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Healing and the New Testament

Ernest Best

The NT scholar is always happy to write a paper on "X and the NT" whatever "X" may be. The churchman usually encourages him and if he likes the results uses them and if he does not ignores them. If we want to discuss healing today, are our guidelines to be laid down by the NT? The way in which we answer that question will determine the use we make of the material in the NT. No direct and formal answer will be given here to the question but it should be borne in mind throughout this essay.

It is important first to identify our subject more exactly. It is referred to under various names: spiritual healing, faith healing, divine healing. "Spiritual" is a vague word and may mean no more than "non-physical"; if it is taken to be a reference to the Holy Spirit then it differs little from "divine healing". Christians are often unhappy with the title "faith healing" because it suggests that the healer or the healed generate within themselves the power which heals. "Divine healing" seems adequate but many would argue that all healing is divine in origin; the doctor cooperates with the way God has made the universe and God heals through the activity of the doctor. Instead of any of these terms, I shall use the simpler and less controversial term "non-medical healing". From another point of view we may seem to be concerned with the nature of miracle. We shall not however occupy ourselves with this question or attempt to define miracle. It is sufficient for our present purpose to accept the factual nature of certain events without attempting to explain them philosophically or theologically and we see no reason to doubt that Jesus did heal by non-medical means, and no reason to deny that such healings take place today.

We find in the NT accounts of healings of different kinds of illnesses: demonic possession, physical disabilities like a withered hand or a paralysis, some ordinary kinds of sicknesses like a fever, and people are brought to life who have died. There is no record of the healing of certain disabilities; new legs and

arms are not given to those who have lost them.

This is very general. When however we examine individual accounts we find serious difficulties in discovering what were the medical conditions which afflicted those who were healed.

(1) It is often difficult to determine from the symptoms as described in the gospel accounts and Acts what the illness was from which the person actually suffered. In Mark 1.40-45 a leper is healed. Did he suffer from leprosy as we know it, i.e. from Hansen's disease? Leprosy is described in the Bible in Lev.13.1-44; 14.54-57; when we examine this we discover that a number of skin complaints are gathered together and described under the term leprosy. Quite clearly the OT allows for successful recovery from some of these diseases for the means by which the recovered person is to be received back into the community and make his peace with God through an offering are described in detail. There is also no suggestion that recovery in these cases is miraculous. Hansen's disease was of course incurable at that time. The difficulty is compounded when we realize that skin complaints can sometimes be psycho-somatic. From what then did the man in Mark 1. 40-45 suffer?

(2) The question of the accuracy of the accounts themselves arises. For a considerable period, at least thirty years, the stories of Jesus were passed on by word of mouth. How accurately were clinical details preserved? In Mark 9. 14-29 Jesus heals a boy who is possessed by an evil spirit; when the same incident is described in Matthew 17. 14-21 the boy is said to be an epileptic. How would a doctor have classified his illness today? Difficulties of another kind arise in the case of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5. 35-43). Jesus is said to bring her back to life; the presence of mourners confirms this; yet after Jesus has restored her to life he strictly charges those who were present that no one should know this; how was her resuscitation to be kept quiet?

This brings us to another and more difficult question. When we talk about healing in the NT, are we talking about those healings which Jesus performed as he actually performed them and their significance for him, or are we

talking about them as they are used by gospel writers and the significance they see in them? The two may not coincide. Many people have looked on the healing miracles as proofs of the divinity of Jesus but did Jesus perform them in order to prove his divinity and do they prove his divinity? His exorcisms appear to prove his authority and power (Luke 11.20). When Paul and Barnabas come to Jerusalem to defend their evangelisation of the Gentiles they do not make a theological defence of their position but attempt to prove that they are right by relating the signs and wonders that God has done through them (Acts 15.12). Yet when in Mark 8.11-12 the Pharisees come and ask a sign from Jesus so that they may know who he is, he refuses to give them a sign, i.e. he will not prove who he is by working a miracle. Jesus presumably healed people because they were the victims of sickness and because he loved them. He did not use them as tools with which he could convince people who he was. Nor did he heal those who were ill so that others might draw spiritual or theological lessons from what he did; he healed because the sick needed his help.

When we turn to the significance of the stories in the gospels other factors enter. Many scholars hold that the accounts of the healings by Jesus recorded in the gospels of Mark and John were used in the period prior to Mark and John in order to prove the greatness of Jesus and that Mark and John often eliminate this element as they use them. We can discover at least two reasons why the evangelists reported them. (1) Sometimes they draw spiritual lessons from them. The healing of the blind is a sign of the enlightenment of the souls of men through the hearing of the Gospel. Lepers are cleansed and the word used for cleansing is the same as the word used for the cleansing of a person from sin; therefore healing from leprosy represents the forgiveness of sin. Sometimes the word used for healing in Greek is the same as the word used for salvation and we are not sure which way to translate it; the evangelists may imply a deliberate ambiguity. When Jesus says to the woman with the issue of blood, 'Your faith has made you well' (Mark 5.34), the same sentence can be translated, 'Your faith has saved you'; if God through Jesus can heal the bodies of men this means that he can also save them from

sin. (2) The healings by Jesus are also recorded because they serve as examples to the early Christians as to how they should heal. This becomes explicit in Mark 9.28f., the story of the boy who was possessed and whom the disciples were unable to heal during Jesus' absence. After his return he heals the boy and when they are alone with him they ask him why they were unable to exorcize the demon; Jesus replies that demons can only be driven out by prayer. Here is a standing instruction to the church as to the way in which healing is to take place: by prayer. There are then a number of reasons for the recording of the healing miracles in the Gospels and Acts. Of course the Evangelists also record the healings for the reason which made Jesus heal, i.e. his love for those who were sick.

Since non-medical healing is often described as faith healing, it is necessary to say a few words about the role of faith. Sometimes the faith is seen to be in the person who is healed. To the woman with the issue of blood Jesus said, 'Your faith has made you well' (5.34). In the case of the paralytic who was let down through a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching, Jesus says that he saw the faith of the bearers and so healed the man (Mark 2.1-12). It is because of the action of the woman from Syrophenicia who had a daughter possessed by a demon and who had come to Jesus that Jesus, without going to the daughter, healed her; it must have been the faith of the woman that was operative. At other times the faith seems to be that of the healer. When in 9.29 the disciples are told that they can only exorcize by prayer, this implies the importance of faith on their part. This is confirmed by the saying of Jesus about faith being able to remove mountains (Mark 11.23f) and by the associated general statement, "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will." But whose faith was operative in the case of the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus?

What view does the NT take of the origin of illness? The answer is confusing. We have seen that there is a boy who in different gospels is described both as demon-possessed (Mark 9.17) and as an epileptic (Matt 17.15); this would suggest the view that his epilepsy was the result of the activity of Satan. (Does anyone today attempt to exorcize

epileptics?). In Luke 13.10-17 we are told of a woman who for eighteen years could not fully straighten herself because she had a spirit of infirmity and who is also described as bound by Satan for eighteen years. In Acts 10.38 it is said of Jesus that he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil. At other times sickness to be regarded as due to personal sin. In his instructions to the Corinthian Christians about how they should celebrate the Eucharist Paul refers to some of them as ill and some as dead because they have not discerned the body when they ate and drank. Whether 'body' here means the sacramental bread which they ate or the fellowship to which they belonged, it was their sin against it which led to their illness. Yet not all sickness is due to sin. In John 9.3 it is explicitly said of the blind man whom Jesus cured that his illness was due neither to his own sin nor that of his parents. Those who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them did not die because they had sinned (Luke 13.4) (There is no need to assume they all died instantaneously; in all such cases some will have had lingering deaths, i.e. they were sick for a period.) Ananias and his wife die as they retain some money that had resulted from their sale of their property; clearly their death was due to their sin (Acts 5.1-11). Thus sickness may or may not be due to sin.

The NT recognizes that healings take place outside the Christian community, or, to put it in another way, healings are carried out by others than Christians. Some of these healings are attributed to the devil; but in these cases they would appear to be the type of healings that are intended to deceive Christians in face of the end of the world, and therefore not healings in general; before the end the "lawless one" would appear and by the activity of Satan he will exert power and show pretended signs and wonders (2 Thess 2.9f; cf. Matt 24.24; Rev 16.14). Acts 19. 11-16 reveals the presence of Jewish exorcists in Corinth. Jesus himself acknowledged their existence as we see from his question, "If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?" (Luke 11.19) Apart from these references in the NT there is ample evidence within Jewish writings for healing by Jewish men of recognized spirituality, with many accounts of healings

similar to those reported in the NT, including healing at a distance. But it is not only within Judaism that we find evidence of healing; it was a frequent phenomenon in the contemporary pagan world, and was usually closely related to religion. Those who suffered from illness were brought to temples, especially those of Asclepios, and would spend the night there where they might be visited by the god and found restored and well in the morning. Healing outside the area of religion does not seem to have been so well known in the ancient world but at that time it would have been difficult to find any group of people whose activities were wholly unrelated to religion. Thus in the ancient world there was a certain continuity between healing and the spiritual. The spiritual was not, however, necessarily Christian.

There are those who at this juncture might wish to describe non-Christian healing as satanic. Would that entail that medical healing should also be so classified? One day John came to Jesus and said that a man who not an disciple was exorcizing in Jesus' name; the disciples had therefore ordered him to stop. Jesus, obviously approving what the man had done, tells the disciples not to stop him for "He that is not against us, is for us" (Mark 9.39-41). If Jesus allows that a person, not a disciple, is his ally, shall we attribute healing outside the church to Satan? Again the answer of Jesus to those who say he heals by Satan, does not seem to imply that he thinks Jewish healers heal by Satan's power (Luke 11.19) If it is a good thing that evil, i.e. sickness, is defeated we can hardly attribute this good to Satan.

Who were the healers? Apart from Jesus, Acts depicts all the main figures in the early church, e.g. Peter, Paul, as healing. It is, however, curious to note that although healing by Paul (e.g. Acts 15.12) is picked out by Luke as a significant factor, Paul himself in his letters seldom refers to it, as if he did not consider it all that important. Considerable attention has been given to 1 Cor ch.12 where the charismatic gift of healing is mentioned. It is interesting that when Paul lists the gifts of the Spirit elsewhere (Romans 12.4-8; Gal 5.22f; Eph.4.11) he does not list healing among them. It may be that the special conditions of the Corinthians church (remember that, according to Acts, Jewish exorcists were

active in Corinth) led to the emphasis among Christians on healing as a gift of the Spirit. When Paul was writing to churches other than Corinth he therefore did not need to refer to the gift of healing since those churches were not so interested in it.

Is non-medical healing in the NT always effective? The majority of scholars believe that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12. 7-9) was an illness of some kind for which, though he prayed, he did not receive healing. It does not appear that Epaphroditus received spiritual healing (Phil 2.25f). In 1 Tim 5.23 Timothy is advised to take a little wine for the sake of his stomach and his frequent illness. Trophimus was left ill at Miletus (2 Tim 4.20)

The world of the Nt which we have been exploring is a very strange world and very different from ours. No one today would expect those who come carelessly or irreverently to the communion service to fall ill during the next week. We would not expect a kirk session or other church body to strike dead someone who did not give as much of their money to the church as they pretended to have done (Acts 5.1-11). The world then was one in which it was easy to accept the idea that supernatural powers of evil were the cause of illness. It was a world which was ready to accept magic as a means of healing; a rabbi is recorded to have healed a demoniac by putting a ring of Solomon to his nose drawing out the demon. More generally, it was a world that was not aware of the distinction we draw between the natural and the supernatural because it had no idea of the laws of nature. This kind of society certainly still exists in many parts of the world today. Even now it is only disappearing from parts of Europe. It is not so long ago in rural areas that if a cow went unexpectedly dry, it was believed that someone had put an evil eye on it; it was hoped that the assistance of a more powerful 'magician' would restore the cow. Today when a cow goes dry, the farmer sends for the vet. We live in a world where we trace sickness to viruses and bacteriae and where medical science is so highly developed that it heals most people. Ordinarily we guide our lives by accepting and co-operating with the laws of nature. We also live in a more individualized world than the NT. The closeness

of the larger family unit was then a matter of course in a way it is not now. When Daniel was delivered from the lion's den his accusers, their children and their wives were thrown into the den (Dan 6.24); we do not condemn the wives and children of criminals. In such a world it was not surprising that healing sometimes took place through the faith of those other than the sick person. Do we not think of faith in a much more personal way? Can a man be saved through the faith of anyone other than himself?

There may, however, be less difference between our world and that of the ancients than I have suggested. Despite universal education there is today a resurgence of belief in magic and superstition, and also of non-medical healing as in the ancient world. Is the revival of healing among Christians related to this more general non-rational attitude? If healings are found among non-Christians, are there "spiritual" laws built into the universe through co-operating with which these healings take place?

I have not attempted to give a definitive or even a preliminary answer to the question raised at the beginning concerning the appeal to the NT but have only tried to raise certain issues which must be faced before we simply set out to imitate what happened in the NT. In estimating the extent to which the NT is normative for us in respect of non-medical healing we have thus to take into account the following factors:

- (1) The NT is often unclear as to the nature of the illnesses of those who were healed;
- (2) It gives different answers to the question of why they were healed;
- (3) It ascribes sickness to different theological causes;
- (4) It allows that non-Christian healing exists;
- (5) It indicates that non-medical healings sometimes fail;
- (6) It relates to a very different world from the one in which we live.

Of these the last tends to receive the least attention from those who study and write about the subject, yet it is probably the most important.