

The Master's Apprentices

It is often claimed that the reason that Christians should expect and exercise healing today is that we should follow the example of Jesus in his ministry. We will return to the problem of imitation in due course, but the answer begins in theology.

Jesus performed miracles not simply because he could, but because he was pointing to something. This is why they are called 'signs'. They 'signify' something about Jesus. The signs he performed pointed particularly to his 'Messiahship', not merely as demonstrations of his power. It is notable that at the end of his Gospel, John says, "But these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."¹⁹

It is not that we will continue performing signs so that people will believe. The idea that performing signs convinces people to believe is foreign to Jesus' thinking²⁰ and in his mind proves nothing.²¹ Jesus regularly withdraws from healing the crowd to preach the good news²² which he sees as his mission.²³ In fact, the healings often prevent him from doing this.

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It is also claimed that we should heal people because we are promised that "...anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."²⁴ On any reasonable reading of this passage the greater things cannot mean healing. Can we do better than raising a dead man to healthy life again? Can we restore withered arms to complete functionality? Can we heal "bleeding" at a touch? Blindness

at a word? Do we hear of these things happening today? No! And these are only works on an equal footing with those of Jesus. How can we expect to exceed them? Jesus' work is to establish the kingdom of God, to draw a people to himself.²⁵ Now we can see how the works we do can be greater than Jesus'. The "greater works" are not signs and wonders but the spreading of the Gospel to all nations. Jesus never saw this happen, but it was accomplished within years of his death!²⁶

So we come to imitation. On several occasions we are to imitate Jesus. But what does this mean? It cannot mean that we are to live in Galilee, or claim we are the Lord and Judge of the Universe, or be transfigured, or die on the cross for sins? Yet some want to say we should imitate his miracles. Why should we imitate him in his miracles of healing but not in walking on water or feeding multitudes with inadequate means. If we could feed thousands with a few loaves and fishes, would it not do immeasurably more to relieve world suffering than all the cures of back or neck pain? A worrying feature of the healing movement is that its claims are strangely slanted.

Upon what basis do we claim to imitate Jesus? How do we know in what areas we should imitate him? We must take care not to apply the commands of the Bible beyond the way that the Bible does. For example, in John 20:21 we are sent as the Father has sent Jesus, specifically in regard to forgiving sins. In other words, we are to accomplish the work that Jesus has come to do in bringing forgiveness of sins.²⁷ We are also told to imitate Jesus in regard to self-sacrifice,²⁸ suffering,²⁹ and evangelism.³⁰

Pepsi or Coke?

We are left with two alternatives on this issue, each with its own implications. Scripture clearly teaches that God can and does heal both spontaneously and in response to prayer. He can use so-called "natural" and "super-natural" means. In the end, all healing comes from God. The distinction between the natural and the supernatural is a

19. John 20:31

20. Luke 16:29-31

21. Matthew 7:21-23; Matthew 24:24-25

22. eg. Mark 1:37-38; Luke 4:42-44

23. Luke 4:18-21

24. John 14:12

25. John 6:38-40

26. Colossians 1:23

27. see John 6:38-42

28. Ephesians 5:1-2

29. 1 Thessalonians 1:6

30. 1 Corinthians 10:33-11:1

false one. Whether it is the surgeon's knife, the physician's chemical or Jesus' spittle, it is God that brings healing.

Healing for all is an unreal alternative. It is not promised in Scripture and there are clear examples in the Bible where people are not healed despite specific faithful prayer. Neither do we see it happen today. Even the leaders of today's healing ministries do not claim a complete success rate. There is always some reason for there not being healing, usually a 'lack of faith' on the part of the sick person. This is patently unlike Jesus' healings (what faith can there be in a dead person!) or even the healing in James 5 where it is the elder's faith that is referred to. It removes the sense of straining forward to be in heaven, and looking forward to the great day when the curse of pain and decay will be reversed.³¹

The real alternative is suffering. Our master was the Suffering Servant, and in this way we are to follow him. Through suffering we are built to maturity³² as we

look not to the false hopes of this life, but to the hope of the life to come.³³ Suffering becomes something which, though we do not enjoy it, brings real joy as we realise that God is refining and testing us. We can say with Job, "Though he slay me yet will I trust him."³⁴ Is this not real faith? Is this not the child-like dependence of the creature upon the all-knowing Creator?

The contrast is shattering. Instead of there being guilt when healing does not eventuate, there is understanding of the higher meaning behind all that happens. There is no longer the agony of trying to work up more and more faith to get what we pray for. Instead, we can rest in God as the one whom we will love even if he kills us. There is a growing reliance on God for all his gifts and a deepening of the sense of his control of all things for our good.

In the end, however, whether you believe that God will heal you or not is unimportant.

All that matters is that "Christ is all and is in all."³⁵ It is not an issue that we should let divide us, but should be subject to a careful scrutiny of the facts and the Bible. If Christianity is true, then the facts will fit our theology. We must not interpret the Scripture by our experience; we must look at the world to see if our theology holds true. In a recent publication, Dr Peter May has made these statements:

"Is it too much to ask, after twenty years of inquiry for me to find one claim to such frankly physical miraculous healing which can be validated?"

"To learn that Oral Roberts has brought physical healing to one million people doesn't fill me with any confidence. One valid example would be worth a great deal. The man in the gospel story who had a

withered hand must have had an interrupted nerve supply, wasted muscles and seized-up joints. In an instant and at a word of command, without even the laying on of hands, we are told in

effect that the nerves became intact, the muscle bulk was restored and the joints moved freely. Any doctor seeing that today would be shocked to his boots! The story would be headline news. Just think of the fuss they made over Uri Geller when he appeared to bend a fork!"³⁶

This is from an author who claims to believe in God's miraculous healing! Even more interesting is the comment in the same book from the Editor who says:

"The years...have been ones in which I have come to experience and appreciate more fully aspects of the charismatic renewal."³⁷

"I myself would like to believe that lots of miracles are happening, but like Peter May find hard evidence difficult to come by. The clear miracles happen somewhere else; the things that happen when I am there are more psychosomatic (though no less real and worthwhile for that) and/or rather trivial

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31. Revelation 22:3

32. Romans 5:1-5; James 1:2-4

33. Romans 8:24-25

34. Job 13:15 (AV)

35. Colossians 3:11

36. 'A Response to Tony Dale', p79, 80 *Signs, Wonders and Healing: When Christians Disagree*, Dr Peter May, John Goldingay (Ed), (IVP, 1989)

37. 'A Personal Introduction', p181, *ibid.*

and not very like the kind of thing related in the gospels and Acts."³⁸

Are we people of truth? If so we should be able to gain clear evidence that these things happen, or don't! Peter May's conclusion after twenty years of careful follow-up is that it is not happening!

A Way Forward

Healing is an issue that is dividing us in many ways. But the most important way it is dividing us is that it is dividing us from the Gospel. We keep wanting (rightly) to see people restored to health but fail to see that, more importantly, God wants all men to be saved. This must be our priority, not some temporary "body-work" which will be destroyed in the end.

We must be careful what we teach and tell people to expect. If God chooses not to heal, the moral and personal devastation that it brings can be awful. As someone who has been in medicine and now in full-time pastoral work for only a short time, the number of bitter people I have seen from unrealised healing far outweighs any positive results I have seen from the 'ministries of healing' exercised in our city.

In the end, this can be yet another attempt to control our own lives—a deep-seated, pagan quest for power. After all, it is in weakness that our God shows his strength, and in foolishness that he shows his wisdom.³⁹ Is it any surprise that in suffering he shows his kindness?

As Evangelicals, committed to our Creator and the knowledge of him through Scripture, let us accept that God can heal. Let us pray for healing, and visit doctors, but above all trust him that he knows best and is in control of all things for our good.

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us....And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose."⁴⁰

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38. 'Conclusion:Analysing the Issue', p181, *ibid*.

39. 1 Corinthians 1:25ff

40. Romans 8:18,28

INSIGHTS

It was with interest that I read your 'Why I don't believe in spiritual gifts' in *Briefing* #29. I would add a couple more notes if there is space in your column.

Anyone found preoccupied with 'spiritual gifts' may be in danger of being misled. Let me explain.

It should be noted that 'spiritual gifts' is a contraction or short-hand form of 'gifts of the Spirit'. There is a difference between the two phrases. One focuses on gifts while the other leans towards the Giver. Both cannot mean the same. Our self-centred materialistic predisposition longs for the gifts rather than acknowledging the Giver.

The passage in 1 Corinthians 12 does not focus on gifts but draws on a metaphor that demonstrates God's care and provision for his people. It is an extension of "God made it grow" in chapter 3:7. To say that 1 Corinthians 12 deals with 'spiritual gifts' is to fall prey to a quirk of the English language. A deception has taken place.

However, 'spiritual gift' (singular) occurs once—in Romans 1:11. Here, Paul's intention is to 'follow-up' the believers in Rome. There is a salvific aspect which is exemplified in the remainder of the letter. Moreover, this gift can be practiced by any of us. There is nothing special as implied in 1 Corinthians.

Let us not be misguided by the idiosyncrasies of the English language and so find ourselves over-concerned with spiritual gifts. But rather, let us all engage in that 'spiritual gift': grounding others in the faith.

That is why I don't believe in 'spiritual gifts'.

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