

Healing and the Holy Spirit

A manifestation of the “already, but not yet” kingdom of God

Cara Pfeiffer

Isaiah prophesies that physical healings will accompany God in coming to save Israel from its enemies: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy” (Isa. 35:4–6; NRSV). A version of that message of hope is found on the lips of Jesus when he responds to the question brought by John’s disciples: “Are you the one who is to

Jesus in effect identifies himself as Messiah by pointing to these works of healing: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear . . .”

come?” Jesus invokes Isaiah’s prophecy and in effect says that his acts of healing and proclamation of good news to the poor fulfill the prophet’s promise of salvation. Jesus in effect identifies himself as Messiah by pointing to these works of healing: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear . . . (Matt. 11:4–5).

Thus we see that Jesus’ ministry of healing did not stand alone but was connected to a theology of salvation, restoration, and messianic expectation. Matthew twice summarizes

Jesus’ ministry as “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness” (Matt. 4:23, cf. Matt. 9:35). Healing was not an add-on to Jesus’ ministry; it was integral to Jesus’ messianic, kingdom-centered life.¹ And as we will see in hearing a personal testimony and engaging in a study of scripture, healing is not an add-on to faith but is the substance of things hoped for.

Pentecostal hermeneutics

Having been raised in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (ICFG), a Pentecostal denomination, I heard much about

both the Holy Spirit and healing. In fact, even the name of the denomination includes both themes: “Foursquare Gospel” is a didactic tool representing Jesus as the Savior, Healer, Baptizer in the Holy Spirit, and Soon Coming King.

In a Pentecostal hermeneutic, theology is usually developed at the intersection of experiential knowledge and a careful reading of scripture. In what follows, I will approach the issue of healing and the Holy Spirit in true Pentecostal fashion through the case study of a dear family friend, Crystal, who has been seeing clearly through a glass eye for the last thirty-nine years. Crystal sat down with me for more than an hour this past June at the annual ICFG International Convention in Columbus, Ohio, and told me her story. What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation, detailing her story of healing.² After recounting her story I will end with my own reflections on healing and the Holy Spirit, based on an “already, but not yet” view of the kingdom of God.

Crystal's story

Crystal is a middle-aged woman originally from the hilly country of southeastern Ohio, but now living in Toledo, Ohio, with her husband. They have five children and six grandchildren. She is an ordained minister in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel where she pastored for twenty-three years with her husband before being appointed a divisional superintendent, the capacity in which she now serves. Crystal has an effervescent personality, but she is also a straight talker and a deep thinker.

Crystal was not initially raised in a Christian home but always heard church bells in the distance and wanted to go to church. She began going to a Moravian church when she was six, and shortly afterward her parents began going to church as well.

When Crystal was two, doctors discovered that she had a detached retina, which caused her to go blind in one eye. During adolescence she had to have her eye surgically removed and replaced with a glass eye.

The eye was hemorrhaging and deteriorating and they discovered that somehow an infection settled in my left eye. They watched it close until I was thirteen to make sure that it never came back and that it never transferred into the other eye. So at that point they knew that

eventually the eye would have to come out, but they wanted me to grow as old as I could, so that the socket would be the same size. So when I was nine the eye was just hemorrhaging so bad. I'd be playing and I'd scream, and before I could scream and grab the eye, the pain would be gone. It was just hemorrhaging right in my head, and the doctors told my parents I had a 50/50 chance of hemorrhaging to death because it was deteriorating so bad. So my mom, she just gave her heart to the Lord and said, "If you help me take Crystal through this and she can grow up feeling whole about herself, I'll give you my life."

After Crystal's parents became Christians they got filled with the "baptism of the Holy Spirit,"³ along with their pastor, and they were "politely" asked to leave the church. At that point Crystal's family started traveling around, going to other church services.

During that time I saw a lot of miracles. I saw legs grow. Somebody couldn't fake that. I remember going to the Ohio Theater and seeing people who couldn't speak, speak. Eyes, blind people putting down stuff. I just saw a lot of miracles. I always remember believing it. I just always knew God was healer, just like he was my Savior. Maybe it was just my age, I don't know. It says "by his stripes we are healed" and I knew that the same blood that was shed for my salvation is the same blood that was shed for my healing. It isn't like you've got to be Christian so long. It's a free gift, just like salvation is. So I knew that and accepted that. But I never sought healing for myself, because I didn't feel like I was losing anything. I never remember seeing. And so I was never really seeking healing. I was just seeking a close walk with the Lord.

Around the age of thirteen Crystal chose to be baptized, even though she had been baptized as a child. That experience was formative for her, as she felt overwhelmed by a "powerful love."

Shortly after that we went to a Foursquare Church. Next thing we knew we were going there Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night. And they had camp, so

I got to go to winter camp. I loved it—so I signed up to go to summer camp. And Sammy Oppenheim (I think it was the first year he spoke there), one day he was talking about how Satan comes to rob and steal and destroy. He gave us certain scriptures to read and asked us if we would spend time doing that instead of playing games in the afternoon when we had a break. So I went back. I never stayed in my dorm, but I can remember staying in the dorm and praying and just seeking the Lord.

I was asking, “What is the enemy stealing from me that God would want to give me?” I had no clue; but I prayed, “Whatever it is, Lord, I want it.” And so that night at the meeting Sammy gave an alter call inviting us to come up to receive what the Lord had for us if we wanted more. And as I was praying, I looked up, and this friend of mine who was supposed to get orthodontics surgery on her teeth, her gums were moving and her teeth were moving and her face. At first I thought I must be crying and I can’t see plain. So I wiped my face and I looked at her and I’m like, “Becky, I think your teeth are moving!” And she’s like, “I know! Isn’t it great?!” And she wouldn’t look. She wouldn’t talk. She just kept praying and bawling.

And I just started serving the Lord and praising him. Then all of a sudden a thought just went through my head, “God’s going to heal me and give me sight.” I said, “No. Why would he do that?” And I just thought, “God’s going to heal me. You know, you need to go forward and ask that man to lay hands on you.” And then I thought, “No. What am I going to do if he says, ‘What? God can heal anything, but an eye?!’” And as soon as I thought that, it was like the Lord was saying, “You know that man can’t heal you.” And I thought, “Yeah, I know he can’t heal me. I know it’s all about you.” It was just like I was having a dialogue back and forth with the Lord. Then I thought, “Okay, I’m going to go for it.”

So I went up and I said, "I believe God is telling me he is going to heal me." And Sammy said, "You what?" And I said, "Yeah, God's going to heal me." And he said, "Oh, great honey, what's the problem?" I said, "Well, I have an artificial eye and God's going to give me sight." And he says, "You have an artificial what?!" So he prayed for me, and as he started praying for me I didn't really feel anything happening, but I was so wrapped up in God's love because I felt like God was just loving on me and telling me he loved me and was going to heal me.

At first I didn't notice anything had happened. Nothing had changed. I just didn't quit praying, so they just kept praying with me. And all of a sudden I started seeing something like little heads, and they looked like they were just floating, like they weren't on the shoulders. And again I thought I was just seeing things, because I'd seen right before that some bright lights coming toward me, so I was encapsulated in that. I thought, "Oh my goodness, is this a dream, a vision, what? This is so awesome." And again just feeling his love. Well then when I saw the little heads floating in there I thought, "Oh, is this part of this dream?" And then I realized I was seeing, and I just went berserk.

After camp, Crystal returned home to an ecstatic mother and a cautious yet believing father and tried to integrate back into normal life. But as news of her restored sight spread, she was approached by a reporter who wanted to do a story about Crystal. Part of the story involved her being examined by several medical doctors.

This was a trying time for Crystal, because though the doctors all agreed that Crystal could see out of her glass eye, they dismissed the idea that her sight came as a miracle and decided it was some yet-to-be-uncovered scientific mystery. As a result, Crystal found herself sitting in a doctor's office crying to God. And this is what she heard from God:

"Why do you think I healed you?" And I said, "Because this is an awesome testimony, and you've saved me, and now you've healed me, and people will have to accept

Christ. They'll have to get healed." And he said, "Why do you think I healed you?" "You know, because this is an awesome testimony." And I just felt like the Lord sighed and said, "Why did I heal you?" And I said, "I don't know then!" And he said, "Because I love you." He wasn't trying to get me to prove anything. This was for me.

Healing, the Holy Spirit, and the kingdom of God

According to the Gospels, sometimes Jesus healed someone for the purpose of testimony (see John 9:1–41), but Crystal's recurring sense of powerful love is also consistent with scripture. For example, Ephesians 2:4–7 testifies that "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us . . . , made us alive together with Christ . . . so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (NRSV). God is here described as a God of mercy, love, and kindness who is ultimately knitting

It seems that with Jesus the kingdom was inaugurated, and it is growing and expanding, yet we are waiting for its completion in the eschaton. This is what is meant by the phrase "already, but not yet."

together history in order to lavishly bless humanity with "the immeasurable riches of his grace." These immeasurable riches seem to be part of what was poured out onto Crystal in her healing, but they are also part of an eschatological expectation made possible through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Here we find ourselves wrapped up in the "already, but not yet" nature of the kingdom of God. It is described as something that starts small and then takes over, like a mustard seed or yeast (Matt. 13:31–32). Jesus also describes it as being "among us" (Luke 17:21). And yet we are taught to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10), as if it is something we wait for. It seems that with Jesus the kingdom was inaugurated, and it is growing and expanding, yet we are waiting for its completion in the eschaton. This is what is meant by the phrase "already, but not yet."

As part of the kingdom, healing also has an "already, but not yet" status. Jesus came "with healing in his wings" (Mal. 4:2), and

he healed countless people during his kingdom-focused ministry (Matt. 4:23, cf. Matt. 9:35). Nonetheless, those healings were always temporal. For instance, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11). Yet Lazarus still died, as did all the other people Jesus healed. We experience healings now, and yet there is a greater healing to come.

God created this world as good—indeed, as very good (Gen. 1). But this world has been marred by destruction, murder, pestilence, and pain. As Paul writes vividly:

The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:18–23)

In this passage we see that healing is ultimately part of the cosmic redemptive plan of God to return the world to its “very good” nature, to *shalom*,⁴ which includes the healing of our bodies, the healing of the whole created order, and the healing of the nations (Mic. 4, Rev. 22). And yet we are left groaning for these things because they have yet to be realized in fullness.

Healing is part of the cosmic redemptive plan of God to return the world to *shalom*. And yet we are left groaning for these things because they have yet to be realized in fullness.

The miraculous healing Crystal experienced was a mediation of God’s love and a foretaste of the future. Her healing was mediated by the Holy Spirit.⁵ Nonetheless, she, like Lazarus, will someday go to the grave. As a result, while she stands now in the healing power of Jesus, she waits in eager

expectation for the complete healing that is to come in the eschaton. In fact, as a bearer of the Spirit, she groans inwardly, and sometimes outwardly, as she awaits redemption.

The role of the Holy Spirit in healing, then, is twofold: to mediate healing to us in the present and to make us long for the healing that is to come. It is a great discipline to pray for healing today. It is a greater discipline to remember the healing that will come tomorrow.

Notes

¹ Brenda B. Colijn helpfully discusses this topic in her chapter, “Deliverance Belongs to the Lord: *Sôtēria* as Rescue and Healing,” in *Images of Salvation in the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 121–43. A work useful for understanding the terms used for healing in the New Testament is Louise Wells, *The Greek Language of Healing from Homer to New Testament Times* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998).

² Crystal Emhoff, interview by Cara L. Pfeiffer, Columbus, OH, May 31, 2011.

³ In Pentecostal circles this language is used to describe an empowering of the Holy Spirit for service to Jesus. It is usually accompanied by speaking in tongues.

⁴ *Shalom* is here understood as the peace that comes when wholeness is fully realized at a cosmic level.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:9 lists healing as one of the gifts of the Spirit. Additionally, John 14:12–18 describes the Holy Spirit as the mediator of the works of Jesus in the physical absence of Jesus.

About the author

Cara Pfeiffer is a self-described Pentecostal Anabaptist who graduated from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN) in 2010 with an MA in theological studies, with a concentration in Bible. She and her husband, Joe Pfeiffer, also a 2010 graduate of AMBS, live in Los Angeles, where Cara is working in an AmeriCorps assignment teaching peacemaking and conflict resolution skills to inner city urban youth.