

# HEALING IN SEMANTICS, CREATION AND REDEMPTION\*

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Healing is a weasel word, a word of convenient ambiguity whose meaning can vary with its context and lead to endless confusion unless we first decide its meaning for our particular context. This is why any study of healing must begin with semantics.

## Healing in Semantics

Let us then begin our search for the meaning of healing. Where shall we begin? The natural place to begin would be with the doctors, so let us look at the usage of the word healing in the textbooks of medicine.

The first thing we shall notice is that the word healing is a rare word in standard medical textbooks. We shall discover that it is confined to the introductory pages of textbooks of pathology and surgery. There it is applied to the process of repair of wounds, ulcers and fractures. In each of these injuries there has been a loss of continuity of a body tissue such as skin or bone, and healing is the word used to describe the restoration of this continuity brought about by the normal restorative powers of the body.

If we now turn to the more ephemeral medical literature such as medical journals and books written on medical subjects for lay consumption, we shall find the word healing in bad company. We shall find chapters on healing in books about alternative medicine and references to healing in articles written by doctors whose medical orthodoxy is often in doubt. So much so, that for many doctors healing is synonymous with quackery. In other words, healing is to be distinguished from the orthodox practice of medicine and the word is not used in polite medical circles. If it is used, then it is on the basis that at least it will not do the patient any harm if that is what he insists on trying.

Actually, of course, we all know what we mean by healing, for any dictionary will tell us that healing is the restoration of a sick person to health. The ambiguity or the weasel-ness we have referred to, belongs not to the general meaning of the word healing, but to the kind of health to which healing is intended to restore man, and to the means by which this kind of health is restored. We need therefore to look at these two sources of ambiguity.

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We begin by looking at what we mean by health. If we look first at the derivation of the word we find that it was brought to our island by the Anglo-Saxon invaders of the fifth century AD and was first used in writing in the homilies written on the eighth-century translations of the Psalms and the Gospels into Anglo-Saxon or Old English as it is now called.<sup>1</sup> It was used in the first translation of the whole Bible into English which is associated with the name of John Wycliffe (1329-84). This translation was made from the Latin Vulgate, and in the *Nunc Dimittis* of Luke 2.29-32 it makes the aged Simon say:

‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy health which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples’.

The Latin word translated health in this passage is the word *salutare*.

Health is one of a group of words in English which are all derived from the Old English root *hal* which means whole or sound.<sup>2</sup> The other words are wholeness, haleness and holiness. Haleness is now obsolete except in the phrase ‘hale and hearty’. Notice that health, wholeness and holiness are cognate words only in English and the Teutonic languages and not in the biblical languages. So by derivation, health means wholeness or soundness. What is its meaning in usage?

Let us once again ask the doctors. Once again we shall be disappointed. Modern medicine can define disease and sickness (especially of the body) with increasing precision, but it cannot define health except as the absence of disease or disability. This is because disease or disability is a disorder of function or structure which can be measured in fairly exact terms which demonstrate its departure from the normal state. You can measure the size of a tumour with a tape measure. The height of a fever can be measured with a thermometer. The amount of sugar in the blood can be determined by chemical analysis. These measurements, of course, are all physical or chemical measurements, and most of the measurements used in clinical medicine are of a physical or chemical nature. Modern medicine is mainly concerned with disease rather than with health, and with disease which can be measured in physical or chemical units, and that means, of course, disease of the body.

The most significant attempt to define health in recent times is that which was made by the World Health Organisation at its inception in 1948. This definition has since become famous.

‘Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1971, compact edition, vol. 1, p. 1273, s.v. *health*.
2. E. Weekley, *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, John Murray, London, 1921, column 699, s.v. *heal*.

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and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.’<sup>3</sup>

There are several things to notice about this definition. The *first* is that it reminds us that health is not a merely physical phenomenon. It is not simply a description of the state of the body, but also of the mind and society to which man belongs. From a Christian point of view we would want to add a spiritual dimension too, and say that ‘Health is a state of complete physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’. The *second* thing to note is that the definition is positive rather than negative. Health is not simply the absence of disease or infirmity, but it is the presence of complete physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being. The merit of this concept is that the absence of disease does not exhaust the meaning of health. The *third* point is that the definition is the expression of an ideal. It speaks of complete well-being in all spheres of life. It has been severely criticised for this and dismissed as unrealistic and impractical. But such criticism is misplaced, for health is the goal at which we aim, and there is nothing to be gained by having an aim which is less than the highest. The *fourth* matter arises out of the third and has to do with the ideal of health. Having described health as the ideal of complete well-being, the definition then fails us. It should have gone on to spell out what it meant by complete well-being, but it did not. By not doing so, it betrays the limitations of its origin. You will recall that it was the product of a multinational conference concerned with the establishment of a new international body to be called the World Health Organisation.<sup>4</sup> It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for such a conference to have obtained agreement on what constitutes true human well-being. So all the definition tells us when we analyse it, is that health is well-being. We have to look elsewhere to find out what well-being consists of.

Our view of what constitutes health or the complete well-being of man obviously depends on what we believe about the nature and destiny of man himself. We shall therefore find that there are as many definitions of health as there are views of the origin, nature and purpose of man. Because the Christian faith has a very specific doctrine of man, it also has a very specific understanding of what constitutes his health or his complete well-being.

With this concept of health as the complete well-being of man in our minds, a concept which has come from an unimpeachable but nevertheless secular source, let us turn to Scripture and see if we can reach a Christian understanding of the meaning of human health and well-being.

3. *Basic Documents*, World Health Organisation, Geneva, 1948, p. 1.

4. This conference was attended by fifty-one nations and was held in New York in 1946 to consider and approve a constitution for the proposed World Health Organisation.

At first sight it would appear that the Bible is not very interested in health, at least as far as the English versions are concerned. The word health appears fifteen times in the Authorised Version, eight times in the Revised Standard Version, eleven times in the New International Version and twelve times in Moffatt's translation. The word health then is not very common in Scripture. Does this mean that the Bible has no real interest in health? Or does it mean that our translators have misled us? Surely we cannot believe that God has no interest in the health of his people, if by health we mean their well-being, soundness or wholeness?

If we analyse a little further the occurrences of the word health in Scripture, a very interesting fact emerges. Of the fifteen occurrences of the word in the whole Authorised Version, thirteen occur in the Old Testament. Similarly in the case of the other versions, by far the majority of occurrences are in the Old Testament. In fact, all twelve examples in Moffat are in the Old Testament. It appears that, so far as the usage of the word in English translations of the Bible is concerned, the Old Testament is more interested in health than is the New Testament.

There is another interesting fact about biblical usage which we should note. Although the word *body* occurs in English in the Revised Standard Version on one hundred and two occasions in the Old Testament, with eighty-five occasions in the New International Version, there is no word for body in Hebrew, unless it be a dead body. The significance of this is not that the Old Testament is uninterested in the health of the body, but that the Old Testament does not think of health primarily in physical terms. It thinks of health as the well-being, the wholeness of the whole man.

There is a word in Hebrew which exactly expresses this idea of health as completeness, soundness, wholeness, both by derivation and by usage. It is the word *shalōm* which today is the common Israeli greeting, 'May you be well!' or 'Peace be with you!' Von Rad in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gives the root meaning of *shalōm* as well-being.<sup>5</sup> It is commonly translated as *peace* in the English versions, but this is a secondary meaning arising from the sense of the harmony which is part of well-being. Peace is harmony between persons and peoples, a freedom from war and strife which is a necessary condition and an essential part of well-being. Such *shalōm* comes from God for, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us, there is no *shalōm* for the wicked (Isaiah 48:22 and 57:21).

How then shall we characterise the Old Testament understanding of health? I suggest that we might do so in the following four propositions:

1. *Health is basically a state of wholeness and the fulfilment of man's being and life considered as a complete and undivided entity.*

5. G. von Rad in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1964, vol. 2, p. 402, s.v. *eirēnē*.

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This is what we mean by *shalōm*.

2. *Health on its ethical side consists of complete obedience to God's law.*

Obedience to God's law is the best form of preventive medicine. This was one of the first lessons for the Children of Israel as they turned their back on Egypt and set out on their desert trek. At Marah, their first stop on their journey, they had been three days without water and there God made the bitter water from which the place got its name into sweet water they could drink. But he also gave them what Karl Barth called 'the divine Magna Carta in the matter of health'.<sup>6</sup> We read in Exodus 15:25-26: 'There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. He said, "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"' (NIV).

God's laws, of course, include the laws of hygiene as well as the moral law. We readily see the significance of the laws of hygiene to the prevention of disease, but God wants our obedience to all his laws if we are to enjoy health as the Old Testament understands it.

3. *Health on its spiritual side consists of righteousness which is basically a right relationship to God.*

The Hebrew word for righteousness is *tsedeq* which has the root meaning of straightness.<sup>7</sup> It means that which conforms to a norm and therefore it describes a relationship. To be righteous is to be in a right relationship to God, and that is the basis of man's well-being. As Isaiah reminds us, 'the fruit of righteousness will be *shalōm*, and the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence for ever' (Isa. 32:17 NIV).

4. *Health on its physical side is manifested by strength and long life.*

As the psalmist says, 'The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with *shalōm*' (Psalm 29:11). Strength is the gift of God and those to whom he gives it die in a ripe old age. Thus we read of Abraham that he 'breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people' (Genesis 25:8). The previous verse tells us that he was 175 years old when he died. It is interesting to find that this is the aspect of health which appeals to Karl Barth. He defines health in terms of strength when he speaks of it as 'the strength to be as man'.<sup>8</sup>

Although we have distinguished four aspects of health in this description of the meaning of health in the Old Testament, these are but four strands in a single whole. They are not four parts which we add

6. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1961, vol. III, 4, p. 369.

7. Norman H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, Epworth Press, London, 1944, p. 73.

8. Karl Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

together to make a whole, but four facets of what can only exist as a whole.

If we wanted to summarise the Old Testament understanding of health it would be in the two words *wholeness* and *holiness*. Health is the wholeness of man's being and personality together with the holiness of his character and actions, which are expressed in righteousness and obedience to God's law.

The basic idea of health in the Old Testament is that of relationship. Wholeness and holiness, righteousness and well-being or *shalōm* are all words of relationship. They imply a standard and that standard is the perfection of the being and character of God. For the Old Testament, the important thing about a man was his relationship to God. That is what the Old Testament is all about. 'Be ye holy for I the Lord your God am holy' (Leviticus 19:2).

We now turn on from the Old Testament to the New Testament and remind ourselves of the remark that the Old Testament is the lexicon of the New.<sup>9</sup> It is in the Old that so often the words of the New are defined and its concepts described and illustrated. The word health is no exception to this, for we have already seen how infrequently it occurs in the English versions of the New Testament as compared with those of the Old Testament. The New Testament assumes the teaching of the Old in the matter of human well-being.

The word in *Koinē* or Hellenistic Greek which exactly translated *shalōm* was *sōtēria*. This was the word which in the papyri preserved in the sands of Egypt was used for health and well-being.<sup>10</sup> In New Testament usage, especially that of the apostle Paul, it was mainly appropriated for man's spiritual well-being and the word is usually translated salvation in the English versions, but we must not lose sight of the fact that salvation includes the whole of man's being.

The New Testament is just as interested in those components of health which we found in the Old Testament. It is concerned with the wholeness and soundness of man's being, the need for his obedience of God's law and the righteousness of his character. The main extension of the idea of man's well-being is in the physical sphere where as a result of the resurrection, man's body will be renewed, and death will become but the entrance to a new and abundant life.

We may summarise the Christian understanding of health in the following terms: Health is the state of a man who is in a right relationship to God, a right relationship to himself, a right relationship to his fellows, and a right relationship to his environment.

If we want a shorter definition, then we may use that of Jesus himself

9. This remark is attributed to Albrecht Ritschl.

10. J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1949, p. 622, s.v. *sōtēria*.

when he said, 'I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly' (John 10:10 AV). Elsewhere, Jesus calls this eternal life (*zōē aiōnios*, John 17:3 etc.). This is life which is the gift of God; whose basis is a knowledge of God and the enjoyment of fellowship with him; whose duration is not measured by time, and whose quality is that of the life of God himself. This is what constitutes man's true well-being. This is what the Bible means by health, a condition of well-being of the whole man in every part of his being and life whether physical, mental, spiritual or social. When we speak of healing as the restoration of a person to health in a Christian context, this is the kind of health we mean. It is a condition which includes the whole of man and not just his body or his mind.

The other ambiguity in the use of the word *healing* concerns the means of healing, and we propose to deal with this ambiguity by looking at healing in creation and healing in redemption or, as we prefer to call them, healing on the basis of creation and healing on the basis of redemption.

### Healing in Creation

The first point to make about healing in creation is that God created the body with the power to heal itself. The body can defend itself against infection and finally destroy itself when death supervenes upon life. Much of the structure and function of the body is designed to prevent body tissues from being damaged, to repair them when they have been damaged, and to resist their decay. These are the basic reasons why we have blood in our bodies and a transport system of heart, arteries and veins to carry it to every part of our bodies. In the first century AD, long before the time that William Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood, the Roman medical author Celsus described the signs of the self-healing of the body.<sup>11</sup> He called it *inflammatio*, inflammation, which means a setting on fire, which was a very apt description. He said that the signs of an inflammation were four in number and he described them in the words that every medical student learns, even today: *rubor, calor, tumor et dolor* — redness, heat, swelling and pain. These are all due to blood. The redness and the heat appear because of the increased blood supply to the part brought about by the opening up of local blood vessels to their maximum capacity, and the swelling and pain occur due to the increased amount of fluid and white blood cells being poured out into the damaged tissue. What Celsus was describing were the signs of the process of self-healing of the tissues of the body.

This self-healing property of the body comes into play automatically. The cells and substances which defend the body and promote healing are on permanent alert. The study of these healing processes has become a

11. Celsus, *De Medicina*, book III, 10, 3.

subject of its own which is called immunology. Immunology is a subject of increasing importance in the surgery of organ transplantation and with the appearance of such conditions as the acquired immune deficiency syndrome or AIDS. In AIDS the healing processes of the body appear to break down and the condition carries a mortality of about fifty per cent.

Not only did God create the body able to heal itself, he also placed healing agents in his creation. One of these healing agents is the sun with whose tonic effect we are all familiar for it often determines where and when we shall spend our holidays. Not only does the sun have a tonic effect on our bodies, it also has a lethal effect on the bacteria which cause our diseases. Exposure to its rays will often kill bacteria which are very difficult to kill by other means. One example of these bacteria is that which causes tuberculosis. It is also to the sun that we owe the supply of vitamin D which we need for the proper growth and development of our bones. In countries where the local custom is to keep women and children indoors away from the sun's rays, the disease called rickets is common because the bones do not form normally because vitamin D is not formed as it should be by the action of the sun's rays on the chemical precursor of the vitamin which is present in the skin. This normal mechanism for the manufacture of the vitamin is entirely dependent on the effect of the sun's rays on the skin.

God also placed healing agents in the plant kingdom. Those which man discovered first of all were the agents which had a purely symptomatic effect. Examples of these include opium, the dried juice of the white poppy, used for the relief of pain from prehistoric times, and also digitalis from the common foxglove which was discovered to be an effective remedy for the dropsy by William Withering of Birmingham in 1785. This drug had been used as a folk remedy in a tea made from foxglove leaves before Withering brought it into medical practice.<sup>12</sup>

More recently, man has discovered healing agents which will actually kill the bacteria which cause infectious disease. In 1935 the sulphonamide drugs were introduced into medicine, and shown to be effective in the treatment of infections such as lobar pneumonia which up to that time had been a very serious disease. Then in 1941 came penicillin, in time to save the lives of many soldiers wounded in the battles of the Second World War. Since then many other healing agents have been discovered, mostly derived from fungi, as the original penicillin was.

So far we have spoken of the self-healing of the body and of the healing agents which affect the body and its diseases, but the same is true of the mind. God created the mind self-healing like the body, and placed in his creation healing agents which could affect the mind and restore it to health when it became disordered. We are all too familiar with these psychotropic agents today, for they are far too frequently used and even

12. Douglas Guthrie, *A History of Medicine*, Nelson, Edinburgh, 1945, p. 257.



more abused in our modern civilisation.

All this that we have described, is healing on the basis of creation. It is an indication of God's intention that man should be healthy. To this end he created man's body and mind self-healing and provided healing agents in his environment for man to discover and use.

There are references to natural healing or healing on the basis of creation in Scripture, but they are not very many. In the Old Testament we may recall the fig poultice which the prophet Isaiah prescribed for King Hezekiah's boil in 2 Kings 20:7 (cp. Isaiah 38:21). The application of a poultice is a well-recognised way of stimulating the process of inflammation. It produces *rubor* and *calor*, if not *tumor* and *dolor*. Isaiah seems to have had some medical knowledge for it is to him that we owe a short description of how wounds were dealt with in Old Testament times. In Isaiah 1:6 we read of the kingdom of Judah that 'from the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness — only bruises, septic sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been cleansed, bandaged or soothed with oil.'

In the New Testament we have another reference to the treatment of wounds in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke chapter ten. There we are told that the Samaritan went to the injured man he found on the road to Jericho and 'bandaged his wounds, bathing them with oil and wine' (v.34). We still use the same principles of wound treatment today, but for the antiseptic wine we use an antibiotic and for the oil we use vaseline. Also in the New Testament we have examples of people who were left to the natural processes of healing when they fell sick. In Philippians chapter two we are told how Epaphroditus was visiting Paul in Rome and during his visit he contracted some serious disease, which might have been typhoid fever, from which he almost died. The passage suggests that he was left to the natural processes of healing to recover from his illness. Then Paul's young assistant Timothy had a chronic dyspepsia from which he was left to recover naturally, though Paul did prescribe a little wine for his condition (1 Timothy 5:23).

You will notice that so far we have not mentioned doctors and their place in healing. This is because most of the healing that occurs in the world occurs without the intervention of doctors or any of the health care professions. If doctors were essential for healing, there would not be enough doctors to go round. In the United Kingdom there is one doctor to less than a thousand people, but in developing countries especially in rural areas, the ratio is more in the region of one doctor to ten thousand people. It cannot therefore be maintained that doctors are essential for healing. As Hippocrates said long ago, medicine is a subject in which no man is a layman.<sup>13</sup>

Medical healing, or the type of healing practised by the medical

13. Hippocrates, *On Ancient Medicine*, chapter 4, 3.

profession, is healing on the basis of creation. Doctors of former times were very conscious that they were only assisting nature in their work of healing. They spoke of the *vis medicatrix naturae*, the healing power of nature, which they sought to assist. A famous French surgeon of Reformation times expressed his faith in the healing power of nature by saying, 'I dressed the wound, but God healed it'.<sup>14</sup>

The practice of medicine was built up out of diligent observation, experience and experiment. Out of these emerged a body of knowledge which, as it increased, made that practice more and more effective. We need to remember, however, that until recently the great improvements in the health of the people of Western Europe and indeed of the world, have come not from medicine, but from improved agriculture and environmental engineering. Improvements in the quality of food, the purity of water, the cleanliness of the air and in the state of housing and the environment have done more for the health of the populations of the world throughout history than the practice of medicine. However, now that these improvements have come, medicine is able to make its own special contribution, and by the use of antibiotics, the introduction of immunisation, and the encouragement of a healthier life-style it can play its part in the betterment of the health of the people. Today the task of medicine is to promote health, to prevent disease, to treat sickness and to minimise disability. All this it does on the basis of creation.

There are one or two aspects of healing on the basis of creation which are worth noting. Natural healing is of course part of natural theology. No doctor who understands the real significance of his practice of healing and how much it depends on the healing power of nature, could possibly deny the reality of natural theology, the reality of what God has provided for man's healing in his creation.

Then there are gifts of healing in nature which are often overlooked. It is a matter of common experience that some people are more successful in healing than others in everyday life. Some of these people become doctors and nurses, but others do not. We all know people to whom we would readily turn if we needed help or healing because we feel that they could help us more than others could. Have we not heard people say of others that simply to be in their presence made them feel better?

Another phenomenon which is not always acknowledged is that even on the basis of natural healing, serious and even fatal diseases can undergo spontaneous remission and even disappear. We remember some years ago, attending a lecture in the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh by an eminent Professor of Pathology who was the author of

14. This was Ambroise Paré (1510-1590) whose original statement was, 'Je le pansay et Dieu le guarit'. These words are inscribed on his statue in the École de Médecine in Paris. He is often called the father of modern surgery.

several successful textbooks of his subject.<sup>15</sup> The lecture was on the spontaneous remission of tumours. He described a number of cases in which tumours which were normally malignant and usually fatal, had undergone spontaneous remission and finally disappeared altogether. He showed series of photographs illustrating how this had happened. He went on to say that he rarely gave this lecture without someone coming up to him afterwards and saying that they too had had a patient who showed a spontaneous recovery just like one of the cases he had shown. He said that he always asked them the same question, 'Did you publish the details of the case?' He always got the same answer, 'No I didn't, because I thought no one would believe me'. So even in healing on the basis of creation, malignant tumours which normally prove fatal can disappear.

There are, of course, several chronic and disabling diseases which are known to show various degrees of spontaneous remission. One well-known example of such a disease is multiple sclerosis. This is one of the diseases which 'healers' often claim to have cured, when usually what has happened is that their activity coincided with the onset of a natural remission of the disease. This means that we must be very careful in claiming success in the healing of any disease which shows this pattern of spontaneous remission.

The final matter I want to consider about healing on the basis of creation is its limitations.

Although God created the body and the mind with the power of self-healing, this power was limited. The damage to the body or the mind resulting from disease or injury may be so extensive that self-healing cannot cope with it. The wound of the tissues may be so large that the normal body processes of healing cannot close it. The mental state may be so disordered that no amount of rest or treatment can restore it to normal. In many of these cases the medical profession, either by the skill of the surgeon or the experience of the psychiatrist, may be able to help, and by applying the principles of healing which men have discovered in creation may promote that restoration to normality which is healing. However, in many cases full restoration to normality is not possible and permanent scarring and disability are the result. The power of self-healing of the body and of the mind is a limited one.

The next limitation of healing on the basis of creation is that which is imposed by the way in which the knowledge of the principles of such healing and its application is acquired. Such knowledge is discovered by man and not revealed to him. The result is that we can never claim that this knowledge is complete for new facts, new healing methods and new healing agents are constantly being discovered. This is why our ideas about disease and its treatment are always changing and can never be final.

15. His name was Professor William Boyd.

The most serious limitations of healing on the basis of creation still remain. We have seen that its scope is restricted and its content of knowledge incomplete, but it has two far more serious limitations. The first is that it has no remedy for the sickness of the human spirit. It has nothing but a negative answer to Macbeth's anxious question to the doctor about his treatment of Lady Macbeth:

'Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?'<sup>16</sup>

Healing on the basis of creation has no remedy for sin, no balm for guilt. Those who try to deal with sin and guilt on the basis of creation end up by trying to dismiss them as feelings and not facts, and endeavour to persuade their patients that they have no objective existence. Therefore the sooner they forget about them, and the religious delusions from which they arise, the better. But we know that sin and guilt are not to be dealt with as easily as that.

The second limitation of healing on the basis of creation is its inadequacy in the face of death. It cannot of course deny the fact of death as it sought to deny the fact of sin, but it has no explanation for it. If you look up any textbook or dictionary of psychiatry and read the entry for death, you will find it mainly taken up with an account of Freud's theory that within man there is a death instinct or a group of death instincts whose object is the destruction of his life and being. There is no explanation of where these instincts came from. Freud admitted that very little was known about them except that they invariably and inevitably accomplish their objective. It is not surprising that most of Freud's followers have not been very keen on his idea of a death instinct. There is no doubt that death inevitably accomplishes its objective, not because it is an instinct, but because it is the wages of sin and the result of man's rebellion against God.

Why is it that healing on the basis of creation is so limited? The answer to this question must be because of the Fall of man. Man was created before the Fall and his body and his mind were not designed to deal with the physical and mental effects of that event. It is an intriguing question whether if there had been no Fall, healing would have been necessary today. We may assume that, quite apart from the effects of the Fall, men would still be liable to have accidents and break bones. Therefore there would need to be provision for the treatment and healing of fractures. As well as fractures there would also be wounds from accidents and they would need to be healed. Would there also be degenerative diseases of

16. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Act V, scene iii, lines 40-44.

man's body which had been created subject to time, and would perhaps therefore wear out with the passage of time? We do not, of course, know the answers to these intriguing questions, but it seems reasonable to suppose that man was created with the potentiality of self-healing, and that this property would be necessary even if there had been no Fall.

But, of course, there was a Fall, and man and the rest of creation were made subject to the bonds of decay, corruption and death.<sup>17</sup> The whole picture changed and man now faced a hostile world in which he was attacked by disease and condemned eventually to die. His body and his mind were able to develop some defences and were able to heal themselves to some extent, but this response was inadequate because they had not been created to cope with such a devastating change in their situation. This is why healing on the basis of creation alone suffers from the various limitations which we have described.

### **Healing in Redemption**

When we come to consider healing on the basis of redemption, the first question which arises is about its relationship to healing on the basis of creation.

In answer to this question, we would maintain in the first place that healing on the basis of redemption embraces and includes healing on the basis of creation. The fact that God has now revealed to us the details of his plan to restore man to complete well-being which is health, does not mean that we are no longer to use penicillin for the treatment of lobar pneumonia or insulin for the treatment of diabetes mellitus, or to operate on someone who develops acute appendicitis. We are not to abandon the knowledge or methods of healing on the basis of creation now that we know healing on the basis of redemption. Some Christian groups, especially those in the Pentecostalist tradition, have taught that once we have become Christians we have no need of medical aid of any kind, for natural healing has now been replaced by supernatural healing. There is no basis for this attitude in Scripture, experience or common sense.

In the second place, healing on the basis of redemption takes healing on the basis of creation and places it in a new and larger context. In this context what could not be explained is now explicable, and what was hidden is now revealed. The origin of man's dis-ease in the world of God's creation is shown to be his rejection of God's will and purpose. It is from this rejection that evil, disease and death have come. These were recognised as problems by those who sought to heal on the basis of creation but they failed to resolve them for they sought their solution on a purely naturalistic basis. Healing on the basis of redemption showed that the origin of the problems of man's health and disease, whether physical, mental or spiritual, was his rebellion against God. Furthermore, it placed

17. Romans 8. 19-21.

these problems and their solution not simply in the context of nature and time, but in the context of God's purpose for man and of eternity.

Finally, healing on the basis of redemption completes the task which healing on the basis of creation had been unable to complete. It does what healing by creation could not do; it deals with the root causes of disease and death. It adds a new dimension to healing. To natural healing it adds supernatural healing which transcends, but does not replace the natural process. To healing in time, it adds the dimension of eternity.

We conclude, therefore, that healing on the basis of redemption does not make healing on the basis of creation superfluous. On the contrary, it takes natural healing up into itself and puts it into a larger and more efficient and effective context.

Where then do we go to find out about healing on the basis of redemption? We go to the Bible as the inspired record of God's revelation to man, and there we learn of the manner and method of our redemption by which we are restored to that well-being which God intended us to enjoy.

We have already looked briefly into the pages of the Old Testament and have seen there the delineation and characterisation of the health that is God's purpose for us, and the wholeness which he requires of us. There is a great deal about preventive medicine in the Old Testament which receives its sanction in God's demand for man's holiness in his character and his life. If we follow the advice which is set out in what has been called 'The Sanitary Code of the Pentateuch'<sup>18</sup> we shall find it will produce a healthy life-style even in the circumstances of our modern life. Alongside this sanitary code is the extensive sacrificial system of the Old Testament testifying by its detail to the holiness of God and the seriousness of man's sin, and serving in its observance as what we might call God's first-aid treatment for sin until the definitive treatment of Christ's death on the cross as the full and final sacrifice, could be provided and applied. By its insistence on sanitation and sacrifice, the Old Testament reminds us that health in the biblical concept consists of wholeness and holiness.

The Old Testament may have much to tell us about health, but it is not so successful in promoting effective healing. After centuries of divine discipline, the Children of Israel had still to find complete healing and perfect wholeness. Their disobedience of God's law and the formalism of their worship left them at the close of the Old Testament still in need of healing. So it is that the Old Testament closes with the promise of the prophet Malachi that the sun of righteousness would one day rise with healing in its rays, as the Jerusalem Bible translates it (Malachi 4:2). The

18. This is the title of a little-known book by an ordained sanitary inspector which was published by the Religious Tract Society in 1894. The author was the Rev. C. G. K. Gillespie.

reference is, of course, to the astronomical sun, but who shall say that the early Christian Fathers were wrong when they saw in this verse a prophecy of the healer and the saviour who was to come in the person of Jesus Christ?

So we turn over to the New Testament and begin with the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. There is no doubt that healing has a significant place in the pages of the Gospels. If we look at the Gospel of Mark we find that no less than 20% of its 661 verses are taken up with descriptions of the healing miracles of Jesus. If we exclude the discourse element of the Gospel we find that the miracles occupy 40% of the narrative part, and if we exclude the Passion narrative, the proportion is even greater. We cannot deny the place of healing in any adequate account of the ministry of Jesus. We are, of course, thinking mainly of the healing of physical disease.

Nevertheless it is clear from John's account of the healing of the paralysed man by the pool of Bethesda in John 5:1-9, that the primary purpose of Jesus' ministry was not the healing of man's physical ailments. You will recall there was a great multitude of sick folk in the five porches of Bethesda, and the word John uses for a multitude is that which describes the catch of 153 fish which he records in verse eleven of his chapter twenty-one. But the significant thing is that only one of this great multitude was healed, and he was not the most grateful of patients. If our Lord had been primarily interested in physical healing, would he not have healed the whole multitude? Another indication that Jesus did not come to earth primarily to heal men's bodies is the fact that only rarely did he take the initiative in healing. Out of the twenty-six healing miracles recorded in detail, he took the initiative in only four. We do not know exactly how many sick people Jesus did heal during his earthly ministry, but it must have been only a fraction of the total number of those who were sick in the Palestine of his day.

He did not, of course, confine his healing activity to the physical disease of those whom he healed. This is illustrated by the healing of the paralytic brought by four men to him at Capernaum as recorded in Mark 2:1-12 and its parallel passages. Jesus' first remark to him was, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'. This has sometimes been taken to mean that his paralysis was due to his sin, but this is not necessarily so. The remark provokes a charge of blasphemy from the scribes present. To this Jesus replies with a question, 'Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk"?' As Mark tells us, he did both and we believe that both were effective, in other words the whole man was healed, and not just his paralysed limbs.

There are a number of features which characterise the healing activity of Jesus which are worth noting. His healing was complete, that is to say that the disease or the disability was totally removed. His healing was immediate. There was only one exception to this, the blind man of

Bethsaida on whom Jesus had to lay his hands twice before he saw everything clearly (Mark 8:22-26). On the other hand, his healing did not confer immunity to disease in general or death in particular. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he died a natural death again in the course of time.

When we turn on to the book of the Acts we find more examples of healing which are similar to those recorded in the Gospels, but they are less frequent. The Gospels cover a period of three years and record twenty-six cases in detail and describe twelve occasions when groups were healed. The Acts on the other hand covers a period of thirty years and records only eight cases in detail and the healing of four groups.

The situation in the epistles is very different. Here, there is no mention of healing incidents such as we find in the Acts, although Paul does speak of performing signs and wonders and mighty works and he regards these as the signs of a true apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12; cp. Romans 15:19). Although there are no accounts of supernatural healing in the epistles, there are references to cases of natural healing as we have already seen. There are also two references to healing matters which we may more properly include under the heading of healing on the basis of redemption.

The first reference is in Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians in the twelfth chapter where we read of gifts of healing, or more strictly, gifts of healings. Some have suggested that the use of the plural *iamatōn* means that there was some degree of specialisation amongst the gifts. The nature of the gifts is not defined, but they are distinguished from the gift of miraculous powers in verse ten. The question arises of whether these gifts were an enhancement by the Holy Spirit of a natural gift of healing which the individual already possessed, or were new supernatural gifts unrelated to the previous natural gifts already possessed. This question is very relevant to our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the believer. There is also a further question, Do these gifts still continue in the Church today? The answer to this second question depends to some extent on our answer to the first one about the nature of the gifts of healing.

There are many tantalising questions which arise from this chapter and its mention of the gifts of healing, and they are tantalising just because they are unanswerable. We cannot explain, for instance, why these gifts of healing are mentioned only in the lists of gifts in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, and omitted from the lists given in Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Peter 4:10-11.

Equally tantalising are the questions which are raised by the second passage about healing which is found in the fifth chapter of the Epistle of James, the brother of our Lord. This passage knows nothing of a special gift of healing, but only of the role of elders in sickness. The first thing to notice is that it is the sick who are to take the initiative. 'Is any one of you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church . . .' (v.14). This speaks of



the elders in the plural which suggests healing was a corporate activity, not an individual one. The second thing to note is what the elders are to do. They are to do three things: To visit him, to pray over him and to anoint him with oil. There are two possible interpretations of this last instruction — the ritual and the medical. The verb used for anoint is not *chriō* which is the ritual term, but *aleiphō* which is used for the application of oil or ointment to the skin for toilet or medicinal purposes. In other words, what James is saying is that the elders should pray over the sick person and give him his medicine in the name of the Lord.<sup>19</sup> The third thing to notice is that in verse sixteen what has been described as the function of the elders in verse fourteen is now said to be possible for any members of the Church, although the anointing with oil is not now mentioned. The most important thing to notice, however, is that the main interest of this passage is in prayer. Prayer is mentioned in every verse and the passage ends by speaking of Elijah as an example of one who prayed and God answered his prayer. You will have noticed, of course, that there is no mention of laying on of hands, only of prayer and of the giving of medicine, if our interpretation of the reference to anointing with oil is correct.

One way to avoid the problems raised by this passage in James is to deny that it applies to the Church as a whole. This is done by Merrill Unger, who formerly taught Old Testament at Dallas Theological College.<sup>20</sup> He maintains that since the Epistle of James was addressed to 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' (James 1:1 RSV) it does not apply to the Gentiles. He claims that the promises about healing in James were based on the healing covenant made by God with the Children of Israel at Marah and recorded in Exodus 15:26. This healing covenant guaranteed instantaneous and complete healing to *Hebrew* Christians, but only until the time when Israel was set aside in unbelief and rejection of the Messiah. Unger supports these suggestions by saying that anointing with oil was a common Jewish practice and this is why it is not mentioned in any of the epistles which were addressed to Gentile Churches such as those to the Church in Corinth. This is an interesting suggestion, but not one which can be regarded as serious hermeneutics, even though it would explain the references to anointing with oil in Mark 6:13 and James 5:14 as applied to healing.

There we must leave our consideration of healing on the basis of redemption as we find it set out in Scripture. We leave it with many questions unanswered and many details unclear. What is clear, however, is that the Church has a vital concern for the restoration of complete well-being as the purpose of God for man.

19. B. B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, Scribners, New York, 1918, pp. 171-2.

20. M. F. Unger, *Demons in the World Today*, Tyndale House, Wheaton, Illinois, 1971, pp. 127-9.

## Healing in the Church today

Healing is a matter of perennial concern to everybody and not merely of antiquarian interest to the specialist. In this final section we consider healing in the Church today in the light of what we know of the practice of the apostolic Church.

We suggested earlier that there were two sources of ambiguity about the term healing. The first arose from the concept of health, and the second from the method or means employed in healing. It should be clear by now what we mean by health and healing. Healing is the restoration of the whole man to a dynamic state of complete physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being which is what we mean by health. It includes the salvation of the soul and the redemption of the body, and extends to the whole of man's being and life in this world and in the world to come. The means by which such healing is achieved are provided by God in creation and redemption, so that we can truly say that all healing is of God on whatever basis it is obtained.

When people speak of healing today in a Christian context they usually mean healing in its physical aspect. We shall therefore confine our attention to this aspect of healing in this final section. We are taking for granted, however, that this physical aspect cannot be separated from the complete healing of the whole man, and that no healing is complete which is concerned solely with disease of the body, or of the mind, in isolation from the rest of man.

From the point of view of physical healing there are three models which we can identify in the experience of the apostolic Church which are relevant to the practice of healing in the Church today. We may designate these three models as follows:

- The Timothy model.
- The Aeneas model.
- The Pauline model.

### 1. *The Timothy model*

In 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul writes to his true son in the faith, 'You ought to take a little wine sometimes as medicine for your stomach because you are sick so often' (*The Living Bible* version). Timothy had a chronic dyspepsia and Paul was prescribing fermented grape juice (*oinos*) for him to take for this condition. It is well-known that alcohol stimulates the secretion of gastric juice and will benefit some forms of dyspepsia. This was apparently known to Paul.

Here then we have an example of treatment or healing on the basis of creation. We have already mentioned another case of this kind which is recorded in the epistles. This was Epaphroditus, left to recover from his near fatal disease when he visited Paul in prison in Rome (Philippians 2:27). There was also Trophimus of Ephesus left at Miletus sick when Paul moved on (2 Timothy 4:20). The implication is that Paul left

Trophimus at Miletus to recover by the natural process of healing from whatever disease he had, and also that Timothy would not be surprised at Paul's doing this. These cases mean that a Christian approach to healing does not necessarily involve the exercise of a special gift of healing or the expectation of a supernatural cure. We shall never know why Paul did not exercise his gift of healing to heal his fellow-workers but left them to be healed on the basis of creation.

### 2. *The Aeneas model*

In Acts 9:32-34 we have the account of how a man called Aeneas was healed by the apostle Peter at Lydda, the modern Lod. Aeneas has a pagan name, that of the hero of Troy whose story was told by the Roman poet Virgil. He is usually supposed to have been a Christian in view of the reference in verse thirty-one to Peter coming to the saints in Lydda amongst whom he found Aeneas, a man whose legs had been paralysed for eight years. Peter goes to his home and to his bedside and says quite simply, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and make your bed' (v.34). Luke tells us that he got up immediately, something that he had not done for eight years.

This was a miracle of healing, a supernatural cure. It is quite impossible to explain cures like this on the basis of hysteria, where the person is just waiting for someone to come along and tell him to get up and snap out of it. This psychological theory for the explanation of the healing miracles of the New Testament arose out of the medical experience of shell-shock and its effects in the First World War.<sup>21</sup> It was adopted by various authors, notably Leslie Weatherhead in his book, *Psychology, Religion and Healing* (1951),<sup>22</sup> but it is quite untenable. A man like Aeneas who had been paralysed for eight years, even if the original cause of the paralysis had been hysterical, would by then have contracted joints and muscles wasted by disuse. It would have been quite impossible for him to respond immediately to a command to get up and resume his normal activity. The immediate and complete removal of his disability could not have occurred from natural causes. It was what the New Testament calls a mighty work (*dunamis*).

### 3. *The Pauline model*

The third model is that provided by Paul's thorn in the flesh which he refers to in 2 Corinthians 12:7. The most probable diagnosis in this case is a chronic relapsing disease, of which benign tertian or vivax malaria is the most probable as Sir William Ramsay originally suggested.<sup>23</sup>

21. E. R. Micklem, *Miracles and the New Psychology*, Oxford University Press, 1922.

22. L. D. Weatherhead, *Psychology, Religion and Healing*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1952, second edition, section one, chapter 1, 'Christ's Healing Miracles'.

23. W. M. Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1902, sixth edition, p. 94.

For a full discussion of the identity of the thorn in the flesh see John Wilkinson, *Health and Healing: Studies in New Testament Principles and Practice*, Handsel Press, Edinburgh, 1980, chap. 11.

There are a number of things which are worth noting about this thorn in the flesh and its treatment. Paul tells us that it was given to him by God and for a specific purpose. That purpose was to keep him from being too proud of his special spiritual experiences. In other words it was an antidote to spiritual pride. Although it was given by God, it was provided by Satan (v.7). Paul goes on to tell how he prayed three times for its removal, but it was not removed. God treated it in another way. Instead of removing the disease, God increased Paul's resistance to it. In well-known words, God told him, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power (*dunamis*) is made perfect in weakness'. In other words, God did not remove Paul's disease, he increased his resistance to it and changed his attitude to it. The result was that when the weakness caused by the disease came upon him, then he experienced the power of God mobilising in his support, so that when he was weakened by the disease, he was in fact strengthened by God. Therefore, he was content to continue to suffer from the disease knowing that God would support him during its attacks upon him.

The question arises, Can we say that Paul was healed if his disease was not removed but continued to attack him? Let us ask another question. Can we say that Paul was saved when sin was still present in him? He had been forgiven the penalty of sin. He had been given the Holy Spirit to overcome the power of sin, but he was not yet free from the presence of sin. If we can say that Paul was saved, then can we not equally say that he was healed? He would not be fully saved until he was glorified, and he would not be fully healed until he assumed his imperishable resurrection body. Nevertheless, can we not say that he was saved and healed as far as he could be during his earthly life?

Paul's experience shows that healing on the basis of redemption in this life does not necessarily mean the removal of disease. What it does mean is a change of attitude towards disease and the promise of the provision of God's strength when disease causes weakness.

These three models are still to be met with in the experience of the Church today, and even within our own experience.

The case of Timothy represents healing on the basis of creation and we all have experience of that, whether it be self-healing or healing which results from the advice and skill of others. There can be no doubt that by far the majority of the sicknesses of Christian people are healed on this basis.

The case of Aeneas is more difficult, for such cases of healing are outside the experience of most of us. We would not, however, deny their possibility on that basis. If malignant disease, for instance, can disappear on the basis of creation, then it may be expected to do so on the basis of redemption also.

The more experience we have of disease amongst Christian people, the

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more relevant does the case of Paul's thorn in the flesh become. For Paul the curtain was temporarily lifted to enable him to understand something of the purpose behind his disease and God's method of dealing with it. We can profit from his experience. When we are confronted with some disease, we can pray as Paul did and leave God to answer our prayer in his own way, which may not be by the removal of the disease. God does not deliver us from the experience of death, but he does change the character of that experience from one of defeat and fear to one of victory and joy. In the same way he may not deliver us from disease, but he will help us to understand its purpose and to withstand its suffering.