

The Path to Wholeness

Beliefs and practices relating to healing in Pentecostalism

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Classical Pentecostalism, as a worldwide phenomenon, has, since its inception, believed in the possibility of divine healing as a legitimate expression of the ministry of the church, entrusted to it by Christ and mediated through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹ Indeed, Dayton² contends in his survey of the rise of the Healing Movements that, 'Pentecostalism...understood itself to be restoring a lost concern of the Early Church' while Poloma³ describes it as one of the major reasons for the growth of Pentecostalism. The belief in divine healing has rested on Old Testament⁴ and New Testament texts,⁵ reinforced by occurrences of healings throughout its history.

However, the occurrence of healings and the belief in the ongoing nature of such phenomena is no guarantee for the internal coherence or consistency of Pentecostal teaching concerning such an issue. A variety of beliefs that sometimes differ from one another co-exist within Pentecostalism and act as reminders that Pentecostalism is neither a single nor static phenomenon. It would be more accurate to recognize that the Christians represented by the umbrella term 'Pentecostal' actually reflect a number of Pentecostals which each develop with some fluidity from their past and from each other, certain central characteristics being owned by most Pentecostals.

There has been, in recent years, an increasing readiness to develop a theology of healing by some Pentecostals. The possibility of divine healing is not in dispute. That which is to be determined relates to identifying a model of healing. This quest has been helped by the ministries and beliefs of people such as John Wimber and others within the Charismatic Renewal. The majority of Pentecostals have not been convinced by the Word of Faith teachers who advocate a strident belief in the claiming of one's healing, positive confession and quasi-magical frameworks in which healing is expected. Discussions have been based on the healing ministry of Jesus, the charismatic gifts of healings referred to by Paul and the guidelines in James 5:13-18. These, as well as the healing references in the book of Acts, have formed the basis for the belief that supernatural healing may still occur today.

Pentecostals affirm the importance of Jesus' healing role to his mission and many believe that the healing authority of Jesus has been delegated to the church. Undergirding this belief is the assumption that Jesus acted as a paradigm for believers with regard to healing.⁶ To a large degree, Pentecostals seek to follow his example. However, they also

recognise motifs integral to it that distinguish it from their own experiences of healing.⁷ Certain issues are important to Pentecostals in the context of healing.

Healing and the will of God

Throughout the history of Pentecostalism, there have been those who state that it is always God's will to heal. It is generally deduced that the desire of Jesus to heal remains constant through all eras and his response to those who come for healing is the same as when he was on earth, his authority to heal being channelled through believers in his absence. Thus, at times, the ministry of healing takes place in a verbal context of claiming or commanding healing, in assumed agreement with the procedure of Jesus.

However, throughout the Pentecostal era, there have been others who have reacted to the simplistic suggestion that because Jesus healed all who came to him for healing, the same is available today. The issue of the conditional nature of divine healing is one of the areas that has experienced a noticeable change within Pentecostalism though tension still remains. Some have suggested that although God has the power to heal, he does not always choose to heal and in the case of the latter, it is due to his sovereign will, though it could be due to sin that had caused the sickness in the first place, the latter possibly intended by God to be chastisement.

The official Statements of Faith of the Classical Pentecostal denominations offer the hope and potential of divine healing but refrain from expressing it as a guarantee. The Statement of Fundamental Truths of Elim was revised in 1993/4 as a result of which the stated beliefs concerning healing underwent amendments. The words, 'All who walk in obedience to His will can claim Divine Healing for their bodies', which was included from 1928, has been removed in recognition that this is not reflected in the New Testament. Rather, it is increasingly recognized that with regard to divine healing, God is sovereign. Donald Gee⁸ (an important early Pentecostal leader) notes, 'We have erred by refusing any place in our doctrine or at least a very insufficient place for the sovereign will of God'. Similarly, he remarks: 'To ask for Divine healing without any accompanying "nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done" seems to pose an attitude out of keeping with every other right attitude we take in prayer.'

There has been a significant development in perception concerning healing, resulting in the latter perspective by Pentecostals which is the result of a major paradigm shift in theological understanding and recognition that although the kingdom has been established by Jesus, not all its benefits may be experienced in this life. Experience and a re-examination of biblical principles concerning healing have been the major causes of this development as well as a

reassessment of the paradigmatic nature of the healing ministry of Jesus.

However, for some, the recognition of Jesus' healing ministry is too pronounced in Pentecostal tradition to accommodate a view that does not anticipate its continuation amongst believers today to the same degree as that which was present in the ministry of Jesus. Consequently, for some, there has been a reticence to abandon the belief that it is God's will to heal the sick. This has caused tensions in Pentecostal belief and practice, and the distinction between God's will and desire is often blurred. The tension between believing that God appears to have provided a way out of suffering and at the same time, a consciousness that, for many, the escape route has not been located is ever present in Pentecostal thought. Consequently, for some Christians who suffer physically or mentally, their presence within some Pentecostal environments has, in the past, sat awkwardly in the context of a perceived belief that healing is available for all, though this discomfort is not unique to Pentecostalism and is substantially decreasing.

The healings of Jesus are still referred to in many prayers for the sick and appealed to as a major basis for believing that similar healings are to be expected for all believers today. The link between the healing ministry of Jesus and that of contemporary believers is still assumed by many though this is not always clarified and the absence of healing is often inadequately addressed. The view that Jesus is a paradigm in his healing ministry is tenaciously maintained by some Pentecostals. However, too often, the expectation anticipated by many is not fulfilled. Reasons are sometimes offered for this lack of healing though this rarely includes the option that the basic premise may be faulty. These unresolved tensions may be located amongst Pentecostals throughout their history and act as a testimony to their willingness to cling to beliefs that are viewed as being accurate biblical perceptions, rather than accept that which reality dictates. This is a fundamental Pentecostal stance. Reality is not viewed as being a legitimate arbiter; the latter is determined by their perception of faith and their interpretation of Scripture. Instead of considering the possibility that Jesus' healing ministry may have been unique, some prefer to believe that the healing authority of his followers and its implementation is of an inferior quality, thus weakening their belief that Jesus delegated his authority to believers. To study the healings and exorcisms of Jesus as if they were deliberately intended to function as resources for practical guidance in healing and exorcistic ministries is to a large degree inappropriate, unless the uniqueness of the ministry of Jesus is first recognized. They are not recorded fundamentally for the believer to emulate them; rather, they are to be admired and recognized as signs to point to the person who achieved them.

That is not to say that healings do not occur today or that one may not learn from Jesus' praxis concerning one's own healing ministry. There are aspects of Jesus' ministry, including his sensitivity and grace that should be incorporated into a person's own ministry and lifestyle. However, his healing powers are to be recognized as signposts to him and not to a more successful healing ministry. Indeed, a marked contrast is to be noted between the healing ministry of Jesus and that of his followers:

- Jesus healed all who came to him for healing.
- Jesus never *unambiguously* related sickness to the personal sin of the sufferer (contrast Lk. 1:20; Acts 5:1ff, 13:8-12 [1 Cor. 12:30; Jas. 5:15f.] where sin resulted in a physical disability).
- Jesus never indicated that sickness had pedagogical value to the sufferer (contrast Acts 5:11, 13:12; 2 Cor. 12:7ff; Gal. 4:13).
- Jesus' healings had a pedagogical function. They taught lessons about him. Thus, they established that he had come to initiate the kingdom, fulfilled OT prophecy, had authority over the Sabbath and table fellowship, was authorized to forgive sins and had come to incorporate the marginalized, providing miracles to enable people to exert faith in him.
- Jesus did not establish a clear methodology.
- Jesus is to be distinguished from other healers in the church, because his mission is unique and thus different from that of his followers.
- The guidelines of James 5:13-18 are markedly different from the ministry of Jesus.

The Atonement of Christ

Undergirding a great deal of healing praxis is the belief in the significance of the atonement of Christ to divine healing.¹⁰ Matthew 8:17 is a key text in the discussion of healing and its place in the atonement although few Pentecostals have interacted with the text in a lucid way. Most fail to recognize that Matthew refers to Isaiah 53 to support Jesus' healing ministry, not to refer to his death. A major debate relates to the significance of the atonement for physical healing with a small minority suggesting that it guarantees healing from sickness in this life to the same degree as salvation from sin. Few would suggest that Christ bore our sicknesses substitutionarily, George Jeffreys,¹¹ the founder of Elim, rejecting any suggestion that 'Christ was made sick for our sicknesses'.

Some claim that Christ's death guarantees restoration to physical and mental wholeness before the final resurrection, one's healing to be claimed. However, it is the standard position of Pentecostals to recognize that although believers can request deliverance from sickness, 'we have to wait until some future time before the full benefits of the atoning and redeeming work of Christ on the cross can be realized'.¹²

Medical healing

Pentecostalism tends not to contrast medical healing and divine healing and the former is not viewed suspiciously or negatively, though at times in Pentecostal history, it has been viewed as an inferior form of healing or even inappropriate for a believer. This latter belief has significantly decreased in recent decades, most recognizing that all healings have divine origin and therefore that recourse to medication is appropriate for the Christian; this represents the popular view in Pentecostalism today. Dialogue and integration with medical practices, though as yet inadequately developed within Pentecostalism, have occurred.

Healing and evangelism

The relationship between healing and evangelism has always been prominent in Pentecostalism, Gee¹³ noting that healings 'have their true sphere in evangelism rather than among the saints'. Most healings in Pentecostal contexts are now anticipated for the benefit of believers though they still occur in evangelistic scenarios. The role of the healing evangelist has now largely been replaced by a local church-based practice of prayer by the (lay) leadership in the context of corporate prayer for those suffering. The Charismatic Renewal, in particular, has been influential in establishing the context of divine healing as the corporate gathering of Christians where prayer for one another by one another is undertaken.

Faith

The issue of faith is a popular feature for Pentecostals with regard to healing. It is also an important ingredient in the narratives detailing the healings of Jesus where the approach to him for help was viewed as sufficient evidence of faith and for the restoration to occur. It is also significant to note the occasions when people were healed in the New Testament when no mention of faith on the part of the sufferer is mentioned.¹⁴

Whether faith is to be exerted by the sufferer, the one who is praying or by both of them has been a vexed issue for many. In the ministry of Jesus, whenever faith is mentioned, it never refers to his own faith; instead, it alludes to the faith of the sufferer or others. In particular, the identity of the faith referred to needs thoughtful delineation. For some Pentecostals, faith is equated with belief in a promise, a promise that healing is the guaranteed right of the believer. Others, recognizing that this can lead to unnecessary guilt and realizing that the premise is unsubstantiated by the NT, have offered a different perspective that results in faith being identified as a readiness to bring a person with an illness in prayer to God trusting that he will do what is best for that person, which may or may not result in healing. Faith is thus to be identified as trust in God who functions in love, power and sovereignty.

Sin

It is a well-established belief amongst Pentecostals that sickness may be the result of judgement or divine chastisement because of personal sin.¹⁵ Sickness has been regularly traced back to Satan and various texts are available to substantiate this view.¹⁶ It has been assumed that sickness may be caused by demonic influence though caution is advised in diagnosing any link. Most Pentecostals reject the equation that illness is always or even often linked to sin. Instead, they are increasingly aware that believers live in a contaminated world which itself suffers from the effects of sin, such consequences impacting believers and unbelievers alike.

Prayer

Pentecostals have always affirmed the necessity of prayer

in the context of a request for healing. The prayer of faith (Jas. 5:15) is not to be understood as a presumptuous assertion that God always responds by granting the request. Neither is it only a statement of belief that God can provide restoration nor is it merely to be equated with a desire to be restored on the part of the sufferer or those involved in offering support. Rather, because of its guaranteed success rate, it is to be understood as a dynamic belief derived from God. The faith required is itself given as a gift by God, such faith being given as evidence that the prayer is being offered in the context of the will of God. Prayer is thus increasingly being recognized as co-operation with God in bringing about his will rather than an opportunity to persuade God to carry out our will. Consequently, while prayer for the sick is being offered, it would be encouraged that the ones praying should listen for God to guide them as to how to pray most appropriately (Jas. 1:6).

Gifts of healings

These are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, 30 as an example of some of the manifestations of the Spirit in the church. The plural form, 'gifts of healings' is generally taken to indicate the potential for healing being manifested by different believers though others prefer to understand the term to refer to every healing as being a gift of healing. It has been suggested that the term refers to the capacity of an individual to heal particular illnesses, though this is not reflected in Scripture. Pentecostals are prepared to identify individuals with a more prominent gift of healing (1 Cor. 12:28) though the ministry of healing would be more generally understood to be available to all and effected through (m)any believer(s) (1 Cor.12:7, 14).

Gifts of healing are most appropriately manifested in conjunction with the gift of faith, the former depending on the latter for its success, the latter being identified as assurance given by God that the person being ministered to would be healed. This is to be understood in the context that, as Gee¹⁷ states, 'there are no indications that...members of the early churches...went around healing everybody...or...all that were sick within the Church. Then, as now, there were some healings.' Given the necessity of an identification of the will of God in healing scenarios, the gift of faith is thus important.

On other occasions, healing has been associated with the use of other gifts in which the one praying for the sick may sense the Spirit indicating that someone is being healed or is to be healed if they receive prayer. Such coupling of gifts was evident in the healing ministries of Kathryn Kuhlman and others in the past as well as in contemporary healing contexts.

The laying on of hands

This is a significant feature of Pentecostal healing praxis¹⁸ following the practice of Jesus, Peter and Paul. The hands are generally gently placed on the head rather than the area of the sickness. Although traditionally the practice was carried out only by the Minister, this has now been also

Conclusion

Pentecostals maintain the belief that supernatural healing is still a possibility today and the pastoral sensitivities associated with this belief have seen significant development. The crucial need for an articulated Pentecostal theology of suffering is still awaited. Within Pentecostalism, the developing role of the gift of teaching and the increasing recognition of its importance to the stability and edification of the church will help inform and instruct believers from a more biblically circumscribed perspective. The biblical evidence may be summarized thus:

- The Old Testament presents God as the healer of people. This capacity helps define him as God.
- The Gospels present Jesus as the healer of people. As such, he is identified as the Son of God, Messiah and Saviour who has come to initiate the kingdom of God. Furthermore, the Gospels record the healings and exorcisms of Jesus to demonstrate the uniqueness of his person and mission.
- The Acts of the Apostles provides examples of the ongoing healing ministry in the early church, mainly through Peter and Paul. Furthermore, it presents Jesus as still healing, the apostles and others functioning in healing in ways that are reminiscent of Jesus in his mission activity. The ascended Christ is seen to be still present in the church.
- The letters of Paul impart limited information about the charismatic and spontaneous nature of the gifts of the Spirit as they relate to healing. Paul reflects the interim period between the initiation and consummation of the kingdom. Although healings still occur, suffering is also present and not all illness is removed. Nevertheless, on occasions, God still heals via the gifts of healings. When he chooses not to bring restoration, the promise of 2 Corinthians 12:9, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' is a strong support.
- The letter of James provides guidelines for healing praxis to be undertaken by members of the local church on behalf of one another. James reflects the same premise that healings still occur and he provides guidelines for preparing for this possibility while giving advice concerning the role of the believers to corporately minister to those suffering from varied forms of weakness, including physical sickness. This advice, set in Jewish terms, needs to be re-contextualised for the contemporary church so that it also can minister in the ways anticipated by James for his Christian constituency.

Notes

- 1 Keith Warrington, 'Healing and Exorcism: The Path to Wholeness' in *Pentecostal Perspectives* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998) 147-176; 'Healing in British Pentecostalism', *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association (JEPTA)* 19 (1999) 34-55; 'Towards a re-evaluation of the role of Jesus as presented in the healing praxis and teaching of British Pentecostalism', *Pneuma* (Spring 2003); Ralph F. Martin, 'Gifts of Healing,' *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements (DPCM)*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess, Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 350ff.
- 2 Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*,

recognized as the privilege of others in the congregation. Sacramental aspects of the activity are generally deemed to be inappropriate in this context though physical experiences (shaking, tingling, heat) have sometimes been claimed to have been felt by those who have laid hands on the sick. Rather, it has been regarded as an act of compassion more than a formal rite, a symbolic act linking the hand of God, representing the power of God, with the hand(s) of the one(s) doing the action.

The name of Jesus

For Pentecostals, there is great significance in the use of the name of Jesus though it has never been assumed that its inclusion is necessary for restoration to occur. Rather, it identifies the one to whom the prayer is being offered. More importantly, it indicates the recognition that although one may offer one's prayer to God, it is only when the 'divine signature' is appended to the prayer, that it will be realized. Colin Dye,¹⁹ pastor of Kensington Temple, one of the biggest Pentecostal churches in Europe, accurately writes that the use of the name of Jesus is most appropriately incorporated if one's prayer 'lines up perfectly with the will of God'.

Anointing with oil

Anointing with oil has retained its place in the context of prayer for the sick in Pentecostal practice, traditionally sparingly applying it to the forehead. It has never been assumed to be essential; rather, for many, it represents the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. Most have failed to appreciate the symbolic value of oil. In the latter respect, although it does indicate the presence of the Spirit,²⁰ it was understood to signify many more aspects by the Jews, including an infusion of the power and presence of God in whose name the person or object was anointed.²¹ Furthermore, it was valued as an indication of love felt for the one who was anointed, such an action being especially appropriate for one who was highly honoured. As such, it offers hope and encouragement to sufferers, reminding them that they are in the presence of God who loves them and will strengthen them.

Beneficial suffering

A developing perception within Classical Pentecostalism is that sickness may be of benefit to the sufferer concerned. Throughout Pentecostal history, there has always been a willingness to express ignorance concerning the reasons why some Christians remain ill after prayer for restoration. Pain is God's mystery and there are some questions that we cannot give an answer to. This has developed into a recognition that, at times, illness may be viewed positively as a benefit for the believer, bringing the sufferer into a closer relationship with him through the suffering. An assessment of current Pentecostalism would suggest an increasing alliance with the latter view. Thus, sickness is viewed as a potential ally to believers and a useful instrument in the hands of God for their benefit.