

Studies in renewal

Study 7:

The Spirit of God and healing in the church

By Rev HPV Renner, Brisbane Qld (1987)

Should the church today give greater recognition to the 'ministry of healing'?
Should we provide 'rites of anointing the sick'?
What does it mean if some have the 'gift of healing'?
How should they use this gift?
What place, if any, does 'healing' have within the church's overall and central ministry, namely, the ministry of reconciliation?

Jesus healed many sick people. On some occasions large crowds of sick people came to him, and he healed them all. (For example, Matt 8:16.) On numerous occasions he healed individual sick people... lepers, the paralysed, epileptics, lame, blind, and the like. Jesus also commanded his disciples to heal (Matt 10:8; Luke 10:9). They did this effectively, anointing the sick with oil (Mark 6:13). A later version of St. Mark's Gospel account has Jesus predicting that believers 'will lay their hands on the sick and they will recover' (Mark 16:17-18). And the Acts of the Apostles describes incidents of healing in the name of Jesus by the apostles (Acts 3:1ff; 8:7; 14: 8ff; 19:11-12).

Healing is one of the 'gifts' of the Holy Spirit about which St. Paul writes. He lists healing in the catalogue of gifts which the Spirit 'apportions ... as he wills' (1 Cor 12:9,11).

What are we to make of all these references to healing? What relevance do they have for us today?

For study:

1. What kind of healing did Jesus perform according to the following: John 9:1-41; Luke 13:10-17; Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 1:29-34; Mark 5:25-34; Mark 7:31-37; Matthew 9:1-8.

SUFFERING NOT PART OF GOD'S CREATION

Before we take up these questions about healing, let us look at what the Scriptures say about human suffering, into which category 'sickness' falls. Here we need to observe that human suffering was not part of God's original creation. In Genesis 1:31 God surveys his creation and notes that 'it was very good'. This statement has an echo in the New Testament exclamation, 'He has done all things well' - a comment made by the crowd after Jesus had healed a deaf mute (Mark 7:31-37). Suffering, including sickness and death, follows after the fall of human beings into sin. It is part of the brokenness of God's creation.

However, we must be careful not to automatically associate a particular sickness with a particular sin. God is able to use suffering - including sickness - in his plan of salvation. The sufferings of Job, lodged in their right context, serve God in his 'scoring over' Satan (Job 1:6ff). The man born blind (John 9) is used to manifest the works of God. Jesus' own suffering is used by God to redeem the world.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that suffering - including sickness - can be the direct consequence of particular sins (cf. Num 25; 1 Cor 10:6ff especially v 8). Scripture sometimes speaks quite clearly about human sinfulness in general as the underlying cause of sickness (Mark 2:1ff; James 5:14ff). The abuse of the Sacrament of the Altar is given as the cause of sickness among the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:29-31).

Note, on the other hand, that the reverse (i.e. the faithful use of the Lord's Supper) has been seen in the history of the church as a 'medicine' for restoring health. The early church referred to it as 'medicine of immortality'. The forgiveness of sins, too, as pronounced in absolution, has been acknowledged, also outside of the church, as producing relief (healing) from sicknesses which stem from guilt.

For study:

2. Read and study Isaiah 53.
Why was it necessary for Christ to suffer?
Who caused his suffering?
What blessings have issued from his suffering?
3. Compare also the Passion accounts in The Gospels and the commentaries on them in the Epistles; e.g. 1 Peter 2:21ff; 3:18; 4:13; Hebrews 2:9,10, 18; 5:8; 13:12.
4. Discuss the following statement: 'Suffering is never the will of God.' Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

JESUS' HEALING UNIQUE

If we are to understand the role of 'healing' within the church's ministry, we must bear in mind that Jesus' healing miracles are unique and have a special purpose. They were performed not just to bring relief and 'deliverance' to people. They were more than compassionate acts of God in which health was restored to sufferers. The miracles of healing Jesus performed were first and foremost marks of identification that showed he is the Messiah, the promised One of God, and that with him the messianic age, the kingdom of God, the promised new aeon (time, age), has arrived. As such they are unique in the service that God performs for his people.

Note: It is preferable not to speak of a 'ministry of healing' as though that were a special service that Jesus came to perform, or that his church performs, apart from his central mission.

For study:

5. What is the significance of comments on Jesus' miracles in the following passages? Mark 7:37; Matthew 11:4-6; Luke 5:24-26; Luke 1:1-10 (especially vv 6, 7, 9).

The Lord of the church spelled out the specific mission of the church when he commissioned his followers to 'make disciples of all nations, baptising them, teaching them, forgiving and retaining sins' (Matt 28:19, 20; John 20:21-23). The church's special mission is the 'ministry of reconciliation'. That means proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that, by faith in him all people might be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:16-20).

In the carrying out of this ministry of reconciliation there are numerous services that the church is equipped by the Spirit to perform. The principle services have to do directly with the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments (1 Cori 12:27-31). However, there are services that Christians render which go out from their reconciliation with God and hopefully lead back to it.

One such service is healing. What we must bear in mind, though, is that within the church's overall ministry of reconciliation healing is an incomplete service until it becomes a bridge that leads people towards reconciliation with God through faith in Christ Jesus. Or it is incomplete until it is used as a manifestation of the truth that the person rendering the healing service is indeed performing it as an outcome of being reconciled with God. In a word, within the church's ministry, healing is a service of love which may attract people to Christ. As such it serves the 'common good' (1 Cor 12:7). It helps to 'build up the body of Christ' (Eph 4:12-16).

For study:

6. If sickness and suffering are leading a man to an encounter with Christ, should the church pray for his restoration to 'health'? Give reasons for, your answer.

Healing can be administered in a variety of ways. Some people seem to manifest the power to heal - apparently supernaturally - in their touch. Others manifest the power to heal in their pastoral therapeutic counselling. Others manifest the power to heal in medical and surgical treatments and in paramedical and parasurgical treatments. When such services are rendered as expressions of love for God and other people - a love that grows out of reconciliation with God - they can be said to be associated with the ministry of reconciliation.

The same applies when such services are used to draw people nearer to Christ, through whom people are reconciled to God (as in 'mission fields'). However, in both these instances the service of healing is always subsidiary and auxiliary to the ministry of reconciliation.

Through its worshipping congregations and its individual members the church is bent on doing all in its power to relieve suffering, including sickness. Members of the church realise that, as people who have been reconciled to God and who are part of his 'new creation', they are committed to reversing the effects of sin and suffering and the fragmentation that the fall of mankind has inflicted upon the 'old creation'. And so those who have not got the gift of healing still participate in the healing of God's sick creatures by carrying them to Christ,

the great physician, in prayer. In order that this service for the world may never be neglected, the church has taken great pains to build into its rituals - particularly the ritual for Holy Communion - prayers for the sick and suffering.

The church also recognizes the great healing power in the words of absolution, in the proclamation of the Gospel ('sound', i.e. health-giving, doctrine), and in the Sacrament of the Altar. The peace which flows from such ministry and which surpasses all understanding, has in itself the power to generate healing in the bodies of those who participate with believing hearts. Strong faith in the words of absolution, in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in the Sacrament of the Altar facilitates healing, while unbelief (i.e. rejection of absolution, the Gospel, and the Sacrament) serves as a barrier to healing of the body. Unbelief prevents the therapeutic peace of God from filling worshippers and 'guarding their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus' (Phil 4:7).

For study:

7. Read Mark 2:1–12; James 5:13–16; 1 Corinthians 11:30.
8. Discuss: 'There is great healing power in the words of absolution, in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in the Sacrament of the Altar.'
9. What reference is made to physical benefits of the Sacrament in the words the pastor speaks to communicants after they have communed? (Lutheran Hymnal p. 14)

rites of healing

In the course of its history the church has created rites for the caring of the sick, by which healing is administered. It prefers not to use the expression 'healing services', because this can be misleading. The principal features of these rites are: prayer, the Word of God read and/or proclaimed, the laying on of hands, and anointing with oil. Crucial is the Word of God and prayer. The 'Word' is the life-giving and life-sustaining word of God. 'Prayer' is the relationship of faith that gives free course to the Word of God. Both are gifts from the Holy Spirit to his church.

The 'laying on of hands' is the tangible symbol of the fact that through the Word God is conveying blessing to the recipient, whose perceptions may have been impaired by his/her sickness, and for whom touch is a means of receiving a communication from God. Furthermore, people upon whom hands have been laid have frequently attested that touch actually transmitted benefit (health) from God. However, laying on of hands is not, in itself, essential to the church's ministry to the sick.

'Oil' in New Testament times and throughout the history of the church has been regarded as medication. (It is also used for 'anointings' in preparation for special service; but that is not its use in rites of healing). Within the context of the Word, the prayers, and the laying on of hands, 'anointing with oil' is received by the sick person as a symbol of healing from God. For some it may even be an agent of healing. However, oil is not, in itself, essential in the church's ministry to the sick. It is not a sacramental means of grace. Usually the oil is administered together with the marking of the cross on the person's forehead and hands. The mark of the cross is a visible and tactile proclamation of the truth that the most fundamental healing for humankind, namely, the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, is achieved through the atoning death of Christ on the cross.

In recent times there has been a strong call for 'rites of healing' to be included in the common public service of the church or in special 'healing services' conducted for the sick. Introducing such rites into the common service with Holy Communion presents dangers:

- It tends to elevate the suffering called 'sickness' above other forms of suffering that human beings endure, e.g. unemployment, poverty, loneliness, etc.
- It might detract from the central feature of the service with Holy Communion, namely the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacrament of the Altar.
- It may attract people to worship more for the healing of their broken bodies than for the restoration of their broken relationship with God.

Where special services are devised and held which have an emphasis on healing, care should be taken that they are lodged properly within the church's total ministry of reconciliation. The centre of that ministry is the forgiveness of sins, through which our deepest needs are met and peace with God is established. The leading of any such services by the rightly called and ordained pastor is important. The pastor's ministry is first and foremost the ministry of reconciliation. Where special healing services are not properly lodged within the church's total ministry of reconciliation, there is the danger that the worshipper's most fundamental need, the forgiveness of sins, will fade into the background, and the restoration of physical health will become the goal and object of a person's approach to the church. The church prefers that the Service with Holy Communion be recognised as the principal public healing service.

In any case, special services conducted within a congregation or under its auspices ought to be ancillary to the main service of the congregation. That is, they should grow out of the main service and lead back into it. They should never be conducted in competition with the main service or as an expression of dissatisfaction with it.

For study:

10. Construct a 'healing service' which could be used in a regular service. Give theological reasons why you selected each component of your service.
11. Why is your service in harmony with the church's ministry of reconciliation?