

The healing ministry of Jesus in the Gospels

Willard M. Swartley

You know the message he [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ . . . [and] he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

Acts 10:36, 38

Luke's summary of Jesus' ministry stuns. The Gospels are laced with healing stories. In John 9 Jesus heals a man born blind. Three issues and insights emerge for our contemporary thinking about healing.

He describes Jesus as a peace preacher and healer. First, the story breaks any formulaic connection between illness and sin in a one-to-one relationship. While there is a connection between the lifestyles of people and the health of a community, any explicit direct connection to sin for a given person must be refused. Rather than imputing blame to someone for his or her illness, the point is rather that the whole community suffers from wrong choices and priorities. Sickness is ultimately rooted in the fallen state of humanity; all creation is implicated as well.

Second, healing is an essential aspect of Jesus' gospel, related to the disclosure of his identity. In this miracle of John 9 faith is not a precondition for the blind man's healing, but Jesus' healing prompts both faith and unbelief, with the latter mounting as the chapter progresses. The religious unbelieving leaders are "the blind" (vv. 40-41); the blind man now sees. He is the model believer (vv. 35-38). *Seeing the light* happens when we say yes to what Jesus can do for us, affirming the blind man's christological perception and confession. It is *physical* sight for the blind man; for most of us it is *spiritual*. What faith response does Jesus' deed evoke in us?

Third, here arises an important issue in discernment for Christian ministry. Pastors and church leaders are encountering different types of "healers," some in the Eastern religious traditions. This story suggests that to discern the nature of the healing gift, we should talk about Jesus as Prophet-Savior, Son of Man, and Lord-healer. John 9, together with other New Testament stories, joins healing and Christology.

Jesus: Savior and Healer Essential to His Kingdom and Mission

The Gospel writers use a variety of terms to describe Jesus' healing ministry. Most frequent is *therapeuō*, from which our English word *therapy* is derived. Its basic meaning is "to serve," in relation to a deity. But it also means care for someone and *curing* of illness. Second in frequency is *iaomai*, which means to heal or cure. Both terms were also in the medical vocabulary of the Greek world. Sometimes the verb for salvation, *sōzō*, is used to describe physical healing in the New Testament (e.g., Mk 5:34); the person is saved, healed from his or her illness.¹ Still another word, *hygiainō*, designates a healthy or sound state of body, mind and spirit. From it comes our word *hygiene*. To this vocabulary in the Gospels we add also Paul's mention of the charismatic gift of healing (1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30). Here healing is based in *charisma*, a direct gift of God.

In the Gospels healings were an essential part of Jesus' mission. These healings and exorcisms announced the in-breaking of God's reign and certified Jesus' messianic claims. Walter Wink, in *Engaging the Powers*, says,

Jesus' healings and exorcisms, which play such a major role in his ministry, are not simply patches on a body destined for death regardless; they are manifestations of God's reign now, an in-breaking of eternity into time, a revelation of God's merciful nature, a promise of the restitution of all things in the heart of the loving Author of the universe. . . . God's nonviolent reign is the overcoming of demonic powers through nonviolent means.²

Scholars agree healing miracles were a significant part of Jesus' ministry. Joel Green counts eighteen healings and four healing summaries in Mark, nineteen and four in Matthew, twenty and three in Luke. John has four healing signs, including his climactic one: raising dead Lazarus to life.³ Morton Kelsey says nearly "one-fifth of the entire Gospels is devoted to Jesus' healings and discussions occasioned by them."⁴ In comparison,

1 Donald Gowan, "Salvation as Healing," *Ex Auditu* 5 (1989): 1-9; James Lapsley, *Salvation and Health: The Interlocking Process of Life* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972); and Wolfgang Schrage, "Heil und Heilung im Neuen Testament," in *Kreuzestheologie und Ethik im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), pp. 87-105.

2 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 134.

3 Joel Green, "Healing," in *New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 2:758.

4 Morton T. Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity: A Classic Study*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995), p. 42.

scant attention is given to moral healing (Matthew, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman at the well in Jn 4, the sinful woman in Lk 7:37–50, and the woman taken in adultery by the Pharisees in Jn 8:3–11). Kelsey counts forty-one distinct instances (seventy-two with duplications . . .). He identifies the method of healing and exorcism: by word only, touch, preaching or other action. Both Kelsey and Stanger list them separately and ask readers to reassess their understanding of salvation in light of Jesus' priority.⁵

A dominant portrait of the historical Jesus is that of healer and exorcist:

During his lifetime he [Jesus] was known primarily as a healer and exorcist. People flocked to him, drawn by his wonder-working reputation, as the gospels report again and again: "they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door"; as a healer, "His fame spread, and great crowds followed him"; "People came to him from every quarter."⁶ [Mk 1:32–34; Mt 4:24; Mk 1:45].

When King Herod Antipas heard of Jesus' deeds, he responded in terror, for he thought John the Baptist, whom he had executed, had risen from the dead. Even Jesus' opponents did not contest that Jesus did these deeds, but sought to discredit him by attributing them to the prince of the demons, Beelzebul (Mt 12:24–28//Mk 3:22–26//Lk 11:15–20). The fourth-century Jewish Talmud continues a similar charge against Jesus, calling him a magician who performed miracles ("practiced sorcery").⁷

This is the Jesus of the Gospels, the archetype of our faith. In Mark 3:13–16 and Mark 6:6–13 Jesus commissions his disciples to participate in his mission. Four points are crucial:

- to be with him (3:14)
- to have authority over unclean spirits
- to proclaim the kingdom of God
- to heal the sick, either laying on of hands or anointing with oil

5 Ibid., pp. 43–45; Frank Bateman Stanger, *God's Healing Community* (Wilmore, Ky.: Francis Asbury, 1985), p. 33. Stanger's even longer list is in two sections: "individual" healings (26) and "multiple healings" (21), some of which are summary statements of healing of "crowds." Only Kelsey cites the method of healing.

6 Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and a Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 60.

7 Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 43a.

In Matthew Jesus authorizes the Twelve as follows: “Jesus . . . gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness” (Mt 10:1). Luke’s parallel is: “Jesus . . . gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Lk 9:1–2). Luke 10 serves as a prototype of the early church’s mission in Acts, in which healing deliverance and proclamation of the kingdom continues.

Bazzana describes the early Christians as both preachers and physicians. Luke 10 and Matthew 10 (and the theoretical Q text that stands behind these) present the physician role of early missionaries. Luke puts healing first and proclamation of the kingdom of God second; Matthew reverses the order.⁸

Of the many points oriented to Jesus’ healing ministry, I list seven:

1. In Jesus, a person of great compassion emerges. Jesus had compassion on the sick and the demon-possessed, and desired their freedom and health. Three women freed of demons (Lk 8:1–3, one a wife of Herod’s house steward!) later provided financing for the Jesus entourage. Clearly these women, and many others, felt Jesus’ compassion. In the Christian tradition compassion is essential for the healing ministry—a compassion that risks self in service to help and heal others (Mt 9:35–38). Without compassion Jesus’ ministry would have been nothing more than an ego trip. Jesus ministered with complete abandonment of ego; his focus was bringing wholeness to each person he encountered. Without compassion Jesus’ words and works would have had no saving significance. In his healings Jesus’ person and works of love complement each other.

Compassion is dominant in Jesus’ healing ministry; searching for a cause of sickness to impute blame is not. On one occasion Jesus utilizes the common belief that sickness is intertwined with sin; for example, in controversy with the Pharisees over the healing of the paralytic (Mk 2:1–12). But Jesus also separates specific illnesses or catastrophes from *direct causative* sin or evil: in the healing of the man born blind (Jn 9) and in his statement about the Galileans upon whom the tower of Siloam fell (Lk 13:1–5).

2. On several occasions Jesus expresses anger in the face of disease, illness and death. In some manuscripts Jesus gets angry (*orgistheis*) as he encounters the leper in Mark 1:41; most manuscripts though say he had

8 Giovanni Battista Bazzana, “Early Christian Missionaries as Physicians: Healing and Its Cultural Value in the Greco-Roman Context” *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 232–36.

compassion (*splanchnistheis*). But would a scribe change the text from compassion to anger? The reverse is more likely—with *anger* the original—since the scribal pattern is to change from harder to easier readings, not easier to harder. In John 11:33, when Jesus sees the Jews wailing for Lazarus, Jesus was aggravated (angered or distressed) in spirit, and he cries (v. 35). In Mark 3:5 Jesus gets angry at the Galilean Pharisees' hardness of heart in response to his healing the man with a withered hand. In the first two cases we do not know the cause of Jesus' anger. Perhaps, his anger

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is stirred by seeing how illness cripples people, obstructs freedom and squeezes out faith and hope. Or perhaps in John 11:33 Lazarus's situation prefigured his own death and resurrection and his weeping is part of his agony to come (cf. Jn 12:27). Whatever the reason, he acts decisively to restore shalom in all these cases. We should not conclude, however, that his mission was solely healing or

deliverance. Rather, Jesus' healings testify to Jesus' identity and the dawning of God's reign. They pave the way for the gospel, even today in newly evangelized areas of our world.

3. For these reasons Jesus' healing ministry has an unusual access profile. Most people healed or delivered from demons are not persons with standing in the religious community. The daughter of Jairus, ruler of a synagogue, is an exception (Mk 5:35–42). Even then the *daughter* was healed, not the synagogue ruler. Approximately one-third of those healed are women. Some persons Jesus healed are ritually defiled. Another third are socially ostracized because they are lepers or demonized. Several are outsiders to the Israelite community: the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24–30), the centurion's servant (Mt 8:5–13) and a royal official's son (Jn 4:46–54).

When we consider the social, economic and religious profile of the people Jesus healed, we learn a basic, important lesson about access. Jesus' healings are not limited to a special group; there are no exclusions. The church is called to continue Jesus' ministry to all people, including the oppressed and marginalized.

4. In numerous cases *faith* plays a significant role in the healing event. Kelsey identifies faith in seventeen of the forty-one cases listed (the word faith in the cases of friends or people bringing a person to Jesus usually

does not occur, though it may be implied). The woman with a hemorrhage displays exceptional faith (Mk 5:24–34). In Mark’s Gospel she alone is commended for her faith. Note the description of the details:

- description of illness: she has a flow of blood for twelve years
- she suffered much from physicians, spent all she had and is no better but only grows worse
- she hears reports of Jesus and presses into the crowd, thinking, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well” (v. 28)
- she touches his garment and feels in her body that she is healed of the disease
- Jesus, knowing that power had left him, turns and asks, “Who touched my clothes?” (v. 30)
- Jesus looks around to see who had done it
- The woman comes forth and in “fear and trembling,” falls down before him and tells him the whole truth!
- Jesus’ commends her faith as basis for her healing
- Jesus’ gives a final word of blessing, “Go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (v. 34)

This explicit commendation of the woman’s faith and use of the word “peace” (*eirēnē*) is unique to the Markan narrative. When compared to Jesus’ word to Jairus, “Do not fear, only believe,” it is clear that the woman plays the stronger narrative role, calling the reader to faith in Jesus. Faith is the leitmotif of this entire segment of mighty works (Mk 4:35–6:6). The woman’s faith contrasts to the disciples’ lack of faith (Mk 4:40) and the unbelief of those in Jesus’ hometown (Mk 6:1–6). The contrast puts her faith in bold relief.

5–7. Points five through seven are based on Luke 10:1–20. Luke’s Gospel, more clearly than the other three, interrelates three crucial themes: *healing*, proclaiming the peace gospel of the kingdom of God, and the downfall of Satan. This is one whole for Luke, as is clear in Peter’s Acts 10:36–38 summary of Jesus’ ministry:

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. (emphasis added)

As Joel Green puts it, “Healing is pivotal for Jesus’ identity and mission in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus’ inaugural address tethers healing and teaching together as complementary means of proclaiming the good news” (Lk 4:16–30).⁹ In the mission of the seventy, which prefigures the church’s later mission to the Gentiles, the first word of address is “Peace

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be with you.” If a “child of peace” is there, the door will be open; you shall enter, heal the sick and say, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Lk 10:9). If the peace is refused, it “shall return to you” and you shall wipe off the dust of your feet against them and say, “Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near” (v. 11). Further, the seventy are “sent” (*apsteilen*), the same word used for Jesus’ mission in Luke 4:18 and 43. Jesus sends out the seventy before

his face (*pro prosōpou autou* [Lk 10:1]) to first cure the sick and then announce, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” While Luke’s recurring verbal “proclaiming gospel” (*euangelizomai*) does not occur here, the announcement “Peace to this house!” introduces the gospel messenger. The house’s peace response to Jesus’ peace greeting is the condition for receiving healing and the kingdom of God.

Luke’s presentation of Jesus’ reflective declaration on the mission of the seventy is most striking. First, Jesus speaks woes upon Chorazin and Bethsaida for failure to receive God’s peace mission—God’s *missio Dei* (Lk 10:13–16)—with words that echo the downfall of earlier self-exalted and oppressive kings (Is 14; Ezek 28):

*And you, Capernaum,
will you be exalted to heaven?
No, you will be brought down to Hades. (Lk 10:15)*

Despite the extensive scope of rejection and judgment, Jesus sees also another result of the gospel of the kingdom’s peace mission: “I watched [was seeing] Satan fall [falling] from heaven like a flash of lightning” (v. 18). Demons are expelled in the name of Jesus; a new reality dawns. Satan’s rule ends; Jesus’ reign begins! The victory has an even more enduring consequence in that “your names are written in heaven” (v. 20). . . .

⁹ Green, “Healing,” p. 759.

One of Luke's special healing/deliverance stories occurs in Luke 13:10–17, the story of the bent-over woman (a good one to memorize and tell):

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

This story, like others in Luke, portrays Jesus' power freeing people from bondage. Both Luke and Mark similarly portray Jesus as God's divine warrior come to vanquish evil, and set people free.¹⁰ Numerous scholars identify here the exodus-liberation theme. Kathleen M. Fisher and Urban C. von Wahlde note that Mark chooses the four miracles of Mark 4:35–5:43 to show forth God's mighty power in Jesus' ministry. In the stilling of the storm "Jesus is acting in ways similar to Yahweh in recreating the harmony of the universe in reclaiming it from Satan." Then, in the exorcism of Mark 5:1–20 Jesus manifests divine power over personal possession by Satan. In the healing of the woman's incurable illness and in the raising of Jairus's daughter "the ultimate affliction of evil upon the world . . . is conquered." Further, they observe

¹⁰ In Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 50–52, 112–20, I describe the relation between the Testaments on this theme of divine warrior and how it relates to peace and peacemaking.

that the miracles are not simply demonstrations of divine power but are exorcisms, the means by which, in Mark's apocalyptic world-view, God's sovereignty over Satan reasserts itself. And this sovereignty controls all areas of life. Thus Mark presents a Jesus who has power greater than any human malady, a power from God which exerts itself to right the order of creation by expelling and controlling Satan's grip over man and the world.¹¹

Jesus' liberation is indeed comprehensive and complete. Mark depicts Jesus as God's warrior attacking Satan's stronghold in his exorcisms and healings as well. Jesus' method of subduing the enemy stands fully within the divine warfare, miracle tradition.¹²

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The word (of God) in and through Jesus is the power that smites the demons. In the Gospels the demons are violent and destructive, seeking injury and death of the human person;¹³ Jesus' actions are liberating, restoring the human to tranquility and communion with self and others. In these confrontations history discloses the cosmic struggle of "Son of God versus demon, Holy Spirit versus unclean spirit." Jesus' purpose was "to

enter this struggle on behalf of the true destiny of mankind and with his heavenly power . . . carry through to the victory, and to the life and communion that it brings."¹⁴

11 Kathleen M. Fisher and Urban C. von Wahlde, "The Miracles of Mark 4:35-5:43: Their Meaning and Function in the Gospel Framework," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (1981): 15.

12 Millard C. Lind's *Yahweh Is a Warrior* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1980) is a probing exposition of Yahweh's warfare as essentially miracle. True, many deviations from this model set forth in Ex 14:14 occur within Israel's history, but this does not change the essential nature of Yahweh's warfare.

13 This does not mean that Jesus and the early Christians considered demons the cause of illness. Gary Ferngren contends that modern scholars who emphasize this point are wrong. For in both Christian and pagan texts a more positive view of physicians and (Hippocratic) medicine is evident during this period: *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

14 James Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1957), pp. 39, 42.

A difficult question arises: how much healing can we expect now and how much do we postpone until the final redemption of the body and the renewal of all creation (Rom 8:17-26)? Ray Anderson helpfully describes Jesus' ministry (in dealing with the Mt 8:17 citation of Isaiah 53:4: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases"). He holds that Christ frees believers from the curse of the law (Gal 3:14; echo Deut 28), which includes diseases:

Forgiveness of sins is a covenanted grace available as a spiritual reality to all in the present time, while healing of the body, as covenanted mercy promised in the eschaton through the resurrection, is only present in a provisional way, regardless of whether through miraculous intervention or through natural means.¹⁵

When the eschatological nature of both forgiveness of sin and bodily healing are affirmed, with both grounded in Jesus' resurrection *and* our promised resurrection, then we can say, yes, healing is indeed included within the atonement along with forgiveness of sin. Complete bodily healing awaits, however, eschatological fulfillment for its final consummation (Rom 8:17-26). While we glimpse now on occasion healing miracles, forgiveness of sins is God's present gift of grace in Jesus Christ (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14).

The theological fallacy of those who claim that immediate and full bodily healing is promised by God through the atonement is a failure to recognize that atonement, while enacted in the cross, is completed in the resurrection.

About the author

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15 Ray S. Anderson, "Healing and the Atonement," unpublished paper, 1986.