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Jesus' Requests to Keep Healings Secret

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1. Introduction

Jesus' requests to keep healings secret are, indeed, unique in the history of healing. No parallel is found in either the Jewish or Hellenistic worlds of Jesus' days. Healers of all cultures are known to be fond of giving an enumeration of the patients whose illnesses they had cured, especially to new patients, partly as a way of encouraging their faith in the healers and in the efficacy of the therapeutics to be administered and partly as a way of boosting their ego.¹ The synoptic narratives, however, show that Jesus insisted on some of his healings being kept secret.

It is probably unimaginable that Jesus who performed as many healing miracles as are credited to him in the Gospels—quite over twenty-five—would have directed that his healings be kept secret. Yet, the synoptic writers say that Jesus so instructed. If he ever issued out such directives, why did he do so? And how do we relate his practice to the healing convention of our time in which open testimonies are required of all who are healed, especially during mass healing? It is therefore, the aim of this paper to provide answers to the questions raised. In considering the second question raised above, our focus will be on the Church in Yorubaland of Nigeria.

2. The Synoptic Evidence

Jesus' directive to the effect that his healings should be kept secret is specifically reported along with four of Mark's healing stories. These include the healing of the leper in which

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Jesus warns: *hora mēdeni, mēden eipēs*, "Listen don't tell anyone about this (Mk. 1:44); the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mk. 5:43); the cure of the deaf-mute (Mk. 7:36); and the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida when Jesus also orders: *Mēde eis tēn kōmēn eiselhēs*. "Don't go back into the village" (Mk. 8:26). Only one of these is paralleled in the other Synoptic Gospels—the healing of the leper (Mt. 8:4; Lk. 5:16). The raising of Jairus' daughter is paralleled only in Luke (8:56). But if the clause, *hote de exelthē ho ochlos*, "as soon as the people had been put out" in Mt. 9:25a may be understood to mean that some air of secrecy was created before the raising of the girl, then it may be said that it is also paralleled in Matthew's Gospel, the following information in verse 26, *exelthen hē phēmē haute eis holēn tēn gēn ekeinēn* "the news about this (the raising) spread all over the part of the country" notwithstanding. The warning to keep the healing secret is also contained in the story of the healing of two blind men, which is peculiar to Matthew (9:30).

It would also appear that Jesus, as a practice, never allowed the demons he exorcized to disclose his Messianic identity to the apparently 'ignorant' public (Mk. 1:34; Lk. 4:41; Mk. 3:12).

The impression given therefore, is that Jesus' requests to keep his healings secret and his reproofs to the demons that his Messianic identity should not be disclosed to the public are interrelated. Another interrelated incident is that in which Jesus expressly instructed his disciples not to tell anybody that he was the Messiah of the Jewish expectation (Mt. 16:20; Mk. 8:30; Lk. 9:21). Jesus' requests to keep his healings secret must be seen and understood along the requests to keep the knowledge of his Messiahship secret. Luke makes it clear that healing miracles were expected of the Messiah (Lk. 4:17-18; 7:22).² So, indiscriminate employment of healing miracles, such as Jesus seemed to be preventing by requesting that his healings be kept secret, would easily attract the attention of the people as a whole to the fact of his Messiahship. Hence, the requests to keep his healings secret. Any attempt to take the events separately will, no doubt, lead to absurd conclusions.

It is, however, striking to note that while Mark's Gospel has the preponderance of such events, popularly tagged 'Messianic

secret' or 'secret Messiahship' by modern scholars, than the other Synoptic Gospels, the fourth Gospel is free of such ideas.

3. The Johannine Perspective

In the fourth Gospel, Jesus makes no attempts to conceal his Messiahship as he tries to do in the Synoptic Gospels. Rather, what we have is the picture of Jesus declaring himself publicly as the Messiah almost everywhere he went. And unlike in Mark where the crowds and even the disciples display an almost incredible obtuseness with regard to what they heard and saw (Mk. 8:17-18),³ many people in John's gospel readily recognized and identified Jesus as the Messiah.

A few examples from the Gospel will suffice. In a discussion with Nicodemus, an event reported as having taken place early in his ministry, Jesus asserts, "... we speak of what we know and report what we have seen" (Jn. 3:11).⁴ Speaking further, Jesus insists that, "no one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven" (Jn. 3:15). To the women of Samaria, Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah (Jn. 4:26). A clear claim to Messiahship is also evident in the several instances in which Jesus describes himself as *to phōs tou kosmou*, "the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12), *to poimen ho kalos*, "the good shepherd" (Jn. 10:11), *hē anastasis kai hē zōē*, "the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11:25), *hē hodos kai hē alētheia kai hē zōē*, "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6). The very moment John the Baptist sets his eyes on Jesus, he identifies him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29), a description which points to Jesus as "the suffering servant delineated in Isaiah liii."⁵ In a subsequent development, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother unambiguously declares: *Heurē Kamen ton Messian*, ("We have found the Messiah") (Jn. 1:41). Some of the people who always followed him certainly believed that he was the Messiah (Jn. 7:41).

From the foregoing discussions, it would appear that a synthesis of both the Synoptic and the Johannine positions could be arrived at by supposing that the two positions were true of the ministry of Jesus; it is not that the Synoptists are

correct while John is incorrect, or vice versa. There were probably some occasions when Jesus made self-disclosures by identifying himself as the Messiah or describing himself in images pointing to him as the Messiah, as correctly reported by the fourth evangelist. There were also some occasions when Jesus chose to check his being identified as the Messiah, as claimed by the Synoptists. It was, no doubt, in the light of this that he sometimes discouraged those he healed of one ailment or the other from making his works known to the public. But, why did he have to do that?

4. Possible Explanations

Chignell gives three probable reasons why Jesus requested that his cures be kept secret:

1. Healing was not his main purpose, hence he sought to spend less time on it.
2. He wanted to be able to convince men and women of the truth of his message without spectacular cures to back up his claims, and,
3. He did not want to be crowded out of villages and towns by excited mobs.⁶

These suggestions are only plausible where Jesus' requests to keep his healings secret are considered in isolation of his requests to keep his identity as the Messiah secret. We have earlier warned that such a consideration will certainly lead to absurd conclusions. That explains why none of the reasons suggested by Chignell can be pressed far. We agree with him that healing was not Jesus' main purpose, but we cannot say that he did not give it the adequate attention it deserved in his ministry with healing stories as earlier noted, quite over twenty-five in the Gospels, apart from the summaries of Jesus' healing miracles. It may not be correct to say that Jesus did not intend to convince people of the truth of his message by performing healing miracles. His condemnation of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, as places where most of his cures had been done and yet, they would not believe, no doubt, implies that he expected people to be convinced by his cures. Also, Jesus' words quoted by the fourth evangelist, "But if I do

them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jn. 10:38), are in support of our position. Finally, it cannot be overstressed that Jesus did not want to be crowded out of villages. To say so is to ignore the fact that on some occasions, Jesus as well did instruct those he had healed to relate their encounter to relatives as a way of glorifying God (Mk. 5:19-20). The true picture of those events is that Jesus only desired to reduce to a minimum the publicity of his cures.⁷

In their own contribution, John and Major also give three possible suggestions as follows:

1. That Jesus' instruction to keep his cures secret was a product of Roman religious atmosphere in which many pagan religions claimed to possess the only true knowledge of the gods which they kept secret from all who were not members of their religion so that only they themselves with this secret knowledge could have a special relationship with their god or gods,
2. That early Christians lived in a persecuted community, so the secrecy about Jesus' Messiahship set an example of how the members of the Church should live.
3. That the instruction became necessary so that Jesus' Messiahship was not misunderstood in an age when the concept had been clothed with military taints.⁸

The first suggestion is untenable on the ground that the idea of secret knowledge, as obtained in the Roman Religions, was not in consonance with Jesus' proclamation of the Gospel. He went about proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God. Jesus did not proclaim any secret or special knowledge. Rather, he called on all and sundry to live a righteous life that would make them partakers of God's Kingdom. The second suggestion cannot be sustained in the sense that it cannot be correctly said that Jesus did not anticipate the persecution of the Church. According to Lk. 14:27, Jesus once said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. To a would-be disciple, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Anyone who starts to plough and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God" (Lk. 9:62). Matthew also

quotes Jesus as saying, "If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget himself, carry his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 16:24-25). Since Jesus expected his followers to face persecutions with calm, it cannot be said that he intended to use the secrecy about his Messiahship to teach how Christians should keep their identity as Christians, secret.

We, however, agree with the third suggestion that Jesus probably gave the instruction to keep his cures secret on some occasions so that his Messiahship was not misunderstood. As earlier on noted, the Messianic hope among the Jews, according to the evidence of Luke, involved the expectation that the Messiah would cure people of their ailments. So, were Jesus' healings to be allowed a maximum publicity, the possibility of his being identified as the Messiah of the Jewish expectation would have been high. Jesus' emphatic desire to reduce the publicity of his healings to a barest minimum was, indeed a concerted effort to conceal his Messiahship.

He sought to conceal his identity as the Messiah because the concept at that time suggested to people a military, nationalistic leadership which he had no desire of giving.⁹ The Jewish expectation was that the Messiah would work for the regaining of political freedom by overthrowing the Roman suzerainty and establishing Jewish rule over the Gentiles.¹⁰ Whereas, Jesus' understanding of the Messianic role was different; he considered the basic need of his people to be spiritual and moral renewal. In the words of Tinsley:

Jesus came to seek and save all lost sinners, to serve men in their need, and to establish a spiritual, heavenly Kingdom.¹¹

Although Jesus recognized himself as the Messiah of the Jewish expectation, he rejected the political role which the Jews expected the Messiah to perform. He refused to be a military or political Messiah. Vander Waal is correct when he says:

If Jesus were to reveal Himself at the very outset as the Messiah and the Son of God, that knowledge would be

open to misunderstanding and misuse. Jesus did not want the people to regard Him as a miraculous healer, or a national hero or a freedom fighter.¹²

Jesus Christ, no doubt, longed for the Kingdom of God where love and integrity are the order of the day, rather than a worldly Kingdom where avarice and self-centredness are the chief articles of faith.

5. The Yorubaland Experience

The practice of healing in the Church in the Yorubaland of Nigeria seems to have made a wide departure from what was obtained at the time of Jesus. Jesus' practice of allowing only a minimum publicity of his healings appears to have been replaced with a penchant for a heavy or a maximum publicity of the healing activities of the Church.

A prominent feature of the practice of healing in the Church today is mass healing as obtained, especially during crusade rallies, which finds a place in the weekly routine of all the Aladura Churches, and is often organized at public places such as market places, parks, stadia, streets, *et cetera*.

The holding of crusade rallies is usually heavily publicized. Posters announcing and advertizing crusade rallies are pasted in every conspicuous place or location in the streets. Handbills for the same purpose are also distributed in the streets, in motor parks, at homes, in the market places and at place of work. Radio as well as Television advertisements are also embarked upon. Announcements are, in addition, made in the various Churches in which people are invited to such rallies.¹³ Sometimes, the posters, hand-bills and Television advertisements carry photographs of people who had been healed in some earlier deliverance sessions. Advertisements do not only herald crusade rallies, but often go on while the deliverance meetings are in progress, depending on the financial capability of the organizers.

Very often, a few hours before the commencement of each deliverance sessions, vans with public address systems mounted on them, are despatched to the streets, to serve as a sort of last-minute reminder to the public. Again and again,

assurances of their deliverance from all forces of evil may be re-echoed. The heavier the publicity is, the heavier the turnout of people at the crusade rallies. Much energy is therefore, put into publicizing the deliverance services to the generality of the public.

At such rallies, Christian songs are rendered, the evangelists or prophets leading the rallies are introduced, the sermons or preachings are delivered, healing prayers are said, leading to mass healing. Then, testimonies are called for and given by those miraculously healed and finally, the grace is said to end the rallies.¹⁴ Testimonies on such occasions are very important. In fact, the crusaders or evangelists are emphatic that failure to give testimonies might result in the disease already cured relapsing, and the evil spirits exorcized returning to their human carriers. Very often, people already cured in earlier rallies are brought in to give testimonies anew and sometimes, some people who had earlier been healed at the faith clinics of the evangelists are made to give open testimonies at crusade rallies.

The impression that is easily created by bringing in those who had earlier been healed to give testimonies afresh at crusade rallies is that the importance of testimonies is being overstressed; it is no less than an emphatic desire to give a maximum publicity to the healings of the evangelists, in particular, and to the healing ministry of the Church, in general. Overemphasis of open testimonies tends to suggest a sort of self-glorification on the part of those involved in Christian healing. It seems to be a good attempt and an opportunity for the evangelists/prophets to blow their own trumpets that they are apostles of Jesus Christ, and that they are accomplished healers. Christian healings which essentially should be theocentric and christocentric have become opportunities for the evangelists/prophets to boost their ego.

Christian healers, however, believe that the practice of giving open testimonies on account of healings received is quite in order and very biblical. They often cite Lk. 8:39 and Mk. 5:19 as the biblical grounds for such a practice. They believe, too, that testimonies are given for the purpose of glorifying the

exalted Lord of the Christian faith, Jesus, and his Father, God, the Absolute Healer of the universe. That is why each testimony is usually greeted with the shouts, "Praise the Lord," "Praise Jesus," "Halleluyah,"¹⁵ *et cetera*. But how justifiable is the practice of giving testimonies publicly on account of healing?

We can recall why Jesus did not allow a maximum publicity of his healings during his earthly ministry—the fear of being widely identified as the Messiah of Jewish expectation in an age when that concept was ill-conceived. Are we still under the same environment? Certainly no! Jesus has completed that first stage of his earthly ministry. He succeeded in his mission as he did not promote politico—Military activities but rather, by his death on the cross and his historic Resurrection on the third day, he uniquely started the actual inauguration of the Kingdom of God which will be fully actualized at the Parousia. Today, Christians believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah of the Jewish expectation; he is the Saviour of the world. And they are emphatic on this. So, it is apparent that there is no more need to keep the identity of Jesus as the Messiah secret. Before his earthly ministry came to an end, Jesus commissioned his disciples, nay, all Christians, to proclaim his gospel to all nooks and corners of the world (Mt. 29:19).

The proclamation of the gospel of Christ includes both preaching and healing (Mt. 10:7-8; Lk. 9:1-2). In the Church's witness today, two arms of the ministry must not only be painstakingly attended to, but must be pursued with utmost caution. Healing deserves adequate attention in the Church. Its publicity cannot be less pursued. In fact, it is a way of keeping alive the spirit of evangelism which the Church has to pursue till the end of his age. Such publicity must, however, be Christ-centered.

6. Concluding Remarks

The foregoing discussions pointed to the fact that both the Synoptists' and the fourth evangelist's portraits of Jesus' attitude to the publicity of his cures are correct. All he

sought to achieve was the emphatic desire to make a minimum publicity of his cures so that he might not be widely identified as the Messiah. This was because the Messianic hope, among the Jews of Jesus' days, was ill-conceived.

They also led us into the world of divine healing in the Church among the Yoruba where the healing ministry of the Church is accorded a maximum publicity, apparently opposite to what the Synoptic Gospels present as Jesus' attitude to the publicity of his healings. That, as a development of the modern world, is in order as the environment of the modern world is quite different from that of Jesus' days. Jesus' Lordship and Messiahship are properly understood in their spiritual perspective. As the Church faithfully carries out the Apostolic Commission of spreading the gospel to all nooks and corners of the earth while faithfully awaiting the Second Coming of Jesus, a maximum publicity of its healing ministry as the evidence of the actual breaking in of the Kingdom of God, is worthwhile. The publicity of the healings of the Church must, however, not centre on the personality of any healer or on his or her Church, but on Christ.

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