



Healing Miracles and the Role of the Pastor

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Dr Cameron gave this address in the Chapel of Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi, during a visit in 1988 at the invitation of the Christian Medical Dental Society of the U.S.

I would like to begin by reading from Scripture in the letter of James, some verses from Chapter 4 and then some from Chapter 5. They include the famous verse which addresses our subject of Healing Miracles and the Role of the Pastor, and I would like you to gain something of the context in which we find this statement in James' letter. First I would like to read from verse 13 of chapter 4:

Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain' whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

And at verse 7 of chapter 5:

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors. As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation.

Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.

The Conference this weekend is on the subject of healing miracles, and I have been asked to say something to you today in commencing this Conference on the subject of healing miracles and the role of the pastor. It is a very large subject, and in the course of 20 or 25 minutes what I can do on a question which is controversial is limited. I have no doubt there are amongst ourselves several very different views of the subject, and if that is true then it will be the more true of the fellowships that many of you will be pastoring in a year or two's time. Some views will be carefully thought out and articulated, views which will be strongly maintained by those with a particular concern in this matter, and many other views ill-thought out, confused and muddled and lurking at the back of the thinking of Christian people, and coming to the fore when they find themselves in situations where healing suddenly becomes a major issue.

Now, without going into the fundamental areas of agreement and disagreement which lie behind this discussion I would like to offer you some practical considerations, some fixed points of practice which I hope will commend themselves across a wide spread of opinion. I hope they will commend themselves to those who must be prepared to pastor people who share a wide spread of opinion. Let me offer you three or four basic, fixed points of practice in this discussion.

The pastor bears a heavy responsibility for the expectations which he raises in the minds of his people.

First of all – and perhaps most important of all – the pastor bears a heavy responsibility for the expectations which he raises in the minds of his people; those who look to him for leadership, both in what he teaches and (perhaps even more important) in the subtle unspoken assumptions which he makes and which come across in his choice of praise, in his prayer, in the manner in which he leads the thinking of the congregation. Those who look to him for leadership will be deeply influenced, whether they are aware of it or not, by the expectations which he raises in their thinking. They will set a pattern of expectation in the minds of his people. Many pastors are unaware of the influence they have at this level. They naively believe that only matters which they consciously address and logically argue in the pulpit will influence the thinking of the congregation. And often those are the things which have least influence! The unspoken assumptions of the pastor himself can have a dominant effect on the expectations of those to whom he ministers. And I think it is important for those who are engaging in preparation for pastoral ministry to think long and hard about their responsibility at this level, because of course it is in setting levels of expectation that one

largely determines levels of fulfilment. People will be fulfilled and settled in their Christian living if the expectations they have are matched. If not, they will be distressed and uneasy and unhappy.

People will be fulfilled and settled in their Christian living if the expectations they have are matched. If not, they will be distressed and uneasy and unhappy.

That applies across a number of issues, but I think it applies particularly here; and whatever view we take individually of the possibility of miraculous healing, whether we take the view that it is simply an impossibility, or whether we take a strong or a weak view of it as a possibility, we must remember that we minister to people whose parents will die, it may be whose spouses will become ill and die before their time, it may be whose children will die. In any large congregation there will be many who suffer personal tragedy, or who have suffered it before we have come on the scene. There will be many whose own home-call will take a specific and perhaps a distressing form. We minister to people who have within their extended families chronic sickness, disability, and all of the unimaginable pressures which these things put on those who themselves experience them – and of which those outside can have little notion. Now I think in my own experience of situations I have met in recent years, and you can think of your own: the child who dies after months of distressing terminal illness, the family who nurse a severely retarded teenager, the blind girl who is bright and outgoing but still blind. And I can think of doctors and nurses in the congregation who face matters of illness, life and death daily in their professional experience. Now that is the typical experience of a congregation, and as you stand in the pulpit and speak to people you have to remember it.

Now I am not suggesting here any particular view on the matter of miraculous Christian healing, merely that what we say and assume influences people for whom we bear a special responsibility. It must bear a proper realistic relationship with what they may come to expect in their own experience. As we weigh our words and our influence we must have a care, for we shall have to give account for the expectations which we have raised.

If we believe in the possibility of miraculous healing we must also believe in the necessity of prudent and proper use of medical resources.

Secondly, let me say something about the place of medicine; a second fixed point in this discussion. There is of course a view that would move from the possibility of the miraculous in medicine to the neglect of prudent medical attention. I think there are many proper views which we should respect within the spectrum of Christian opinion in this discussion, but I do not so regard that opinion. It seems to me that it is deeply flawed, that it lacks theological foundation, and that it has been the cause of enormous distress among those who have been influenced by it.

If we believe in the possibility of miraculous healing we must also believe in the necessity of prudent and proper use of medical resources. The notion that somehow divine healing is an *alternative* to God-given medical attention is theologically, biblically flawed. And whether we believe in special healing ministries within a congregation, a small group with special responsibility to pray for the sick, the formal anointing of the sick as in James or the laying on of hands – whatever view we take in practical terms we must engage in this ministry in the closest co-operation with those who are medically qualified. The confidence that God may sometimes transcend normal medical practice must be held side by side with confidence in those who are medically qualified.

Thirdly, let me say something about the place of the sovereignty of God in this whole process. We may believe that healing miracles are to be expected every week. We may believe them to be possible but extremely unusual events. We may take some middle view, or we may believe that these events are not to be expected today. These are all Christian views, and in any gathering of this size I expect that there is somebody who holds at least each of them. But I am convinced that a view that is not to be trusted at all is that which regards miraculous healing as some kind of *ex opere operatu* process, a mechanical act in which, given the means, you can be entirely sure of the end.

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If there is healing, it lies in the sovereign hand of God to give it. Any lesser view, which believes that given the right circumstances and the right technique we can bring this about, is essentially a magical view, a view that we can manipulate God into doing that which we wish him to do. It is a less than Christian view of God's own miraculous intervention in his own world. So I suggest that another fixed point in this discussion is that whatever view we have of healing it has to be a view that accords with the sovereign rights of God over his creatures, and which is prepared to accept that the Lord's will is not always capable of determination by the Lord's people. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, and whatever the instrumental role which we may have as members and pastors of the people of God, whatever role those with special gifts and interests in this area may have, God's role is assigned only to God. God himself decrees the end of man. We may propose, but God sovereignly disposes; whether in healing, or in sickness, or in death.

Fourthly, let me suggest that the context in which we must see the possibility of healing – if it is something in which we believe – must always be the context of our ministry to the sick. I think it is a deep mistake to abstract the question of supernatural healing from the broader question of our ministry as pastors to the sick. It must lie within the context of our broader ministry to the sick, and involve the support of those engaged in medicine.

And that is the context in which there *may* also be an opportunity for a special ministry, which would seek the miraculous healing of those whom medicine has failed or has yet to succeed. We will pray for the sick, we will visit the sick and it may be we will anoint the sick or lay hands upon the sick; but if we do so we must do so with the support and the aid of the physician's art and we must do so seeking God's own best will for those who are ill. And we must do so in the broadest context of our concern for all those who are sick and who are within our care. At a time when we face an aging population, the role of the church in caring for those who are sick, chronically sick or housebound, those who are demented, will keep growing; and special ministries of healing cannot be detached from that broader ministry.

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And at the back of all of this concern we must not lose sight of the fact that though there is healing, and though there may be miraculous healing, we are mortal – and mortal we shall remain. Mortality is an irremedial element in the human experience. In the fallen world mortality is universal in its effects. And whereas we may mitigate mortality, and the staving off of the processes of mortality is the chief goal of the medical enterprise, restoration, healing, the maintenance of health, all are but a forestalling of the mortality to which we shall all finally succumb. It is to a mortal destiny that we are all of us called. There can be no more fundamental responsibility of the pastor than his preparation of his people for the fact that one day they will die.

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A balance must always be maintained between restoration – it may be a miraculous restoration – and the fact that each of us must one day come to terms with the fact that our future does not lie in this world. It is in maintaining that balance that I believe the pastor's chief role lies; and if he can maintain that balance, whatever his distinctive views and practices may be in the area of healing itself, he will have discharged his pastoral responsibility in a way which is faithful. If he is unable to maintain that balance, if he so immerses himself either in preparation for death or, more likely, in a one-sided concern for healing and health, it seems to me he will fail in his fundamental responsibility; because his responsibility as pastor of the flock is to prepare his people for their final homecoming to glory and to God. And that must always be the fundamental context in which we consider healing, because we find ourselves in a world which runs away from death, in a society in which death is the one thing we don't think about. We find ourselves in a society which has convinced itself that we really are immortal, and we are those select few who are able to face death, by the grace of God, with what someone has called a 'steady eye'. And as we face it and as we grow in Christian maturity we come the more able to face that

fact. We look to God's own healing ministry, when we will discover healing and health as we can never know it in this life.

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And as we have it in first Corinthians 15:

For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

'Death it swallowed up in victory.'
'O death, where is thy victory?'
O death, where is thy sting?'

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.



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