when a major demonstration of God’s power is needed, as in the days of Elijah (vv. 17f.).

The basic elements of the situation described by James in verses 14-16 are as follows:

- ❖ A believer is sick (“weakened”).
- ❖ He or she calls on the elders of the church.
- ❖ They come and anoint the sick person with oil.
- ❖ They offer a prayer of faith over the person.
- ❖ The sick person becomes well because the Lord raises him or her up.
- ❖ Mutual confession of sin is made.
- ❖ Mutual prayer is offered.
- ❖ The sin is forgiven.
- ❖ The forgiven person is healed.

Although each element is, in and of itself, simple enough to understand, the difficulty comes in attempting to establish the proper connections among them. Is the sinner the same as the sick person? Is the sickness physical or spiritual or both together? Is confession made to the elders at the time they come to anoint or to another person at a separate occasion? Is there physical healing, spiritual healing, or both? Does James consider that what he is stating is true for all believers in all circumstances? What exactly is “the prayer offered in faith” (v. 15), and how much faith is needed, and on the part of whom?

The questions multiply because James appears to be combining two different things—physical sickness and sinfulness. Verses 14-15a seem to deal with the physical aspects, whereas verses 15b-16 (beginning with “If he has sinned...”) discuss what seems to be a different aspect, namely, sin and forgiveness. Yet the

Greek text joins v. 15a to v. 15b with a conjunction “and if,” “even if” (ka[n]) that indicates a genuine linkage between the two parts.<sup>69</sup>

Some basic comments can be made concerning the theology of healing in these verses. In the first place, James acknowledges the reality of sickness, sin, and healing as having both physical and spiritual causes and results. Furthermore, James does not say that only unbelievers are sick. Nor does the conjunction ka[n] necessitate the idea that everyone who is sick has sinned. Rather, James is mentioning problems, both physical and spiritual that may show up in a believer’s life—sometimes even simultaneously—and for which the Lord’s touch is needed.

Secondly, in these verses James puts forth his perspective on the corporate nature of the Christian life. The physically weak believer,<sup>70</sup> recognizing the need of divine intervention, calls on the church elders to pray with him or her. They come with the visible symbol of God’s presence to act and direct, the anointing oil,<sup>71</sup> and having applied the oil they then pray over the sick person. The elders, along with the patient, acknowledge their need of God to intervene and heal the sick person. Together the believers make this appeal to God. Similarly, in a case of sin, believers join together in prayer before God, though this latter case may not necessarily involve the elders.

Thirdly, James underlines the fact that all healing ultimately comes from God. It is the Lord who raises up the (formerly sick) person.<sup>72</sup>

Fourthly, although James has stated the case very broadly, the larger context of this passage demonstrates that he is not, in point of fact, implying that physical healing is automatic if these steps are followed. After all, he has already spoken of the necessity of enduring in trials (Jas. 1.12), of the brevity of life (Jas. 4.14), and of

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. the NASB translation, which (unlike the NIV) preserves the sense of the Greek conjunction: “... and if he has committed sins...”. The same wording appears in the RSV.

<sup>70</sup> “Weak” is to be taken here in the sense of “physically weak” or “sick.” For this reason, the elders have to come to the person rather than the person being able to meet them elsewhere, probably an indication that the person is homebound or an invalid somewhere.

<sup>71</sup> Nystrom, *James*, p. 306, notes the similarity to the ministry of Jesus’ disciples in anointing and healing the sick (Mk. 6.13). The oil itself is not considered a medicinal remedy but a symbol of God’s presence and action.

<sup>72</sup> Of course, the healing is ultimately to be understood in terms of a “temporary” healing, since the world is still under the regime where “death reigns” (Rom. 5.14) on the physical plane. All people still die physically.

the need for patience in suffering (Jas. 5.10f.). Rather, in 5.14-16, James highlights the procedure to follow. Healing, if granted, comes when God himself chooses to act favorably and restore the person.

Thus, in summary, we see these lessons from the Epistle of James:

- It is God who heals, but he does not always choose to heal.
- In difficult cases, the sick person can call the church elders for anointing with oil and prayer.
- Spiritual and physical healing are both needed in life, sometimes at the same time.
- Confession of known sin, prayer, faith and dependence on God are all expressed.
- God, rather than the person, controls the parameters of life, including its length.

### ***C. The First Epistle of Peter***

First Peter is the only letter in the Petrine corpus (generally understood as 1 and 2 Peter and Jude) that has, at least on the surface, some relevance to the topic of health, sickness and healing.

The letter deals extensively with the topic of suffering, and Peter makes sure his readers realize that suffering is not something unusual for a faithful believer (1 Pet. 4.12). Even Jesus himself suffered—to the very point of giving his life for those who were unworthy and unrighteous (1 Pet. 3.18). Nor was Jesus' suffering ephemeral; it was in his body: he died physically. Only a resurrection could bring him back to life.

In a section concerning servants who suffer unjustly (1 Pet. 2.18-25), the apostle draws on the OT prophecies (Isa. 53) that allude to the Servant of Yahweh receiving blows that he did not deserve, and yet accepted, on our behalf.

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet. 2.21-25)*

The quotation of Isa. 53.5 is not exact in 1 Pet. 2.24. Nevertheless, the presence of 1 Pet. 2.22, which is a definite quotation of Isa. 53.9 (“*He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.*”), and the fact that Peter repeats the key ideas from Isa. 53 throughout these five verses makes it clear that the apostle is indeed thinking of Isa. 53.5 when he writes: “... *by his wounds you have been healed*” (1 Pet. 2.24).

Peter puts this quotation from Isa. 53 in a different context from what Matthew used for Isa. 53 (in Mt. 8.17). Whereas Matthew emphasized physical healing, Peter stresses the example of unjust suffering endured without complaint. The context of this passage in 1 Peter has, in fact, nothing to do with physical healing but rather with pleasing God (1 Pet. 2.19, 20, 25) and receiving the forgiveness of sins: Jesus “*bore our sins, ... so that we might die to sins and live to righteousness*” (1 Pet. 2.24). That is why, in the following verse (1 Pet. 2.25), the believer returns, according to Peter, to the Shepherd and Overseer of believers’ *souls* (a spiritual notion), rather than to the Shepherd and Overseer of *bodies*.

Thus, although at first glance, Peter’s allusion to Isa. 53.5 seems extremely relevant, in the final analysis, it is not really significant in terms of physical health, sickness and healing. It does, however, have a clear bearing on the issue of spiritual health.

The summary for this book, then, can be very brief:

- Peter speaks of *spiritual* healing and being pleasing to God rather than addressing the matter of physical healing or well-being.

#### ***D. The Johannine Epistles***

The apostle John, writing at the end of the first century AD, had to confront the docetic heresy, and his first two (extant) letters reflect this theological challenge to the churches. In these missives, John establishes once again (as he did in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel; Jn. 1.14) that Jesus Christ was fully human, with a fully human body, while at the same time remaining fully God.<sup>73</sup>

What concerns us here, however, is a brief verse in the Third Epistle of John. This verse has become a cornerstone for the Prosperity Gospel, as its proponents see the verse as a virtual promise from God that good health can be the expectation

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<sup>73</sup> 1 Jn. 1.1-3; 4.2; 5.6; 2 Jn. 7.

of all believers: “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 Jn. 2).<sup>74</sup>

What the Health and Wealth Gospel interpreters have failed to understand with respect to this verse is that John is following normal convention here for writing a hellenistic letter. This gracious sentence represents “a form approximating to the secular conventional health wish, to be found in most secular letters of the period.”<sup>75</sup>

That observation does not, however, negate the fact that John sincerely wanted these things for Gaius. How should we then interpret this verse in order to grasp John’s theology of health, sickness and healing?

First of all and positively, we can note that John recognizes that a human being has not only a spiritual dimension but also a physical one and that both are significant.<sup>76</sup> John the Elder is already convinced that Gaius’ soul, that is, his spiritual life, is on the right track (eujodovw—to follow a good path, to be successful). This idea is thoroughly confirmed by the following verse (3 Jn. 3), where John says that Gaius is faithful to the truth and walks in the truth. John says, then, that he is praying, not for Gaius’ spiritual health, but for two other things, namely, that Gaius would:

- ❖ go well (eujodovw; be on the right track) in everything; and
- ❖ have health (uJgairnw).

The first of these requests probably concerns the everyday affairs of Gaius personally, as well as perhaps the church administration for which he is responsible.

<sup>74</sup> See Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996), pp. 248-250, for the story of Oral Roberts’ “insights” on this verse and for a brief critique of similarly misinformed exegesis. A more detailed and sustained analysis can be found in Ken L. Sarles, “A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 143, number 572 (Oct. 1986), pp. 330-353, and in Moo, “Divine Healing,” mentioned earlier.

<sup>75</sup> Judith Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John* (Studies of the NT and Its World; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), p. 102. For this reason, Robert W. Funk, “The Form and Structure of II and III John,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86/4 (Dec 1967), p. 430, says, “The conventional health wish in III John 2 marks this letter as the most secularized in the New Testament.”

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Paul’s concern that the Thessalonians be blameless in their entire “spirit, soul and body.” (1 Thess. 5.23).

The second request is for Gaius' physical health. The request does not necessarily have overtones of healing in it, though this verb (*uJgairnw*) could be used in that way if the context permitted (or encouraged) such an interpretation. Here in Third John, however, the meaning seems to point in the direction of "continuing in" (rather than of "being restored to") good or decent health.

In this verse John uses one of the normal (for a hellenistic letter) Greek verbs for a request or a wish directed to a deity: *eufcomai*. He does not use a verb of thanksgiving (such as *eujcaristevw*) as if he were going to say: "I thank the Lord, Gaius, that, because you are a believer, you are in good health." Rather, the apostle asks for that favor to be granted by God.<sup>77</sup> According to John, then, a healthy spirit (such as Gaius had)—a soul that is on the right track spiritually—does not automatically mean that God will bless that same believer with a healthy body. The Elder asks God for that specific blessing of health for his friend Gaius.

By this time, the apostle John had outlived most, if not all, of the other apostles. He knew well that spiritual health was no guarantee of physical health. Far from supporting the claim of the Health and Wealth Gospel people to the effect that good health is a Christian's (new) birthright, John's letter to Gaius points to the fact that one is continually dependent on God for health.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, the principles drawn from the Johannine literature are the following:

- A healthy soul does not guarantee a healthy body.
- God is the one who has ultimate control over the health of a person.
- Both the physical and the spiritual aspects of human life are important.

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<sup>77</sup> Health and Wealth Gospel partisans tend to emphasize the idea that God would surely respond favorably to such a prayer, particularly from the apostle John. Such a viewpoint, however, neglects the truth that God alone in his sovereignty knows what is ultimately going to bring him the most glory.

<sup>78</sup> God's higher purposes may be better served by a believer's going through physical suffering and sickness—for the purification of his or her own soul (which can always be further refined) and/or the purification of the lives of those who are around the sufferer and who can then observe how he or she handles misfortune and physical trials. Such was the case for the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 12.7-10) and for all Christians after him who have profited from his insights as a result of his "*thorn in the flesh*."

### VIII. The New Testament Evidence: The Revelation to John

The Gospels and the book of Acts provided narrative accounts of what had taken place in the ministries of Jesus and the apostles, including many examples of healings, a bit of commentary on those healings, and indications of the diversity of reactions to those events. In the Epistles, we see mature reflections by seasoned believers, but the topic of healing is touched on directly only by Paul's comments on healing as a spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12) and by James' prescription of prayer and anointing for the one who is ailing (James 5). Other comments in the Epistles are more tangential, though including significant insights.

When we come to the book of Revelation, we are in a different genre altogether or, in reality, multiple genres. In Rev. 1, John documents poetic visions, and in Rev. 2-3, the genre presents itself as epistolary.<sup>79</sup> The major section, Rev. 4-22, is apocalyptic, giving supposed narrative accounts of things yet to be. The book ends with exhortation. Other genres are mixed in throughout these larger divisions, and the book of Revelation also manifests a heavy dependence on OT imagery.<sup>80</sup>

As far as the book's relation to the here-and-now question of health, sickness and healing is concerned, the author does not provide any straightforward didactic material. Healing in this present life is simply not a topic that John pursues. We do, however, have a few indicators of John's perspective on the issues.

The first point to be gleaned from the Revelation to John is that God is sovereign (as the OT taught), and his sovereignty extends even to his control over death. The timing and means of death are under God's control.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, death is so completely under his sovereignty that it does not even have to be the final event. God can—and will—give life to those who are his and who have died;

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<sup>79</sup> Note the comment of David E. Aune, *The NT in Its Literary Environment* (Library of Early Christianity 8; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 159, identifying these so-called letters as "prophetic proclamations patterned after ancient royal and imperial edicts."

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 13f., 26f., 168, 186ff. W. M. Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, rev. ed. by Mark W. Wilson (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 36-40, points out the necessity of also understanding the references to the pagan elements that would have been in the background of the readers of the Apocalypse, particularly with respect to chapters 2-3, but scattered throughout the entire book.

<sup>81</sup> Rev. 1.18; 6.8; 8.11; 9.15; 16.10f.

resurrection to everlasting life is a reality. That resurrection has already taken place for Jesus,<sup>82</sup> and some day believers will experience it.

*I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. (Rev. 20.4-6)*

In Revelation, John often uses analogies to get his point across. Thus, in writing to the seven churches, he describes them as having certain physical maladies, whereas, in point of fact, their problem is a spiritual sickness. The image of the breakdown of the physical body is thus used to denote a problem in the church's spiritual relationship with God.

- ❖ Thyatira is "on a bed of suffering..." (Rev. 2.22)
- ❖ Laodicea is "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" and will receive "salve"<sup>83</sup> for her eyes (Rev. 3.17f.)

These images lead into some of John's comments as to suffering brought on by refusing to conform to God's plan. The plagues from the seven bowls of God's wrath are distributed, John says, to those who richly deserve them because of their sin (Rev. 16.7) or a refusal to repent: "*Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done*" (Rev. 16.11).

Physical suffering and illness, even death, can be disciplinary measures. In that respect, the person can bring on suffering by making bad choices. At the end of the

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<sup>82</sup> Rev. 1.5, 18; 5.6; and others.

<sup>83</sup> According to Ramsay, p. 309, Laodicea was the manufacturing center for a tablet that could be used in eye problems. Perhaps the tablet was then ground by the patient and made into a salve.

book, physical plagues are threatened should anyone attempt to add to the book, or death if the person were to remove something from John's testimony<sup>84</sup>:

*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22.18f.)*

To counterbalance the negativity of those threats, John offers positive eschatological hope to those who will live forever with God:

*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Rev. 21.4)*

*On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. (Rev. 22.2f.)*

As was the case in the OT vision of the Age to Come, so also here, the curse is reversed. The healing of the nations appears in the context of chapters 21-22 to be a complete picture: spiritual fellowship with God in wonderful ecological conditions in a new heaven and earth, right relationships among all those who are there serving the Lord, and no longer any physical or psychological suffering or death.

The Age to Come will have been fully consummated, fully arrived when these things become a reality.

To summarize the lessons of the book of Revelation given to John, we note the following points:

- God himself controls life and death.
- Foolish choices, sinfulness and/or a refusal to repent can all lead to physical suffering.

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<sup>84</sup> Aune, *Literary Environment*, p. 241, notes that an "integrity formula" is a common hellenistic device, occurring at either the beginning or the end of the many documents.

- The negative effects of the curse pronounced at the Fall will one day be overcome, and sickness and death will give way to eternal life in joyful service to God.

### **IX. The New Testament Evidence: A Brief Synthesis**

Thus, in looking at the entire NT, we can see that, in several points, the various authors agree. At other times, one author or another will contribute additional and unique insights to help construct to a more comprehensive theology of health, sickness and healing.

The points which follow are the basic ideas that the NT proposes. Each one of these principles could, with profit, be expanded and elaborated. The intent here, however, is merely to suggest the general direction and overall scope of the teaching and insights of the NT for a theology of health, sickness and healing, within the guidelines already established earlier in this article.

1. Sickness is a reality of human life after the Fall (Gen. 3), and death eventually takes place for everyone. Some people also suffer from demonic oppression in this life.
2. Poor health or physical disability can be the natural result of life after the Fall, the result of sin (and thus God's discipline for a believer or punishment for an unbeliever) or the result of poor choices, including neglecting normal health procedures.
3. Healing is possible through God's power and in Jesus' name. The NT writers recount many examples of healings and exorcisms in the ministries of Jesus and the apostles.
4. God is the source of all healing and of protection from illness or death, and no situation is too difficult for him. Yet God does not always choose to protect or to heal; his sovereign will may be expressed in other ways.
5. Healing may come through various means (or combinations of means): through medical means (scientific treatments and/or the use of traditional herbal remedies),<sup>85</sup> including the normal healing activity of time; through miraculous healing with (or apart from) the intervention of a person having the spiritual gift of healing; or through the concerted prayer of faith by the church elders.

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<sup>85</sup> These medical remedies could include scientific treatments and/or the use of traditional medicines and plants or herbs. See the following section on applications.

6. Since God is the one from whom all healing ultimately comes, the actual techniques are not in themselves significant and may vary according to the circumstances.<sup>86</sup>
7. Spiritual health does not imply physical health, though (to look at the other side of the coin) sin may result in a person's physical sickness or even death.
8. Healings and exorcisms display God's power and may thus lead to conflict with those not committed to Christ.
9. Jesus' miracles of healing were demonstrations that he was the fulfillment of the OT promises for a healing Messiah and that he was ushering in the Kingdom of God.
10. God's work needs to be distinguished from that which originates with Satan. Satan can perform (counterfeit) miracles through his agents. Whereas the genuine miracles of healing that come from God are truly helpful and bring him glory, the purpose of Satan is to lead people astray.
11. Physical healings and exorcisms were acts of compassion, and neither Jesus nor the apostles limited the benefits of these healings to any one group; both Jews and non-Jews were healed.
12. Resurrection is the promise for the future for believers.
13. One day, the Kingdom of God will be a fully consummated reality, and then the effects of the curse will be lifted. Sickness, pain and death will be abolished.
14. The believer needs to live in the light of eternity, remembering that one's spiritual life is of much more value and more lasting significance than one's physical life.

These points, then, represent the major NT lines for a theology of health, sickness and healing. They are, of course, founded on the premises that 1) God himself created humankind and is interested in the whole person, and 2) God is sovereign over all that takes place or could conceivably take place.

#### **X. Some Practical Implications of a NT Theology of Health, Sickness and Healing**

What bearing then do these theological conclusions have on everyday life for us as believers? A few responses, with African overtones, will be suggested, though a longer treatment of the pastoral theology and ethics of healing is not possible here.

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<sup>86</sup> In the biblical records, not even prayer and faith are always mentioned.

First of all, it is permissible to seek healing—through prayer, through the ministry of someone with the spiritual gift of healing, through the anointing and prayer of the elders of the church, through modern medical science, and through traditional treatments that have no non-Christian (pagan or Muslim) orientation. In all cases, these actions are to be undertaken in faith, believing that God can use those means (and those people) to effect a cure if that is his will.<sup>87</sup> Believers should never have recourse to a healer who uses any sort of religious ritual or dependence on spiritual powers but who does not confess Jesus as Lord. This stipulation completely and irrevocably eliminates any and all use of charms or fetishes or sacrifices as well as the consultation of sorcerers by a Christian.<sup>88</sup> The Christian must look to the one true God and not to false gods, spirits or the living dead (ancestors) for protection and healing. Traditional means of healing<sup>89</sup> that do not have (pagan) religious overtones can be helpful and may be used, but only to the point where the Christian participant is sure that no appeal is being made to supernatural forces and that the plants thus employed do not have otherwise harmful effects (such as what might be induced by hallucinogenic drugs).

Secondly, as Christians, we must recognize that God is sovereign and independent.<sup>90</sup> He may choose to heal, but he cannot be manipulated. No “technique” can ever force him to heal a person. His purposes are higher than mere physical health. If healing is the best way for God to accomplish his goals of bringing himself glory and of conforming the believer to the image of his Son (Rom. 8.29), then God will so act. But on some occasions, God may, in fact, receive greater glory as the sick person learns to trust him in the midst of the suffering. Because of God’s power, healing is always possible. On the other hand, because of God’s omniscience and his sovereign independence, healing will not always be granted.

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<sup>87</sup> Faith is the consistent heart-attitude of the Christian. It is not a means of “manipulating” God.

<sup>88</sup> This statement does not eliminate the possibility of consulting non-Christian healers or doctors, provided that no non-Christian religious aspect be implicated in the process.

<sup>89</sup> An example would be the use of medicinal plants.

<sup>90</sup> This realization, however, is different from Muslim fatalism, for the Christian will still acknowledge personal responsibility before God to act wisely and carefully within the limits of knowledge and possibility. Cf. point 5 in this section on implications.

Thirdly, and as a natural consequence of the previous point, it is clear that promising good health to believers is, at best, misleading. In reality, such presentations of the gospel message, whether coming through the Health and Wealth (or Prosperity) Gospel proponents or through others, are actually unbiblical and a perversion of the true gospel. To accept such a message constitutes a case of following what Paul described as “*a different gospel—which really is no gospel at all*” (Gal. 1.6f.). These teachings are not helpful and should be avoided by believers. Evangelical churches and pastors need to give their members clear teaching on the theology of health as well as a theology of money and resources, in order to enable them to avoid the pitfalls of these perverted gospel messages.

Fourthly, believers must keep short accounts with God, confessing all known sin immediately, so as to avoid unnecessary disciplinary sickness. Obviously, this step of confessing one’s sins is also significant in order to grow in the Christian life. If, as the NT teaches, one’s spiritual life is more important than one’s physical life, we as believers need to give the highest priority to maintaining a right relationship with the sovereign God who created us.

In the fifth place, a believer must not neglect to care for his or her physical health, using the best possible means and all available wisdom and knowledge. The physical part of life, however, must not be allowed to dominate, either for good (as, for example, by spending too much time playing physical sports) or for ill (by, for example, eating without restraint). God created the human body and has given us the responsibility of using it wisely and of caring for it properly, so as to be capable of serving him effectively, without being hindered by poor health due to our personal negligence.

Finally, another implication of the NT theology of healing is that compassion should mark the believer’s reaction when encountering those who are sick, just as compassion also marked Jesus’ and the apostles’ attitude toward those who were suffering. For the church today, this may mean more involvement with AIDS sufferers, with clinics and primary health care, with interest in helping the physically handicapped and with other means of outreach to those who suffer physically. It may also imply the need to train more lay people for spiritual ministry to the sick, in order to supplement the chaplaincy services and over-committed pastors. And all of this ministry would need to be undertaken, as with the example of Jesus and the apostles, without restrictions as to the needy person’s ethnic background or social class.

## XI. Conclusion

Although the NT evidence is scattered and diverse, we have been able to discern several major building blocks of a NT theology of health, sickness and healing. Each of these points could, as we have mentioned, be profitably elaborated further.

What is particularly necessary to keep in mind, however, is the interaction of the different ideas. Neglecting to balance one idea against another has led some groups to extremes in interpretation. Consequently, some groups deny that miraculous healing exists in our day. Other groups, located at the opposite end of the spectrum, say that failure to be healed or to live past the age of seventy reveals a basic failure to believe and claim God's promises.

These pitfalls of extremism can, however, generally be avoided by examining *all* the data of the NT (and not just a few favorite texts), making sure that the biblical evidence is always interpreted from within its proper context. Even though the various NT authors have different perspectives on the issue of health, sickness and healing, they do not contradict each other (if rightly understood)<sup>91</sup> and together present a balanced theology. Taking verses out of context or neglecting certain theological aspects will, however, almost invariably lead to theological errors and sub-biblical practices.

Healing is a positive reality that the NT clearly acknowledges through many examples and through the direct teachings of Paul and James. It is a reality in which believers can rejoice and which they can seek in time of need. But alongside this aspect which encourages the believer to seek healing, the NT also has many other verses that remind us that healing is not something that can be assumed as our legitimate right or heritage as believers, at least not in this life. God, in his sovereignty, may have other paths for the sick person and his or her family and friends to walk down.

We can pray to the Lord for his intervention, and we can seek healing by any legitimate means. But we must never forget that the Lord himself is the one who knows what is genuinely best in each situation. He is the one who orders events and circumstances according to his infinite wisdom and power, whether for healing or not.

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<sup>91</sup> Sound hermeneutical principles and good exegesis of relevant passages are obviously essential to any correct understanding of biblical truth.

And for the blessing of knowing that God is in ultimate and absolute control, we can be truly grateful.

### **Excursus: The Body in Pauline Theology**

The issue of the nature of the material body holds little interest for the majority of the NT writers, although Hebrews 2.9, 14; 10.5; John 1.14; 1 Jn 1.1-3; 4.2; 5.6; and 2 Jn 7 highlight the fact that Jesus was a real human being, having an actual physical body. In the case of the Johannine writings, these remarks were probably in response to docetic influences (possibly mixed with some pre-Gnostic ideas) in his churches. For the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the emphasis falls more on the fact that Jesus was thus totally identified with humankind and able to obey God in a physical body.

Only Paul spends any time considering the body as a topic in itself, and his remarks are wide-ranging and worthy of being developed in a separate study. For the present, we offer simply the following basic overview of Paul's ideas concerning the body. Some of these concepts obviously overlap with the interests of the present study:

- A. The body is not to be despised
  1. Everyone cares for his/her own body (Eph. 5.28f.)
  2. Husband and wife should rejoice in each other's body (1 Cor. 7.4)
  3. Paul expresses an interest in the well-being of the: spirit, soul and body (1 Th. 5.23)
  4. The existence of the gift of healing confirms the body's worth (1 Cor. 12.9, 28, 30)
  5. The incarnation was part of the early church's creed (1 Tm. 3.16—creed; Col. 2.9—hymn)
  6. Christ himself had a real body, one that could die, be buried and rise again (1 Cor. 15.3-8)
- B. In fact, the body is integral to personhood
  1. For this reason, we will have a glorified body after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15.20; 2 Cor. 1.9; etc.)
  2. The human body will be changed into a glorious one (1 Cor. 15.35-52; Phil. 3.20f..)
  3. We long for that even now (Rom 8.23)
  4. One day we will be rid of of earthly or bodily limitations (2 Cor 5.1-9)
- C. There is a sense in which the body seems to be a hindrance
  1. Paul stresses its fragility and usefulness (as a jar of clay) rather than its glory (2 Cor 4.7)

2. Sickness is frequent enough (Paul: 2 Cor. 12.7-10; Gal. 4.13s; Epaphroditus: Phil. 2.25-30; Timothy: 1 Tim. 5.22; Trophimus: 2 Tim. 4.20)
- D. The body is an instrument or tool
  1. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6.19)
  2. The body should reveal the life of Jesus to others (1 Cor. 4.10f.)
  3. The believer is to honor God with his or her body (1 Cor. 6.20; 7.34; Phil. 1.20-22)
- E. As a tool, the body needs to be “honed”
  1. The body needs to be mastered (1 Cor. 9.27)
  2. Physical training is of some value (1 Tim 4.8)
  3. Yet physical duress is not a means of spiritual growth (Col. 2.23)
  4. What happens to the body does not necessarily have to have a negative effect on the inner person (1 Cor. 4.16)
- F. The ultimate concern in life is not physical but spiritual
  1. Paul condemns those whose “god is their stomach” (Phil. 3.19)
  2. The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14.17)
  3. Flesh and blood will not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor 15.50)
- G. Paul can use “body” imagery for spiritual truths
  1. Images of being dead and alive (Rom. 6.11, 13)
  2. The body of Christ (in celebration of the Lord’s Supper), given for us (1 Cor 11.24)
  3. The body of Christ as an image of all believers (Rom. 12.4f.; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4)

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