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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

John Wilkinson

## Physical Healing and the Atonement

*Dr. Wilkinson, a former Church of Scotland medical missionary in Kenya, last wrote for us in October, 1977 on "The Case of the Bent Woman in Luke 13:10-17". Since then he has written at length on Health and Healing: Studies in New Testament Principles and Practice (Edinburgh, 1980), and now he discusses the question of the relation between the atonement and the physical healing of believers.*

Health and its attainment in this life are subjects of the perennial interest. The avoidance of ill-health and the removal of sickness when it occurs are the aims of everyone. This is demonstrated by the scale of the provision of health services in western countries, the demand for which can be measured, and also by the popularity of the services of unorthodox alternatives the extent of which cannot be measured, but is known to be considerable.

Christians share in this desire for the healing of physical ill-health. They believe that ill-health is contrary to the will and purpose of God. They believe that the reason Jesus Christ died on the cross was to deal with the problem of sin and its consequences, amongst which are included disease and death. They believe also that there will come a time when sin will be no more and its consequences of disease and death will disappear for ever from human existence. Whilst there is general agreement that this is the clear teaching of Scripture, there is disagreement about when that time will be. One view is that the healing of disease on the basis of Christ's atonement is already and always available in this present life to those who claim it. This is obviously a very attractive view if it is true.

The purpose of the present article is to consider whether this view is true and justifiable in the light of Scripture, theology and Christian experience. We begin with an account of the history of this view in the modern history of the Church.

### A Historical Review

Throughout its history the Christian Church has accepted a

responsibility for the care of the sick. This responsibility has been discharged in various ways. First, by the provision of hospitals, infirmaries and similar institutions in which the sick were housed as inpatients or treated as outpatients. Out of this provision has arisen the formation in many countries of national health services by secular authorities. Second, the Church has preserved and disseminated medical knowledge and experience, often of an empirical but effective nature. This has included the cultivation and use of herbal preparations. Third, it has used methods which involved the expectation and sometimes the occurrence of miraculous healing of disease.

All through the ages of the history of the Church we read of cases of miraculous healing which cannot be explained by any method known to orthodox medicine. In modern times the best known of these cases are associated with the ministry of John Wesley in the eighteenth century,<sup>1</sup> and more recently with the names of the Blumhardts in Germany and Dorothea Trüdel of Switzerland in the nineteenth. These cases of healing were the result of faith in the power of Christ to heal, prayer for healing and the laying on of hands with or without anointing with oil. These practices were often based on the fifth chapter of the Epistle of James.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Miss Trüdel recounts how it was this passage and its successful application in practice which started her off on her career of healing.

The connection of healing, both physical and emotional, with the atonement provided for men in the death of Jesus Christ does not appear to have been made by these early modern practitioners of healing in Europe. For this connection we need to look to the United States of America. Here the origin of the idea that physical healing is to be found in the atonement in this life is usually traced to the teaching and practice of Charles Cullis (1833–1892). Cullis was greatly impressed by the work of Dorothea Trüdel and wrote an introduction to an account of her life and work which was published in America in 1872.

Charles Cullis was delicate as a child and was in poor health all his life. He began his working life as a clerk in a mercantile house in Boston, Massachusetts, but he had to resign when his health broke down. He then began the study of medicine and became interested in the control and treatment of tuberculosis. He founded the first hospital for consumptives in the United States in

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<sup>1</sup> See M. T. Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity* (London: 1973), 235, note 44 for numerous references to healing experiences in John Wesley's Journal.

<sup>2</sup> Jas. 5:13–18.

1865 in his home town of Boston. He practised homoeopathy and became interested in 'faith healing'. He believed in using his medical skill in the treatment of sickness, but when this failed he sought to heal his patients by prayer, the laying of hands and anointing with oil. Each summer he held healing conferences in Intervale, New Hampshire and at Old Orchard in Maine. He became a minister of the episcopal Church and established several congregations in Boston.<sup>3</sup>

In 1879, Cullis published a small book entitled *Faith Cures, or Answers to Prayer in the Healing of the Sick*. In this book, he described his experience of healing by prayer but made no serious attempt to provide a theological basis for his practice of healing. That was left to the pastors he had influenced by his teaching. It was they who connected the healing of the body which Cullis and his successors practised, with the atonement and maintained that Jesus Christ had died to remove human sickness as well as human sin.

The first of these pastors was the Revd Adoniram J. Gordon DD (1836–1895). Gordon exercised a notable ministry as pastor of Clarendon Baptist Church in Boston for over twenty-five years. He came into close contact with Cullis and his medical and philanthropic work in that city, and in 1882 he published in America and Britain a book with the title *The Ministry of Healing, or Miracle Cures in All Ages*.<sup>4</sup> In this book, Gordon somewhat tentatively suggested that physical healing might be found in the atonement, and in his second chapter he quoted the words of Mt. 8:16–18 (AV):

'And He cast out devils and healed all that were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses.'<sup>5</sup>

Gordon underlined the last three words of this quotation and then made the following cautious observations:

'In the atonement of Christ there seems to be a foundation laid for faith in bodily healing . . .'

'If, now, it be true that our Redeemer and Substitute bore our

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<sup>3</sup> H. R. Viets in A. Johnson & D. Malone (eds.), *Dictionary of American Biography* (Oxford: 1930), 4, 587–588, art. 'Cullis, Charles, 1833–1893'. See also W. E. Boardman, *Faith Work under Dr Cullis in Boston* (Boston: 1874).

<sup>4</sup> A. J. Gordon, *The Ministry of Healing, or Miracles of Cure in All Ages* (London: 1882). The title of this book is the origin of the phrase 'The Ministry of Healing', which is now commonly used to describe the healing activity of the Church. The book was reprinted in Harrisburg in USA in 1961.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

sickness, it would be natural to reason that he bore them that we might not bear them.<sup>6</sup>

In similar vein, the Revd Reuben A. Torrey DD (1856–1929), the well-known American evangelist, in his book *Divine Healing* published in 1883, commented on the Matthaean verse as follows:

‘It is often said that this verse teaches that the atoning death of Jesus Christ avails for our sicknesses as well as for our sins; or, in other words, that “physical healing is in the atonement”. I think that is a fair inference from these verses when looked at in their context.’<sup>7</sup>

The tentative nature of these two quotations should be noted, for the next book to appear set out in a much more positive and dogmatic way what its predecessors had only tentatively and undogmatically suggested. The Revd Albert B. Simpson (1843–1919) was a presbyterian minister who trained at Knox College in Toronto. He had attended one of Charles Cullis’s summer conferences at Old Orchard in Main, and had received physical healing. He maintained in his book *The Gospel of Healing* published in 1885 that there was physical healing in the atonement and that this was available on request for sick people in this life. Simpson’s book was even more influential than Gordon’s and its teaching was endorsed and spread by the Christian and Missionary Alliance whose founder and first president Simpson was. It was Simpson who first spoke of the fourfold gospel in which Christ was preached as Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer and Coming King. These four aspects of the work of Christ were symbolised by a cross, a laver of water for cleansing, a pitcher of oil for healing and a crown. Simpson summarised his teaching in such statements as the following:

‘Therefore as He hath borne our sins, Jesus Christ has also borne away and carried off our sicknesses, yea, and even our pains, so that abiding in him, we may be fully delivered from both sickness and pain.’<sup>8</sup>

As a result of the teaching and ministry of A. B. Simpson and others, teaching that physical healing was available in this life in the atonement by prayer became widespread and influential in the Church life of America. This is shown by the fact that in 1887,

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> R. A. Torrey, *Divine Healing* (New York: 1883), 533. This book was reprinted in 1924 and 1974.

<sup>8</sup> A. B. Simpson, *The Gospel of Healing* (New York: 1884), 17. This book was reprinted in 1915 and 1955.

one of the leading theologians of Princeton University thought that this teaching was significant enough to form the subject of a popular lecture on theology. Alexander A. Hodge was the holder of the chair of didactic and polemical theology at Princeton and he gave his lecture under the title, 'Prayer and the Prayer Cure'.<sup>9</sup> Some thirty years later, Benjamin B. Warfield, another Princeton theologian, gave the Thomas Smyth Lectures at Columbia Theological Seminary and published them with the title, *Counterfeit Miracles*.<sup>10</sup> These lectures were a characteristically thorough investigation of what he termed 'faith healing'. Like Hodge, Warfield agreed that God answered prayer and might heal the sick supernaturally in response to prayer. But also, like Hodge, he denied that God pledged himself to heal the sick miraculously in this life at the request of his people and without the use of means.

An elaborate statement of the view of physical healing which Warfield had denied was given by the American evangelist F. F. Bosworth in his book *Christ the Healer* published in 1924. Several years before he published this book, Bosworth had conducted great healing campaigns in Canada and the United States. In the course of these campaigns he published in the secular press a series of thirty-one questions directed at opponents of his healing ministry. These questions were answered by Rowland V. Bingham in a supplement to his book, *The Bible and the Body: Healing in the Scriptures* published in Toronto in 1921. Bingham declared Bosworth's teaching to be unscriptural and unacceptable. However, in spite of Bingham's unfavourable conclusion about his teaching and practice, Bosworth still brought out his book in 1924.

In 1930, the Revd T. J. McCrossan, a Scottish Canadian minister who taught Greek at Manitoba University, published a book with the title *Bodily Healing and the Atonement*. He claimed on the title page that 'this book proves conclusively from the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, that Christ died for our sicknesses as He died for our sins'. The book was a detailed exposition of the subject of physical healing for all in this life in the atonement, albeit set out in somewhat dogmatic and even emotional terms. This book is still influential in some charismatic circles and was republished in 1982 by the Rhema Church, a pentecostalist body in the United States.

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<sup>9</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Popular Lectures on Theological Themes* (Philadelphia: 1887), Lecture V, 94-116.

<sup>10</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: 1918). This book was reissued in 1965 by Eerdmans, and then in 1972 by Banner of Truth, Edinburgh.

Since McCrossan's book was first published, many other books have appeared either maintaining or opposing the teaching which he expounded so dramatically, but they add little to his original exposition. In addition, many of the earlier books on physical healing have been reprinted.

### **Current Interest in Healing**

The subject of physical healing is still very much a live issue in the Christian Church. This is partly due to the continued activity of evangelists who claim to practise healing as part of their ministry. One of the best-known of these is John Wimber of the United States who is the founding pastor of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship originally established in California. Wimber is now engaged in a worldwide ministry of evangelism and healing. His practice of healing has produced some controversy in Christian circles, especially since this became more widely known through his ministry to David Watson during Watson's fatal illness<sup>11</sup> and the publication of his book, *Power Healing*. In this book he deals with the connection of physical healing with the atonement. He recognises that there will always be sick people who are not healed in this life, and illustrates this from his own experience since he himself cannot claim to be completely healed. Wimber admits that he has not been healed of his coronary heart disease and his peptic ulcer and goes on to say:

'I wish I could write that at this time I am completely healed, that I no longer have physical problems. But if I did, I would be a liar.'<sup>12</sup>

Wimber was the principal lecturer on a course on 'Signs, Wonders and Church Growth',<sup>13</sup> recently offered by Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. This course was first introduced in the winter term of 1982 and continued to be offered until 1986 when it was withdrawn for evaluation purposes. It proved to be a very popular course and indicated the great interest in miraculous healing that exists in the United States.

From time to time, itinerant evangelists conduct healing missions in different countries. In a recent mission of this kind in one African country, some African Christians were so convinced by the teaching on healing given by the evangelist that they accused the missionaries from whom they had first heard the

<sup>11</sup> David Watson, *Fear No Evil* (London: 1984), 50–57.

<sup>12</sup> John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Healing* (London: 1986), 162.

<sup>13</sup> Course number MC 510.

gospel of not preaching the whole gospel. They claimed that the missionaries had omitted part of the gospel by not teaching them that physical healing was available in this life in the atonement to all who wished to claim it. It is this kind of situation which gives significance to the contention that such healing is available in this life. If it is available then preachers who do not preach a gospel which includes it are failing to preach a full gospel. Also, if this contention is true then those Christians who are sick need to be sick no longer for healing is available for the asking.

It is obvious that teaching of this kind may easily result in division in the Church and it is therefore important to know whether it is true or not. It is important that we should seek answers to the following three basic questions about the truth of the claim that healing of the body in this life is included in the atonement and can be claimed by those who are sick:

1. Is this the teaching of Scripture?
2. Is it theologically valid?
3. Is it true to Christian experience?

### **Physical Healing in Scripture**

When we turn to Scripture there is no doubt that instances of miraculous physical healing in this present life are recorded in both the Old and the New Testaments. Therefore we are justified in believing on the basis of the Scriptural record that miraculous physical healing of individual sick people is possible, and possible in this present life. The question is then whether we are able to go further and say that such healing is available in this present life for all who request it in faith.

#### *The Old Testament*

In the Old Testament, God is declared to be a God who is able to heal physical disease. He describes himself in Ex. 15:26 as the Lord who heals his people if they obey his commands, and in Ps. 103:3 the Psalmist calls on his soul to praise the Lord,

‘who forgives all your sins  
and heals all your diseases’ (NIV).

The actual individual accounts of miraculous physical healing in the Old Testament are not numerous. They occur principally in the historical books and occur in response to individual need and



in particular situations. They are especially associated with the ministry of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.<sup>14</sup>

When we turn to the prophetic books we find references, especially in the book of the prophet Isaiah, to the day of Israel's deliverance and the coming of one who is to be sent from God as the Messiah. In that day, the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dumb will speak and the lame will walk.<sup>15</sup> That day will see the advent of the Messianic kingdom in which there will be no sickness or disability, but the implication is that these will continue to occur until that kingdom comes. It is not envisaged that they can be healed now on request.

The only passage in the Old Testament in which physical healing is possibly linked with the atonement is Is. 52:13–53:12. This passage forms the fourth of the Servant Songs which were identified in the book of Isaiah by Bernard Duhm in 1892. This fourth song considers in more detail than the other three, the person and activity of the Servant of the Lord (*'ebed Yahweh*). The significant verses for our present purposes are those which speak of his suffering and its object. These verses are as follows in the Authorised Version:

Is. 53:

- '4. Surely he hath borne our griefs,  
And carried out sorrows;  
Yet we did esteem him stricken,  
Smitten of God and afflicted.
5. But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
He was bruised for our iniquities:  
The chastisement of our peace was upon him;  
And with his stripes we are healed.'

These two verses are the main ones which are quoted by those authors who maintain that physical healing is available in the atonement in his present life.<sup>16</sup> Their meaning and interpretation are therefore important. Do they refer only to the bearing and removal of sin by the atonement made by the Servant, or do they also include the healing and removal of physical disease by his work of atonement?

The main theme of this passage is the work of the Servant in redeeming his people from their sin. This is mentioned in almost every verse from verse five to verse twelve, and the use of the

<sup>14</sup> 1 Ki. 17:17–24; 2 Ki. 4:18–37; 5:1–14.

<sup>15</sup> Is. 29:18; 32:3–4; 35:5–6; 42:7.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g., T. J. McCrossan, *Bodily Healing and the Atonement* (Youngstown, Ohio: 1930), 17–34, and also R. Hubbard, *Isaiah 53: Is there Healing in the Atonement?* (Bromley, Kent: 1972).

words translated *transgressions* and *iniquities* in these verses clearly indicates that it is the removal of sin which is the object of the Servant's suffering. For this reason, it is often held that the whole passage refers to the healing of the spiritual disease of sin and does not include any reference to the healing of physical disease of the body.

On the other hand, verses three and four contain two words which are not usually translated as *sin*. These words are *h<sup>o</sup>li* and *mak'ob*, which are translated as follows in different English versions:

Version	<i>h<sup>o</sup> li</i>	<i>mak'ob</i>
AV/RV/RSV	griefs	sorrows
RSVm	sicknesses	pains
NIV	infirmities	sorrows

The word *h<sup>o</sup>li* occurs twenty-four times in the Old Testament and except for its two occurrences in this passage in verses three and four, it is almost always translated in the English versions by words meaning sickness or disease in a literal physical sense. However, it can be taken in a non-physical sense in these verses as it is by the AV followed by the RV and the RSV.

The word *mak'ob* occurs sixteen times and means *pain* which may be either physical or mental. It is usually translated *sorrow*, i.e., mental pain, which may of course have a physical cause.

The occurrence and meaning of these two words in this passage have given rise to the interpretation that the healing of physical disease is also to be included amongst the benefits of the atonement made by the Servant. We saw above in our brief historical review how this interpretation has in turn given rise to the claim that the healing of physical disease is available in the atonement and may be obtained in this life on request by faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

The details of the experience of the Servant in this passage correspond closely with those described in the gospels of the experience of our Lord. This close correspondence is, of course, the basis of the traditional Christian interpretation of the passage as fulfilled by the sufferings of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> There is, however, one detail which is different from all the rest. All the injuries and their effects which are described of the Servant were produced by external agents at the time of his suffering. He endured mental

<sup>17</sup> It must be said however, that a doctrine which depends almost entirely on the meaning of one word (*h<sup>o</sup>li*) cannot be regarded as well-founded.

<sup>18</sup> C. R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah* (Oxford: 1948), 23-27.

anguish, he was wounded, he was bruised, he was scourged, and all this was on our behalf. This description is readily understood, but how are we to understand the detail which refers to his bearing our sickness and disease in verse four, if this is what this verse means? Did he actually suffer from physical disease? It was early suggested that several features in the description of the Servant could best be explained by supposing him to suffer from leprosy. The Latin Vulgate actually translates the third clause of verse four by *nos putavimus quasi leprosum*, which Ronald Knox rendered into English by 'A leper, so we thought of him. whom God had smitten and brought low.'<sup>19</sup> However, we do not need to go as far as this. Nevertheless, the problem remains. In verse three he is described as a man who knew pain or sorrow (*mak'ôb*) and was familiar with sickness (*h'ôlî*), which may or not mean that the Servant was himself a sufferer from disease. If we apply this to Jesus Christ, then it cannot mean that the Servant was himself the subject of disease, but that he was familiar with disease as it occurred in others. How then can he be said to bear sickness? For the answer to this question we must turn to the gospels.

Before we do so, we must complete our examination of the treatment of the Servant and its results. He was wounded and bruised, chastised and scourged in our stead, and his chastisement produced our *šālôm* (health NEB) and his scourging resulted in our healing (v.5). This passage in Isaiah looks forward to the coming of one who will remove human weakness and sin and will secure healing and well-being for his people. He will do this by enduring suffering produced by injuries inflicted on him by others, suffering which should by rights have been his people's because of their sin. It is, therefore, clear why the fulfilment of this prophecy has traditionally been seen by Christians to be accomplished in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

## The New Testament

### 1. In the Gospels

The Old Testament passage which we have just been considering

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<sup>19</sup> The Greek version of Aquila also speaks of the Servant as leprous (aphēmenos) according to Jerome. See J. Jeremias in G. Kittel (ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: 1967), V, 690, art. 'p̄ais theou'. The idea that the Servant was the Messiah and was a leper is also found in the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Sanhedrin*, 98b.

is one of the most frequently quoted in the New Testament of all Old Testament passages. Its use in the gospels indicates that Jesus Christ 'often regarded his vocation in the light of this supremely suggestive prophecy'.<sup>20</sup>

The only place in the gospels where Is. 53:4a is quoted word for word is in Mt. 8:17. The quotation comes at the end of a section in which Matthew has described some of the physical healing miracles which Jesus performed. These were the healing of a leprosy patient, of a Roman centurion's servant and of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, which are described on an individual basis. Matthew then told how,

'When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick' (v. 16 NIV).

Then he proceeds to quote Is. 53:4a in verse seventeen:

'This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities (*astheneias*) and carried our diseases (*nosous*)"' (v.17 NIV).

This quotation was direct from the Hebrew because it differs from the LXX rendering.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that Matthew uses it to describe what Jesus did for the sick.

Both the Greek words used by Matthew are those commonly used in the New Testament for physical disease, and the quotation occurs in the context of the healing of physical disease. This suggests that Matthew understood the Isaianic passage to mean that one of the activities of the Servant would be the healing of physical disease, and that the interpretation of this passage included physical healing.

There is no suggestion here that Jesus bore the sicknesses of those he healed in the sense that he transferred them to himself and so suffered from them himself. He certainly could not have done this for those who were demon-possessed and so allowed himself to be demon-possessed. That is unthinkable for the Son of God.

Similarly, there is no indication that the healing activity of Jesus was connected with his atonement. His healing miracles were all performed before he died on the cross to make atonement for human sin. They are connected with his power to heal.

<sup>20</sup> James Moffatt, *Theology of the Gospels* (London: 1919), 149. cp. R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: 1971), 130-132.

<sup>21</sup> R. H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden: 1967), 109 & 111.

Another reference to Jesus as the Isaianic Servant of the Lord in a healing context occurs in the gospel of Matthew. In chapter twelve after Jesus had healed the man with the withered hand in the synagogue on the sabbath day, he withdrew to avoid any attempt by the Pharisees to put him to death. After recording this Matthew goes on to say:

‘Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah’ (Mt. 12:15b–16 NIV).

Then follows a quotation of the whole of the first Servant Song from Is. 42:1–2. This Song speaks of the Servant as the meek and patient teacher who will be endowed with the Spirit of God and whose mission will be to teach true religion to the nations. Matthew quotes this passage as fulfilled by Jesus who wished to avoid publicity and confrontation with the Pharisees and to continue with his mission, which Matthew appears to understand as including the healing of physical disease. As if to emphasise this, Matthew immediately tells of another case of healing, that of the man who was blind and mute in verse twenty-two.

As in Mt. 8:17, there is no indication here that the healing activity of Jesus whilst he was on earth was connected with his work of atonement. Indeed, the uniform presentation of the gospels is that his healing was due to his power.<sup>22</sup> This is why his healing miracles are called might works (*dunameis*) or simply works (*erga*). They demonstrated his power, and because this also indicated who he was, they were also called signs (*sêmeia*).

Our conclusion must be that the writers of the gospels do not connect the healing activity of Jesus with the atonement accomplished by his death, but with his power which was demonstrated in his life. They do, however, indicate that the healing of sickness by Jesus was available in this life by request when he was on earth and was able to heal personally.

## 2. In the Apostolic Church

When we turn to the history of the apostolic Church as given in the books of Acts, we find that cases of immediate miraculous healing are still recorded although they are fewer in number than in the gospels. The basis on which these cases of sickness were healed is not always stated, but where it is stated it is by the

<sup>22</sup> One of the clearest examples of this is found in the account of the healing of the woman with the issue of blood in Mk. 5:25–34 where Mark records that at her healing, ‘Jesus realized that power had gone out of him’ (v. 30 NIV).

invocation of the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 3:6; 9:34; 16:18, cp. 19:13). This means that in each case the healing was by the authority and with the power of Jesus Christ, i.e., on the same basis as healing in the gospels. There is no mention of the atonement in these cases. Apostolic preaching offered forgiveness of sin on the basis of the atonement but never specifically offered physical healing.<sup>23</sup>

In the epistles there are only two references to the practice of healing and neither of these is related to the atonement. In 1 Cor. 12:9, healing is mentioned as one of the gifts given to certain members of the Church to be used for the benefit of the Church. In Jas. 5:14, sick people are told to call on the elders of the Church so that the elders may come and pray over them and anoint them with oil so that they may be healed.

There is one verse in the epistles which is sometimes quoted in support of the view that healing is to be found in the atonement in this life, and that is 1 Pet. 2:24.<sup>24</sup> However, Peter here speaks of Christ bearing our sins (as the LXX did in Is. 53:4), and not our diseases. Certainly, he appears to quote part of Is. 53:5, but he uses a past tense which suggests that he is referring to the passion of our Lord as having made atonement for sin, rather than referring to physical healing being available for his readers in the present.

We began this section by asking the question of whether physical healing on the basis of the atonement is always available in this life on request, according to the teaching of Scripture. Our answer to that question must be that in Scripture, physical healing in this life is not unambiguously connected with the atonement. Also that in Scripture there is no promise that healing of the body is available in this present life to all who request it on the basis of faith.

### **The Theology of Physical Healing**

The second question we must ask about the teaching that physical healing is available for all in this life in the atonement, concerns its theological validity.

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<sup>23</sup> See C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: 1936). Dodd found no reference to physical healing in the preaching of the apostles except a mention in Acts 2:22 where Peter referred to the miracles of Jesus as a sign that he came from God. Leon Morris in his *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: 1955) also could find no references to physical healing, which means that the apostles did not preach that physical healing could be found in the atonement in this life.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g., John Wimber, *op. cit.*, 165.

There can be no doubt that Jesus Christ bore our sin when he died on the cross to make atonement for it. He did so in every possible meaning of the Hebrew verb *nāśa'* used in Is. 53:4. He took it up, he bore it, and took it away. As Peter said in 1 Pet. 2:24:

'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.'

Jesus was also exposed to suffering by virtue of his incarnation. He suffered the minor experiences of hunger, thirst and weariness during his earthly ministry. In his passion he endured the major experiences of pain, wounding and dying. This pain and suffering was part of the experience of his atoning death and essentially linked to that experience because he was truly incarnate in a real human body.

However, the question is whether Jesus bore our diseases when he made atonement for us, in the same sense as he bore our sin, so that as we can have forgiveness of sin in this life by faith in his atonement in this life, we can also by faith in his atonement have freedom from sickness in this present life. In order to answer this question we must recognise that sin and disease belong to different categories and what is true for one of them may not be true of the other. Disease is not sin, but a consequence of sin. Disease carries no penalty which must be atoned for as sin does. Disease does not interfere with a man's fellowship with God like sin does. A sick man can still enjoy fellowship with God in spite of suffering from disease, and his experience of sickness may even deepen that fellowship. Once we recognize that sin and disease belong to different categories we can readily see that the atonement will affect them in different ways. In the case of sin we can know forgiveness in this present life, but there is nothing corresponding to this experience of forgiveness in the case of disease. The only thing which could correspond to forgiveness would be an immunity to disease which would be as permanent as our forgiveness. Those who were healed by Jesus in the gospels were not given such an immunity for this would have meant that they would never have died. Even Lazarus who was raised from the dead eventually died again.<sup>25</sup> What was true for them is also true for us today. When we receive forgiveness on putting our faith in Jesus Christ and his atonement on our behalf, we are not made perfect by having sin and its effects removed from us. Sin will only be finally removed at the resurrection. What applies to

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<sup>25</sup> Jn. 11:1-44.

sin, also applies to its effects such as disease for these too will only be removed at the resurrection.

The healing miracles of Jesus in the gospels are an assurance that we may be delivered from individual episodes of disease and even have our lives prolonged in particular circumstances by the power of God, but they give no assurance that we may be given absolute immunity from disease or permanent deliverance from death on request this side of the resurrection.

We conclude, therefore, that it is not theologically valid to maintain that physical healing is available in the atonement or request in this present life. However, it is theologically valid to maintain that physical healing, and indeed the complete removal of sin and disease from our bodies, will occur at the resurrection as part of the redemption which was secured for us by the atonement which Christ made for us on the cross. An atonement which was made to secure the ultimate removal of sin and all its effects. This was what Paul meant when he wrote to the Roman Church saying that he was eagerly awaiting 'our investiture as sons of God, on the day when we receive the redemption (*apolutrōsos*) of our bodies' (Rom. 8:23).<sup>26</sup> It is clear that this redemption of our bodies will not occur in this life but in the life that is to come at 'the day of redemption' of which Paul speaks in Eph. 4:30.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Testimony of Christian Experience**

Our final question must be whether it is true in Christian experience, that physical healing is available in this life for all who request it by faith. If this is true, then many Christians are suffering unnecessarily and many preachers are preaching an incomplete gospel. Furthermore, as we have already mentioned, there is a danger of producing a two-tier Christianity with Christians divided into those who claim to have been healed, separating themselves from those who cannot claim to have been healed. This same danger is present in the various movements which have arisen stressing the possible attainment of complete personal holiness in this life, and it is not without significance that an emphasis on the possibility of complete physical healing and complete personal holiness in this life have often been combined in the various holiness movements which have arisen

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<sup>26</sup> F. F. Bruce, *An Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul* (Exeter, 1965), 209. Cp. his Tyndale New Testament Commentary on *Romans*, 174.

<sup>27</sup> Leon Morris, *op. cit.*, 47-48.



from time to time in the history of the Church, particularly in the United States.

If it is true that physical healing is available on request in this life for all who put their trust in Jesus Christ, then this should be normal experience of Christian people. They should not be the victims of disease or sickness of any kind. The question we must consider, therefore, is whether this kind of healing is true to the experience of such people.

We turn first of all to the New Testament to examine the experience of the early Christians. If complete physical healing was always available on request, then we should find that it was enjoyed by these early Christians of all people. In fact, we find that it is specifically recorded of four of them that they were sick and continued to be sick and to undergo the natural process of their disease. Also, it is important to note the incidental nature of the mention of their sickness. Their sickness would not have been mentioned except that it affected the work of the Church and in particular the plans of the apostle Paul. This suggests that there must have been many other cases of sickness which occurred but were not recorded because there was no special reason to record as there was in the case of these four. In other words, when Paul mentioned these four cases, he was not concerned to argue that physical healing was or was not available in the atonement for Christians in this life. This was because this idea had not yet arisen in the Church.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul reminds the Christians of Galatia that he first came to their country because he was ill:

‘It was bodily illness, as you will remember, that originally led to my bringing you the gospel, and you resisted any temptation to show scorn or disgust at my physical condition’ (Gal. 4:13–14 REB).

This passage makes it clear that Paul was ill at this time and showed visible signs of his illness which were obvious to the Galatians. The implication of the passage is that Paul went through the natural stages of his illness without the occurrence of any dramatic healing. His recovery was by the normal natural process without any suggestion that he claimed any immediate healing through the atonement.

If Paul’s experience in Galatia was an example of ‘the thorn in the flesh’ which he described in 2 Cor. 12:7–10, then we are able to obtain more details about his illness. However, the identity of the thorn in the flesh is controversial and our view of its nature may even be influenced by whether we believe that physical healing is available in this life in the atonement. Those authors

who believe that such healing is available tend to interpret the thorn as describing some form of personal temptation or social persecution. Those who do not accept this view, on the other hand, are free to consider other possibilities including those of physical disease. One very attractive one is that the thorn in the flesh was a recurrent infection in Paul's body such as benign tertian or vivax malaria. If this were so, then the incident of which Paul reminds the Galatians was an attack of malaria.<sup>28</sup>

If this thorn in the flesh was a physical disease such as malaria, then we find that in this case God refused to heal this disease even though Paul requested him to do so on no less than three occasions (v.8). Instead of removing the disease, God provided an antidote, so that as the disease had been provided as an antidote to pride (v. 7), grace was provided as an antidote to the weakness produced by the disease (v. 9). If physical healing was to be found in the atonement in this life, then surely Paul would have claimed it and so been healed of his disease. The fact that he did not do so suggests that it was not automatically available.

There may be uncertainty about the nature of Paul's illness but we are not confined to his case alone in our consideration of the experience of disease in the apostolic circle. In his case, the diagnosis may have been left deliberately vague so that the example of his experience could be applied to other similar situations, and not confined to one particular disease.

The second case was that of Epaphroditus, who was sent by the Church at Philippi to be of service to Paul in his prison in Rome (Phil. 2:25-30). In Rome he contracted some acute infection from which he nearly died. The fact that he fell ill and came very near to death indicates that neither he nor Paul thought that they could claim immediate physical healing from his disease. Paul's description implies that Epaphroditus was allowed to go through the natural stages of his infection and even to approach near to death before he recovered. This description fits in well with the possibility that whilst in Rome, Epaphroditus contracted enteric fever and exhibited the normal progress of that disease until it issued in recovery. No attempt was made by Paul or anyone else to cut short the infection by claiming physical healing in the atonement or applying any gift of healing.

The third case was that of Timothy. It is an indication of the authenticity of First Epistle to Timothy that it reveals Timothy to

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<sup>28</sup> For a full discussion of the nature of Paul's thorn in the flesh see John Wilkinson, *Health and Healing: Studies in New Testament Principles and Practice* (Edinburgh, 1980), 112-142.

be a chronic sufferer from dyspepsia. No forger would have the temerity to suggest that a Christian leader suffered from a chronic physical disability such as Timothy had according to 1 Tim. 5:23. Paul appears to accept that Timothy was frequently ill, and all he suggests is that he should use a little wine for the treatment of his chronically recurrent stomach complaint. If immediate physical healing had been available for Timothy, Paul would have encouraged him to seek it. The fact that he did not do so, suggests that it was not immediately available on request.

The fourth case is that of Trophimus, but we have few details about him except that Paul had left him sick at Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20). The fact that Paul had left him behind because he was sick does not suggest that immediate physical healing was available to him in the atonement, or it would have been sought to allow him to accompany Paul on his journey.

If the teaching that we are considering is true, namely, that immediate healing of bodily sickness is available in this life on request in faith, then there was no need for any of these four people to have continued to suffer illness. The fact that they did suggests that this teaching does not represent the belief or the experience of the early Christians.

What about the experience of Christians today? This is no different from the experience of the early Christians. As in the New Testament, some sick people are healed and some are not. As in the New Testament, sick people today seek healing in faith that God has the power to provide it, but they do not automatically receive it for it is not included in the blessing provided for this present life in the atonement.

### Conclusion

We began with the question of whether physical healing is available in this life in the atonement to those who request by faith in Jesus Christ.

We examined Is. 53:4–5 which is the passage on which an affirmative answer to this question that such healing is available is usually based. We found that a possible interpretation of this passage is that healing of the body is to be found in the atonement, but that this interpretation is not unambiguous, as the word *h'li* can be taken in a physical or a non-physical sense.

Also, this interpretation was not that given to these verses in the New Testament where the gospels connected the healing of physical disease in this present life with the power of Jesus Christ to heal rather than with his atonement.

The teaching of the New Testament is that complete physical healing and the removal of all physical disease will occur at the resurrection when our bodies will be redeemed and transformed into a glorious body not subject to disease, decay or death (Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 15:49–53 & Phil. 3:21). This redemption in which our bodies share is the result of the work of atonement wrought for us on the cross (Rom. 3:24–25; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:12 & 1 Pet. 1:18–19).

Physical healing is, therefore, available to all in the atonement but *not in this present life*, only in the life that is to come.

Nevertheless, physical healing is available to some in this life based on the power of God in Christ to heal, and it is the duty of Christian people who fall ill to seek healing through the means which are available, whether those means are medical or non-medical, physical or spiritual.