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A Philosophy of Healing from the Ministry of Jesus

Most early cultures (Greek, Roman, Babylonian, Egyptian, Persian, Hebrew) viewed the human as a united body, mind, and spirit, with each aspect having influence on the others. In such societies throughout history, including many today, the priest and healer were the same individual. Only in recent times and in 'developed' countries like our own have the roles of healing the body and tending the mind and spirit been separated so completely.

(Science) is like what happens when we separate a jigsaw puzzle into its 500 pieces. The overall picture disappears. This is the state of modern medicine: It has lost the sense of the unit of man . . . Its discoveries are true; that is to say, they reveal valid and important facts. But they do not lead to a true understanding of man . . . (Nelson, p.54-55).

By a strange quirk of logic it is permissible to remove medically the results of man's sins, but it is not quite correct to believe that God will do it himself if asked in prayer or invoked through sacraments (Kelsey, p.223).

How did this dichotomy evolve? What should be the role of the contemporary Christian as a healthcare provider or recipient regarding the healing process? And what should we expect from ourselves, from the Church and from the medical profession with regards to healing? In this paper we briefly trace the history of medicine and healing through the Old Testament, during the life of Jesus, and throughout the development of the Church. We will then propose some principles to serve as guidelines for the place of the Church and the healthcare professions with regards to healing in the present day.

Medicine before Christ

The practice of medicine had little influence on the Hebrews of the Old Testament, since most healer-physicians also practised sorcery and magic or were members of pagan sects which worked in temples like those of the cult of Asklepios (also spelled Aesculapius). Although Asklepios was a historical figure who lived about 3,000 years B.C., the Greeks, and later the Romans, worshipped him as the god of medicine. Temples, in which the diseased came to sleep, housed priests who acted for the god and used religious suggestions to help

cure illness. Asklepios probably originated in Egypt as the magician Imhotep, but later was thought by the Greeks to be a son of Apollo. Hippocrates, born about 460 B.C., was a Greek physician who was among the first to question and remove much of the superstition surrounding disease and its cause. But cults, astrologers, and magicians continued to abound.

Therefore it is not surprising that the Hebrews, worshippers of the One God, did not seek medical care from pagan sources. Medicine is discussed frequently in all ancient writings except the Old Testament, where only once are physicians specifically mentioned. This reference reflects the negative attitude that the Hebrews held toward available medical care:

... Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians (2 Chron. 16:12).

The Old Testament teaches that Yahweh alone is the giver and taker of health. There are numerous specific examples of disease inflicted as a punishment for sin and disobedience to the commands of Yahweh (Table 1). The prevailing attitude was that since Yahweh controlled all that happened, it was not appropriate for humans to struggle against His will. If sickness came, Yahweh would heal if it was His pleasure.

Disease was not always associated with sin, however. There are several accounts of healing in which no blame is imputed to the sufferer. The leper, Naaman, 'a mighty man of valour', and Job, 'a blameless and upright man', are examples of disease not necessarily associated with wrongdoing. Interestingly, demons had no place in the Old Testament as a cause of disease, despite the fact that demon possession was mentioned as a frequent cause of disease during Christ's time.

Disease, then, was viewed by the ancient Hebrews as a personal infliction by Yahweh to teach a lesson or to punish, over which humans did and should have little control. This differed from the prevailing Greek attitude in which disease was viewed as an unlucky affliction from the gods, but it was impersonal, not necessarily due to any good or bad human act. They viewed disease as a result of fate or destiny.

From the Greek culture also emerged a philosophy called Gnosticism, in which the nous (mind) became trapped in the less desirable physis (body), which was not really essential. Gnostics strove to separate the pure mind from the evil body. This philosophy of body-mind dualism, totally in opposition to the Hebrew view of an

Table 1 Interventions in Health: Old Testament

Yahweh Inflicting Sickness:

Barrenness	Gen. 20:18	
Boils	Exod. 9:8-10	
	Job	
	1 Sam. 5:6	
Death	Gen. 38:9-10	
	Exod. 12:29	
Leprosy	Numb. 12:10	
	2 Kings 5:26-27	
Plague	Gen. 12:17	
	Numb. 11:33	
	2 Sam. 24:15	
General	Lev. 26:16, 25	Threats of disease
	Deut. 28:22, 27-29, 56-61	for disobedience
	Lev. 21:18-23	Nobody with physical
		disability permitted to
		approach altar

Yahweh Healing:

Boils	Job
Leprosy	2 Kings 5:1-14
Plague halted	Numb. 16:47-50
	2 Sam. 24:16
Raised from dead	1 Kings 17:17-23
	2 Kings 4:18-37
Snake bite healed	Numb. 21:9

integrated body-mind-spirit, was prevalent during Christ's time and has continued to influence the Church up to the present time.

Healing ministry of Christ

A surprisingly large proportion (about 1/5) of the accounts of Jesus' life are dedicated to His healing ministry. There are numerous accounts of specific healings as well as general references to the healing of multitudes (Table 2). It is interesting that there is no account of Jesus asking someone what they had done wrong before healing them. As a matter of fact, only rarely did He mention sin at all to a sick person, and even then it was without imputing blame. When a paralytic man was brought to Jesus, He said, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (Matt. 9:2). Only when He perceived that the scribes around Him thought He was blaspheming did He heal the paralytic's body.

Table 2 Recorded Healings of Jesus*Specific Healings:*

		<i>Matt</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>Luke</i>	<i>John</i>
Blindness	1.	20:29-34	10:46-52	18:35-43	
	2.	9:27			9:1-41
	3.		8:22-26		
Demon Possession	4.			13:10-17	
	5.	8:28-34	5:1-20	8:26-39	
	6.		1:23-28	4:33-37	
	7.	9:32-33	12:22	11:14	
	8.	15:22-28	7:24-30		
Epilepsy, Palsy	9.	17:14-21	9:14-29	9:37-43	
	10.	8:5-13		7:1-10	
Fever, Death	11.	8:14-15	1:29-31	4:38-39	
	12.	9:18-26	5:21-43	8:40-56	
	13.				4:46-54
Leprosy	14.	8:1-4	1:40-45	5:12-14	
	15.			17:11-19	
Paralysis	16.				5:1-18
	17.	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:18-26	
Other					
a. Deafness	18.		7:32-37		
b. Dropsy	19.			14:1-6	
c. Hemorrhage	20.	9:20-22	5:25-34	8:43-48	
d. Withered hand	21.	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	
e. Replaced ear	22.			22:50-51	

General Healing of Multitudes:

12:15	3:10	
8:16	1:32	4:40
13:58	6:5	
14:34		
4:23		6:17
11:4		7:21
9:35		
14:14		9:11
15:30		6:2
19:2		
		5:15
		13:32

After healing the man who had lain for years at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus warned him to 'sin no more, that nothing worse befall you' (John 5:14).

Jesus believed that there was a force of evil in the world (demons,

sin) that resulted in illness, but was not necessarily related to an individual's good or bad deeds or position in the eyes of God. In His ministry, His attitude was that sickness *can* be caused by sin (obvious contemporary examples perhaps being venereal diseases or the myriad of syndromes resulting from substance abuse), but sin is not the only cause of sickness. His healing ministry is striking in that it has none of the moralistic character so prevalent in the Old Testament.

The 'Christian' attitude that glories in sickness is completely alien to that of Jesus of Nazareth; it is aligned on the side of what he was fighting against.¹

It seems evident that the power to forgive sins and the power to heal were for Jesus different aspects of the same ministry. Jesus did not go out of His way to heal people, there are no accounts of His healing anyone against their will (often He asked them if they wanted to be healed, Matt. 4:23-5:1; Mark 3:9; Luke 5:12-16; John 5:15-16). When He healed, it was usually out of compassion and it seemed to flow naturally. He did not heal to 'prove' His relationship to God or to 'make' people believe, and He was angered when this was suggested. Why then did Jesus heal? Because He believed that healing was good and that total health was the ideal will of God for all people, because He was full of mercy and compassion for the suffering of people, and because of His deep hostility for what made people sick.

If Jesus had any one mission, it was to bring the power and healing of God's creative, loving spirit to bear upon the moral, mental, and physical illnesses of the people around Him. It was a matter of rescuing man from a situation in which he could not help himself. Jesus disclosed a new power, a ladder to bring him out of the pit of his brokenness and sin. Leaving man in his wretched condition so as to learn from it makes no sense in this psychological frame-work. Judgment and punishment only add to a burden already intolerable.²

The coming of Jesus . . . wipes out once and for all the notion that God puts sickness upon men because he is angry with them . . . if sin had caused that misery, Jesus' attitude appears to have been; once this man is healed, perhaps he will come to his senses, but as long as he is sick it is difficult for him to come into a relationship that makes sense.³

Healing in the Church

The Book of Acts contains specific and general accounts of healings by disciples of Jesus (Table 3). The apostles carried on a healing

1. Kelsey M. T.: *Healing and Christianity*, New York, Harper and Row, p.90, 1973.

2. *ibid.* p.67.

3. *ibid.* p.97.

Table 3 Interventions In Health: New Testament After Jesus*Specific Healings:*

	<i>Acts</i>
By Peter	3:1-8
	9:32-35
	9:36-41
By Paul	14:8-12
	16:16-19
	19:13-16
	20:8-12
	28:8
By Ananias	9:17
By disciples	14:19-20

General Healings, 'signs and wonders':

2:43, 47
 5:12, 15
 6:8
 8:6, 13
 14:3
 15:12
 19:11
 28:9

Disease or Death Caused by Sin:

Ananias and Sapphira struck dead	Acts 5:1-11
Sorcerer struck blind	Acts 13:6-11
Christians ill because they took communion too lightly	1 Corin. 11:29-30

ministry apparently out of obedience to Jesus' command that they do so. Although they were often surprised at their success and sometimes even healed unwillingly,

... the Christian became a source of healing, essentially and simply as a continuation of Christ's life through his church ... it was understood that Jesus became what we are in order that we might become what he is. Healing was as basic a part of early Christian thought and experience as it had been in the life of Jesus.⁴

However, the moralistic attitude of the Old Testament, in which illness was seen as a direct result of sin, begins to emerge in the New Testament after the Gospels. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira after lying are an example of sin being punished in the body. Paul described his 'thorn in the flesh' as being given to him by Satan 'to keep me from being too elated' (2 Corin. 12:7-9, RSV). Three other

4. *ibid.* pp.330-334.

times Paul mentions the illnesses of Christians who were apparently not healed in any miraculous way (Phil. 2:25–28; 1 Tim. 5:23; 2 Tim. 4:20). In these instances, however, their diseases were not attributed to any misdoing or sin.

The healing ministry of the early Church is described in the New Testament both as a special gift (1 Cor. 12:4–10) and as a responsibility and function of the entire Church (James 5:14–16). All of the Christian leaders in the First and Second Centuries (Justin Martyr, Cyprian, Tertullian) refer to healing as a natural part of the Church's ministry, although by 200 A.D. *Origin of Alexandria* noted that 'the power of healing diseases is not evidence of anything specially divine'.⁵

The Gnostic philosophy is mentioned throughout the history of the Church. The Second Century Docetists asserted that the physical world was evil. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and later Luther and Calvin, all expressed the opinion that the body was inferior to the spirit, a belief not really in keeping with the ministry of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels.

By the Fourth Century, the institutionalization of healing is evident: religious orders were formed to care for the sick, healing became incorporated into liturgy, articles such as oil or water were blessed and expected to take on supernatural powers, and shrines to martyrs sprang up. By the Seventh and Eighth Centuries under the influence of Gregory, the Church more and more expressed the idea that illness was a punishment from God. After the Eighth Century, official services of the Church mostly rejected a place for healing. Aquinas taught that since God is known primarily through intellectual activity, such things as healing were not necessary or relevant. Prayers for the sick were used to remind them of their sins and help them toward repentance. The practice of 'extreme unction' for the dying replaced the earlier 'laying on of hands'. By the Thirteenth Century, sick persons were not to seek medical help until they had confessed their sins to a priest.

Thus the Christian Church developed an ambivalent view of the medical profession and of the role of healing in the Church. On the one hand, hospitals were formed and staffed almost exclusively with the religious, and yet scientific investigation and inquiry were viewed as a failure to accept God's will or even as the work of the devil like sorcery or black magic. Indeed, medical progress was hindered for years in the name of God.

5. Weatherhead LD: *Psychology, Religion and Healing*, New York, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, p.77, 1951.

In 1248 the dissection of the body was pronounced sacrilegious and the study of anatomy condemned. Progress in medicine required dissociation from the Church, and the two healing streams—both of God—divided.⁶

Even today, The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England expresses the belief that sickness is a visitation from God, a result of some wrong doing:

Wherefore, whatsoever your sickness is, know you certainly that it is God's visitation. And for what cause soever this sickness is sent unto you; whether it be to try your patience for the example of others, and that your faith may be found in the day of the Lord laudable, glorious, and honorable, to the increase of glory and endless felicity; or else it be sent unto you to correct and amend in you whatsoever doth offend the eyes of your heavenly Father . . .⁷

In the Middle Ages, healing came to refer to healing of the soul, not the body. A physician in the Eighteenth Century was denied the right to practise medicine if he treated a patient for more than three days when the patient had not confessed his sins. During this same time, people were seeking healing at shrines (as in the cult of Asklepios hundreds of years earlier). This practice continues today; two million people each year travel to Lourdes alone. English kings were anointed to attain divine power for healing. The English Prayer Book until 1715 contained a special prayer for the healing powers of the king.

By the end of the Nineteenth Century the views of Descartes, Newton, and Darwin were influential in the Church as well as secular life. The prevailing dogma was that the material world alone was real and that the world evolves according to rational and mechanical laws that can be explained. By the Twentieth Century, however,

Man's whole conception of time and matter and scientific truth were undergoing a traumatic change. The scientific method had not provided final and certain truth after all, but only hypotheses which could be overturned by new research and replaced with new understanding. Scientific 'laws' could no longer be seen as ultimate truths; they were like maps, increasingly accurate but still only maps of a territory that could never be fully known.⁸

The division of spirit and body and a mechanistic view of healing came not only from the Church and from philosophy, but also from the medical profession. Today, physicians in general would object to the idea that they are charged with treating not only an individual's disease, but also considering the health of the spirit and the effect of

6. *ibid.* p.88.

7. *loc. cit.* 1., p.16.

8. *ibid.* p.317.

the spirit on one's response to disease. Health is currently defined by the World Health Organization as physical and mental well being rather than just the absence of disease. If we accept this definition, it is quite possible to suffer from a disease and still be healthy. The purpose of medicine today is more often to treat disease than to move individuals toward health. Hence, many modern physicians do not even perceive themselves as healers, but rather as treaters-of-disease.

In contrast, the patient, while frequently expecting a specific and tangible treatment for disease, especially in the form of medication, also expects that the physician will offer healing in a broader sense. Patients leave the physician's office with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction or of being cheated by the brief and terse encounter with the 'healer'. The propensity of the public for litigation is perhaps a symptom of this dichotomy between the physician's and the patient's expectations of medical practice. Indeed, the likelihood that a physician will be sued is much more related to his/her personality and the extent to which the patient feels 'cared for' than to the quality of medicine practised.

Today, then, the Church's attitude toward healing is influenced by a number of divergent forces: science, which seeks to systematically explain natural phenomena and categorize events into knowable, understandable entities, as well as a variety of philosophic and religious views such as Gnosticism with its denial of the body, traditionalism of the Old Testament which personalizes all sickness as an individual visitation from God, and the unrestricted compassion shown by Christ in the Gospels, regardless of political or religious restraints.

Principles for healing today

It is our contention that in the ministry and teachings of Jesus there are basic principles essential for a meaningful understanding of the role of healing today—especially for those involved with the healthcare professions, either as practitioners or as clients. We will discuss here four of these principles which can help to guide our own practices.

Body and spirit are intertwined

Jesus clearly perceived the body and spirit to be closely related. He forgave sins and healed bodies almost in the same breath as a natural part of His total ministry. He made it clear that wellness is part of God's ideal plan for humans. And yet not all peoples are healed of disease; there is faith without healing and healing without faith.

Perhaps what Jesus was trying to communicate is that it is not correct to equate physical illness with God's favour or disfavour.

God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws. The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehaviour . . . we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are.⁹

Likewise, it is not correct to equate absence of disease with health.

The medical profession is discovering that health is more than the absence of illness. For centuries doctors have been primarily concerned with pathology . . . But assuming that we knew all there was to know about disease, we still would not necessarily be able to make people well. Wellness is more than the absence of illness.¹⁰

We believe that what the ministry of Jesus reminds us is that people are a totality of mind, body, and spirit.

Not method but redemptive concern lay at the heart of His ministry—concern that encompassed the whole man—the making of the whole man, whole. The physician, if informed and alert to the modern implications of his vocation, cannot miss this real point of identity with Christianity's real figure.¹¹

We need skilled healthcare professionals with particular knowledge to treat disease and alleviate pain, but we need to remember that health is more than the absence of pathology and that a whole person is being treated, not a sick body.

The peoples of the world today are tired of an intellectualized culture which makes great discoveries, does fine things in theory, but has ceased to help them in leading their real lives. They are weary of scientists and scholars who become more and more learned, but shut themselves up in their studies and abdicate their responsibilities as the guides of mankind, because all their science does not help them to know where they themselves ought to be going . . . We must stop thinking that the spiritual world has nothing to do with science, psychology, politics, commerce, or medicine.¹²

While health is not the totality of human wholeness, it is a basic

9. Kushner H. S.: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, New York, Avon, p.132, 1981.

10. Larson B.: *There's A Lot More to Health Than Not Being Sick*, Waco, Tx., Word, p.20, 1981.

11. *loc. cit.* 1, p.363.

12. Tournier P.: *The Healing of Persons*, New York, Harper and Row, p.279, 1965.

component. While physical healing is not the same as personal healing, it is intrinsically related. And while creative medicine will not usher in the kingdom of God, it can contribute significantly to that fuller realization of our common humanity, which is both a gift and an achievement.¹³

Care, compassion, benevolence

The important place that physical healing held in the ministry of Jesus was because He was moved with compassion at the sufferings of humans around Him. He did not allow religious dogma or political expediency to hinder Him, even when it meant the disfavour of influential individuals. Jesus was eventually killed as a result of accusations that He was a magician and blasphemer. Healthcare personnel today are also influenced by the politics of health. Cost containment, priority-setting for limited resources, rapid technologic advances, and the pressures of personal advancement can mask the basic reason for existence of the 'helping' professions. The caring, co-operative attitude of the healthcare professional can quickly disintegrate to a superficial paternalism without continuous renewal and remembrance of the need for compassion and benevolence.

The Church and its individual members also have a responsibility for healing.

Protestantism, with its intellectual, didactic tendency, has concentrated too exclusively on preaching and collective action. I think that in order to be true to its mission it ought to recover the sense of the individual cure of souls.¹⁴

In the early Church it was not possible to be passive and be a Christian. And today, the ministry of the Church requires active participation and hard work of its members, so that caring and compassion are demonstrated in practice.

True spiritual healing demands another kind of preparation altogether. Let a fellowship be formed of convinced, devout and sensible people. Let them regularly pray together. It may be necessary for them to live together for periods. We forget that the disciples lived together for three years, and lived with Jesus, and even then were weak and undependable.¹⁵

Freedom of choice

There is no indication in the Gospels that Jesus ever sought out

13. Nelson J. B.: *Human Medicine*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, p.189, 1973.

14. *loc. cit.* 12, p.232.

15. *loc. cit.* 5, p.488.

people to heal. They came to Him, and when they did, He frequently asked them if they wanted to be healed. Indeed, when faith was totally lacking, Jesus was not able to heal. Being sick is a very personal all-engrossing state and sometimes people become comfortable in that role. When people choose sickness, no therapy can be successful. Before Jesus healed the man who had been lying by the pool of Bethesda for 38 years, He asked him if he wanted to be healed. It is difficult to believe that, if he had really wanted to get into the pool for healing, the sick man could not have elicited enough sympathy among passers-by so that he would not have had to wait for 38 years. Hence, Jesus sought the man's active participation. The implication is that if the man had said he did not want to be healed, Jesus would and/or could not have helped him.

Becoming well after a long bout of illness is risky and takes courage. One no longer has the excuse of sickness for weaknesses or failures. And some may not have the strength or will to struggle to get well.

I have to tell you that I am afraid of feeling myself becoming normal. I feel everyone is going to take advantage of me, treating me unkindly . . . I am defending myself in advance.¹⁶

One physician has taken an extreme position on the issue of freedom of choice.

The concept of medical care as the patient's right is immoral because it denies the most fundamental of all rights, that of a man to his own life and the freedom of action to support it. Medical care is neither a right nor a privilege: it is a service that is provided by doctors and others to people who wish to purchase it.¹⁷

Though most of us would tend to argue in the opposite direction—that medical care is morally all people's right—it is important to recognize that Jesus not only respected each person's right to choose between health and disease, but even required that they choose. It is not the prerogative of healthcare personnel to choose therapy for patients. Whether people think they want to or not, they must be involved in decisions regarding their health.

Equal access

There is a most moving account of a woman who begs Jesus to heal

16. *loc. cit.* 12, p.243.

17. Sade R. M.: Medical care as a right: a refutation. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1971, 285(23), p.1289.

her daughter (Matt. 15:22-28). He does so despite the fact that she was a Gentile, not a member of the Jewish people to whom He belonged. Jesus commanded the disciples to give freely, as they had received (Matt. 10:8). Neither Jesus nor His followers discriminated in their choice of who to heal on the basis of income level, religious or political persuasion, or ethnic background.

In our healthcare system today attempts have been made through government subsidies, free clinics, etc. to assure most individuals of access to at least a minimum standard of preventive and therapeutic health services, but that is not the issue here, since most of us are not in a position to directly influence government policy. Rather, it is in our individual attitudes and approach to clients (as healthcare personnel) and to each other (as members of the Church) where we begin to see ways in which we can minister, not necessarily in the same manner to all people, but equally.

It has been said of medicine that its duty is sometimes to heal, often to afford relief, and always to bring consolation. This is exactly what the Bible tells us that God does for suffering humanity. Sometimes God heals, but not always. But He gives relief, He protects and sustains us in times of affliction; and His consolation is unending. Here too we may say that the doctor in his vocation works hand in hand with God.¹⁸

In summary, Jesus' ministry serves as a model for the Christian healthcare provider and client. The principles of the integration of the body-mind-spirit, care and compassion, freedom of choice, and equal access, sometimes obscured in today's healthcare system, can serve as the foundation for the practice of healing in our professional and personal lives.

18. McLenden W. W.: *Medicine of the whole person and the laboratory physician*. In Paul Tournier's *Medicine of the Whole Person*, Waco, Tx., Word Books, 1973.