

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S HEALING MINISTRY? BIBLICAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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One of the church's foremost missions is also one of its most neglected. This is the ministry of healing. An examination of this neglected ministry brings us closer to the reason why the spiritual life and vitality of too many churches seem to be at such a low ebb. Perhaps the greatest reason for this neglect is the ignoring by Western-influenced churches of the biblical theological foundations of the church's call to a healing ministry. The purpose of this article is to examine these biblical perspectives and to suggest some practical implications.

Luke chapter 9, verses 1-4, summarizes very well the theological challenge to a commitment to the *understanding of and involvement in* the church's healing ministry:

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: "Take nothing for the journey - no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town". (NIV)

According to the above passage, the challenge to the church today is a threefold one. God's people are being called to be:

- Healers who proclaim and demonstrate a *total gospel* of forgiveness and healing,
- Healers of the *whole person*,
- Healers in a *healing community*.

If the church, through its local congregations, can come to grips with these theological cornerstones of healing, then we can be assured that this ministry will truly be transformed from a neglected imperative to an all out initiative, from a maybe to a must. This should be a priority task for the church as we face the alienation and increasing marginalization of persons in the new millennium.

Healers who proclaim and demonstrate a total gospel

The total gospel according to Luke 9:2 is to "preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick..." (NIV). Traditionally, Western-influenced churches have abandoned healing and health care delivery to the medical establishment. Even those involved in medical missions have relied on medical professionals to do the job as separate from the day-to-day mission of the local congregation. Thus we in the church have tended to be guilty of a "schizophrenic" or split mind approach whereby we isolate our members' use of medical science, as well as psychology, from the realities of spirituality and the need of the church to be a healing community. However, health is not only the business of the professionals - medical, psychological, or any other. It is also the business of the church.

If we are to take scripture as the basis of our functioning, then it becomes apparent from the verses in Luke that one theological cornerstone of a commitment to the church's ministry of healing is that it is a mandate of Christ and one that should be obeyed. This mandate comes from the very will and love of Christ. Thus, when Jesus called his twelve disciples, "he sent them out" as disciples, not only to "preach the kingdom", but also to "heal the sick." As apostles of healing, we are sent. The Greek word for "he sent" is *apesteilen*. We can see that it has the same root as the word "apostle". The apostles were ones sent, and so, as ones sent, all in the church are to be apostles of healing.

Once we make a commitment to Christ, we are taking up the challenge to be involved in a ministry of reconciliation and healing. This is also a commitment to those to whom Christ himself is committed. John the Baptist questioned Jesus, saying, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Notice how Jesus replied: "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: 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. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Luke 7:19, 22, 23 - NIV) If Christ had a concern for the healing of the suffering as central to his messiahship, how much more should we help the church to see this mission of healing as central to our discipleship and apostleship? What does healing have to do with being "sent" to "preach the kingdom of God"? The twelve disciples and we who are disciples in the church today are sent to heal as part of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Healing is a demonstration of the kingdom of God. We see this in Luke 9: 11 where Christ first proclaims the kingdom of God and then heals. "The crowds learned about it (the feeding of the five thousand) and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing."

The concept of the "kingdom of God" as projected by the church in today's world often lacks relevance. This is because we fail to show the world in what ways the kingdom affects our existence - ways that can be empirically observed or experienced. When we minister healing as part of the proclamation of the kingdom, the medium is the message. The Word of God becomes incarnated into human interaction. Healing, then, is a sign which points persons to the kingdom, so that they may know Christ as lord and king and become his loyal subjects. In other words, healing is central to evangelism.

Christ's preaching and healing show that once we are a part of the kingdom of God, we are freed from the oppressive reign of sin, Satan and suffering - freed to be under the liberating, healing reign of God. This is the manifestation of the kingdom. Thus if we are labourers seeking to extend God's kingdom, if we are to be truly vehicles of the kingdom in *deeds* as well as words, then healing has to be a part of our ministry.

The real question then, is this: "How much has health and healing been a part of our proclamation and working out of the kingdom of God in today's world?" Traditionally, we have portrayed salvation as primarily related to moral forgiveness and transformation but hardly related to suffering. Too often we forget that the purpose of the cross was also to destroy sickness and suffering. God created us to be perfect and to be in his own image (Genesis 1:27). This is the ultimate purpose of our salvation experience. Yet we read in Genesis 3:9 that our basic problem of sin or alienation from God leaves us unprotected and thus vulnerable to a disintegration of self which leads to the disease of the body, mind and spirit, and disharmony with others. Furthermore, the devil's direct activity is a disintegrating force.

How then does God meet our basic human problems of alienation, as well as disintegration and disease? These are met by Christ's double work on the cross, of forgiving, reconciling and redeeming on the one hand, and healing or re-integration on the other. Isaiah, the prophet, tells us that "by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5, NIV). Guilt is met by forgiveness as well as the healing of its consequences, as in the case of the paralytic (Mark 2:5-12). The Psalmist speaks of God's double work of forgiveness and healing when he says, "Praise the Lord, O my soul; and forget not all his benefits - who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103: 2-3).

The above passages, and other similar ones, clearly point to the fact that under the reign of God, healing is inseparable from salvation. To put it another way, salvation is healing. Where God reigns there is healing. Christ commands the church to manifest that healing (or salvation) as we proclaim that the good news of the kingdom, or reign, of God is available to whosoever will. The primary

concern of God's kingdom is the person's greatest good - *summum bonum*. Christ, as the good shepherd, clearly states, "I am come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10). Salvation is all about this "abundant" life.

Preaching by itself will be of no avail when there are so many in our congregations and surrounding communities whose sufferings, hurts, struggles with personality weaknesses, and sicknesses are neglected. Do we as leaders and members of our churches truly know who are the sick and silent sufferers? Are such persons made aware of the total work of God who "forgives sins and heals diseases?" There exists a need that we have to meet. This is why God, out of his love and concern, gives us a mandate and calls us to be the *sent* ones and to proclaim the gospel as the total gospel.

Healers of the whole person

The church has a health problem! In fact, it could be said that the health problem of the church is our misunderstanding of what is health. The whole person approach to health and human development is the most needed and yet the most neglected in both Western medicine and Christianity. This has led to a situation where, in both these disciplines, the individual has become artificially divided into various aspects that become dealt with as completely separate entities.

This dualistic philosophy promulgated by the philosopher Descartes, claims that the mind and the body are completely independent entities, which in no way affect one another. The Western philosophy of scientific materialism also seeks to negate the reality of a human spirit - an aspect of ourselves that exists in relationship with a divine spirit. Given this problem, it is even more important to recognize that the holistic or whole person approach to human health and salvation is very much rooted in scriptures.

Firstly, when God created Adam, he breathed "into his nostrils" and he became a living *nephesh* (Genesis 2:7). This Hebrew word for soul sees the human individual as a totality rather than as a body with a compartmentalized soul. Secondly, we observe that Jesus gave the disciples "power and authority" not only to "drive out all demons," (dealing with the spiritual) but also to miraculously "cure diseases" in the natural realm. In addition, then, to the theme of power and authority, there is the recognition that in the biblical worldview, there is suffering and healing - both natural and spiritual. Certainly this would seem to point to the reality of seeing persons as whole persons. Thirdly, in Thessalonians 5:23, Paul prays: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Surely there is no place in the Bible for a "spirit-body" or a "soul-body" dualism.

The errors of Western thought have sidetracked the church from a theology of healing. Thus wholeness is not sufficiently a central notion in the church's ministry. How many of us seek wholeness as we look up to the cross? How much does the church challenge the sick and suffering in both body and mind to struggle with the unique dimension of the spiritual so that they might find ultimate freedom and thus wholeness?

As disciples *sent* to heal, we need to rediscover the biblical view of the person and of health, healing and salvation as these relate to the whole person. Let us, therefore, challenge the church as we seek to avoid the travesty of the patchwork approach to wholeness.

Let the healing of the whole person - body, mind, spirit, social relationships and our relationship to the environment not be a neglected possibility but an accessible reality! Let it be all or nothing. If it is not all, it will ultimately be nothing!

Healers in a healing community

We, in the church, cannot heal as isolated individuals; we need others. This is demonstrated in Luke 9:3-4. While Jesus told his disciples that they should "take nothing for the journey - no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic", yet he continued, "Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town". Perhaps one of the greatest causes of failures in the church's ministry of health and healing is that too many congregations function like theatres instead of healing communities. Churches or chapels with platforms as stages for the clergy and robed choirs to perform and pews for individualistic observers are too often the order of the day. Instead, the crying need is for organic communities where each person is as important as the other, and each has a friend.

When we look beyond the needs of the world's suffering, poor and bound, we need to ask ourselves: "What should be the motivating force behind the church as a community of healing?" Love is the greatest motivator for healing in and by the congregation. God heals simply because he loves. Love is the greatest commandment (Matthew 27:37-40). It motivates concern for others. This concern demands caring in situations where there is sickness and suffering. The apostle John underscores this message when he says "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers ... This is how we know what love is - Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers ... let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:14,16,18). Paul exhorts us to "do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6: 10). If we are to be obedient to our call to a ministry of healing, then our congregations should not only be therapeutic communities, but also total care communities.

As a therapeutic, total care community, there are certain elements of any local congregation that are not found in a secular environment. These include:

- a fellowship formed by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2: 18-22);
- gifts of the Spirit for ministry;
- proclamation of the gospel as the good news of grace;
- teaching for Christian growth; and most importantly,
- prayer as our means of access to God.

In all these activities, the church is directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; Acts 1:8). These are unique elements. Hence each congregation has something peculiar to offer to the world in its ministry of healing. Should these elements be hidden from persons in need as we neglect this ministry by avoiding adequate outreach for community?

Practical ways of being a community in healing

What are some practical ways in which each congregation can become a community in healing? We need, first of all, to rid ourselves of the image of the church setting as that of a theatre or stage. The local church should be envisioned as a hospital - a place, not only for the drama of preaching and ritual, but primarily for the healing of the sick. Once, a minister friend and I reflected on how his church could help psychologically ill patients in a practical way. He came to the conclusion that "So often it seems that in the church we seem to pay more attention to the well than to those who are sick". As part of its stewardship, the local congregation as a healing community should mobilize all its talents and resources to demonstrate to all that God is a God of medicines, persons and miracles. If the church is to maintain relevance and meet the challenges of the new millennium, then each congregation needs to be involved in the following respective activities, even in some small way.

1. God has given us the materials and skills in the church to carry out a medical ministry. Christ himself pointed to the need for medicines when he said that it is those who are sick who have need for a physician (Mark 2: 17). We must not forget, however, that natural medicine is medicine too! Herbs, aromas, music, wholesome food and the beauty of nature are referred to in the Bible as healing and health-giving agents. God also provides for exercise and the beauty of nature.

"Health for all by the Year 2000" was the main goal that the World Health Organization (WHO) set for this planet. As we see by the many health problems around us, this goal has not been achieved. What can we do, however, to make this a reality within the shortest possible time? The health experts say that justice is necessary for health care. Here, health care is a right rather than a commodity. This can only come about in the context of integrated communities where each person takes responsibility for promoting the health of the other. Therefore, if all local congregations, worldwide, in every city, town or village, took this mandate seriously and trained at least two members to function as lay community health promoters and health workers, as well as community organizers, there would be a health revolution on this planet. The role of community organizer is vital to health care, as poverty and injustice are the greatest causes of ill health in the world. This model of the church member as trained village, suburban or inner-city health promoter, health worker and community organizer is an apt and necessary one.

2. Christ has also given us human resources to exercise skills in counselling and mental health services. In Galatians 6:2, the apostle Paul exhorts us to "carry each other's burdens". Indeed, there are many in our local communities and congregations who are suffering with anxiety, depression, personality problems, control problems, difficulty in marriage, with children, with the job, with finances, with their sexuality and with relationships in general. Spiritual problems such as the need for commitment to Christ and to experience his Spirit, a loss of faith, doubt, hopelessness, knowing God's will, and feeling far from God, also need to be addressed by counselling. Daily also, we face the crises of death, divorce and loneliness and daily we need to respond. In fact, we should be bold to say that once it is consistent with its mandate, given the attitude of oppressive societies, the church is the only institution able to generate the total service commitment needed to rehabilitate those most neglected by others. Such persons would include the addicted, the mentally ill and homeless persons on the streets all over the world.

The counselling service is one that can be performed by non-professionals from among ministers and lay leaders, as well as human service health professionals. All church members can engage in informal counselling, or intentional listening. This could be done in settings such as home visitation and on the occasions of life changes, ordinances and religious ceremonies such as funerals, weddings and the blessing, or baptism of children.

3. Christ has given his church the most powerful tool for whole person healing - prayer. The apostle James makes it abundantly clear that it is the inescapable duty of elders, and also each member, to pray for the sick in the congregation. James exhorts us, "Is any of you in trouble? He should

pray. ... Is any of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him ... And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well ... 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" (James 5:13-16).

We in the church cannot call ourselves disciples of Christ and yet be sceptical about God's ability to heal miraculously as a result of our prayers. This is as equally important as God's ability to transform the morality of a person as a result of our evangelism. Each church should have groups that intercede for the sick, and teams that go out to pray for the sick at home and in hospitals. There should be prayers for the sick in the liturgy of worship services. Indeed, the opportunities for this aspect of a healing ministry are many.

To what degree are we engaging in a ministry of healing to the whole person in our congregations and health missions? How much are we promoting this in national and international health programmes? It is at this point of stewardship that the church cannot afford to differentiate between its natural and supernatural resources. Too often churches take the side of providing either "secular style" medical and counselling services, on one hand, or prayers and charismatic healing, or use of spiritual gifts, on the other, with little effort to use both as God-given resources in healing. Medicine and divine healing, as well as counselling, mental health and community services are God's avenues to the healing of body and mind, our spirits and social problems. Thus all these resources of God are to be equally honoured and used in our stewardship of healing.

A total ministry of "medicines, persons and miracles" needs to involve fellowship-building activities in small groups - house groups, support groups and enrichment groups for such as singles, married couples, youth and the elderly. These could also be for persons with special need for support in bereavement and for personal struggles such as alcoholism, drug addiction and domestic violence.

In fact, this total ministry of the church as a healing community is not only for its members but also can be part of a community-based approach for the surrounding village, suburban or inner city neighbourhood or region. This would involve community organizing and socio-political advocacy. Above all, we should not forget that the church should not marginalize those who heal, labelling them as "eccentrics," "super-specialists" or "super-human." Similarly, those committed to healing do best not to distance themselves out of frustration with the church's failures. They, too, will need the support of the total healing community. Healers also can become wounded.

The imbuelement of power

The ministry of counselling with, praying for and tending to the sick can be a very demanding and oftentimes frustrating task. However, God gives us power to transcend the limitations of science in dealing with the spiritual diseases inflicted on people by Satan. Jesus saw his healing ministry in the context of the kingdom of God or God's reign of liberating power. In Luke 9:11, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom precedes his healing activities. To his disciples, however, first "He gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases," then he sent them out "to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick." The Greek word used for power is *dunamis* and it has the same root as the word "dynamite." This usage is most apt, for indeed God is a God whose power and might are such that of him Christ said, "With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible". Thus the power of Christ was given not only over the supernatural but also over natural evil - the power to cure diseases. Many natural diseases, even though understood, still have no cure today. When we believe that we have conquered all natural disease, some new strain of virus or disorder of the environment is inflicted upon us. Ultimately then, only God has absolute power over nature and natural evil. Thus we need God's power to heal those sick through natural as well as supernatural causes.

The **dunamis** that Christ gave to his disciples is available to all who serve the sick and oppressed. Christ's atoning death and his triumphal resurrection are supreme examples of this power. It comes through the daily spiritual guidance and the exercise of his spiritual gifts that come when we submit daily to the Holy Spirit of God (I Corinthians 12). Most of all, power and authority come through prayer. Remembering their experience of futility as they battled with the disease of the epileptic boy, the disciples asked Jesus, "Why couldn't we drive it (the demon) out?" "Because you have such little faith", answered Jesus. "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move" (Matthew 17:20, 21). Jesus also pointed out, according to some manuscripts, "This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting" (cf. also Mark 9:29).

As *sent* ones, how much of a place are we willing to give to the recognition of divine resources in our health and healing ministries? How much are we willing to challenge the church to receive this power?

Summary and Conclusion

The human condition cries out for a healing church. The healing congregation, with members as "apostles of healing," is the fulfillment of the mandate that Christ has given to us to spread the good news through evangelism and mission. In proclaiming a total gospel of salvation, we demonstrate it practically by ministering healing. Here "the medium becomes the message". Healing is both a sign pointing to, and a manifestation of the results of persons coming to be in the kingdom of God.

Healing of the whole person - body, mind, spirit, the socio-economic and environmental - is the practical outworking of God's salvation. This healing has its definitive place in the local church. In this context, the congregation would function as a healing community rather than a place for empty ritual and individualism. Christ gives power through the Holy Spirit and his gifts for healing in the church today. Practical possibilities include medical healing (including natural medicine), counselling and mental health services, prayer for divine healing, as well as community building and advocacy. The non-professional laity would be the main caregivers, working primarily through health promotion, fellowship building and community organizing among the poor.

The church worldwide has been active in healing. Nevertheless the neglect is still significant. The national and global cries of the 1990s almost seem to outstrip our efforts.

As we face the third millennium after the birth of the one who sends us to heal, how will the church, and we its members, respond to his challenge?