

Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 41 · Number 4 · October 2017

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

The Role of Divine Healing in Cross-Cultural Ministry

Richard Hibbert, G. Geoffrey Harper
and Evelyn Hibbert

Introduction

When people first hear of Jesus, they often wonder not so much about who he is but what he is able to do for them. They want to know whether Jesus has power to help with the practical problems that threaten to overwhelm them. Among the most pressing of these is sickness.

Despite advances in modern medicine, the experience of being ill brings people face to face with the frailty of their bodies and their powerlessness over life and death. For most people in the Global South, illness is an everyday reality that threatens the survival of both children and adults.¹ Sociologist Rebecca Bomann, who studied sickness and healing in Colombia, describes the constant threats to health posed by living in a marginalised neighbourhood in one of Africa's,

Asia's, or Latin America's cities. Following ethnographic fieldwork in a Bogota *barrio*, she recalls, 'Open sewer drains, piles of uncovered garbage, and foul-smelling meat markets were common sights... . Hygiene was a luxury that only a minority could afford, and even fewer had access to quality medical care.'²

At the same time, healing from illness or injury is prominent in the conversion narratives of many Christians across the world. In the second month of Richard and Evelyn's church planting ministry among the Millet (Turkish Roma) in a Bulgarian city, three believers from a town five hours' train journey away arrived on our doorstep. As we had arranged to travel to Turkey the next day, they offered to stay for the two weeks we would be away. During that time, they prayed for a nine-

1 World Health Organization, 'The Top Ten Causes of Death,' *Fact Sheet 310*, 2014, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs310/en/>.

2 Rebecca Bomann, 'The Salve of Divine Healing,' in *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, ed. Candy Gunther Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 198.

Richard Hibbert (PhD/Intercultural Studies, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is the Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Mission at Sydney Missionary and Bible College. **G. Geoffrey Harper** (PhD, Australian College of Theology) is lecturer in Old Testament at Sydney Missionary and Bible College. He is editor of *Finding Lost Words: The Church's Right to Lament* (Wipf & Stock, 2017). **Evelyn Hibbert** (EdD, University of New England) is the Academic Dean at The Salvation Army Booth College, Sydney. She is the co-author with Richard Hibbert of *Leading Multicultural Teams and Training Missionaries: Principles and Possibilities* (William Carey Library, 2014, 2016).

year-old girl who had never been able to speak. She ran to her devout Muslim mother crying, 'Mummy, mummy, I can speak!' Deeply impressed by the healing that followed prayer in the name of Jesus, her mother started coming to the meetings of the newly formed church.

This is not an isolated incident. Reports of healing as a significant element in people's journey in and towards faith in Christ can be found throughout the Global South. A multi-country survey of Pentecostals found that in eight countries across Latin America, Asia, and Africa, more than 70 per cent claimed they had received divine healing for themselves or a family member.³

Todd Hartch suggests that divine healing is part of the reason for the 're-birth' of Latin American Christianity.⁴ A recent study of Protestant churches in China estimates that more than half of all church members became Christians because they personally experienced divine healing or saw a family member healed.⁵ In one Filipino denomination, 83 per cent of church attendees surveyed reported that healing was highly significant in their conversion.⁶

3 Luis Lugo et al., *Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals* (Washington, DC, 2006), 17, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2006/10/pentecostals-08.pdf>.

4 Todd Hartch, *The Rebirth of Latin American Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 101–102, 125.

5 Gotthard Oblau, 'Divine Healing and the Growth of Practical Christianity,' in *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, ed. Cathy Gunter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 308, 313.

6 Melba Maggay, 'The Persistence of the Old Gods: Some Inter-Cultural Dimensions', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, (2008): 26.

On this basis, Philip Jenkins claims that divine healing 'is the key element that has allowed Christianity to compete so successfully with its rivals outside the Christian tradition'.⁷ Illustrations of how healing has attracted people to the gospel can be found throughout the history of mission. Jesuit work in Vietnam in the seventeenth century, for example, led to around 70,000 Vietnamese becoming Christians. Historian, Nola Cooke, points out that it was divine healing that particularly caught the attention of the local people and attracted them to Christ. Despite the Jesuits' stress on the rationality of Catholicism, it was the readiness of missionaries and local converts to pray for the sick that gave the Christian message legitimacy at every level of society.⁸

This article explores the role that this 'key element' plays in people's faith journey. It begins by examining reasons why the role of healing in Christian ministry has often been downplayed and analyses the expectations of missionaries and other Christian workers with respect to healing. It then explores the role of divine healing among the Turkish Roma in a recent church planting movement in Bulgaria. Reflecting on this analysis in the light of the Psalms, implications for Christian workers are drawn out.

7 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 159.

8 Nola Cooke, 'Christian Conversion in Cochinchina', in *Asia in the Making of Christianity: 1600s to the Present*, ed. Richard Young and Jonathan Seitz (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 39–40.

I The Search for Supernatural Power for Healing

Across the world, people from many religious traditions seek supernatural power for healing and for protection from sickness.⁹ Unlike people from western cultures, who tend to make a clear division between the natural and the supernatural, the material and the spiritual, most people from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are more holistic in their thinking.¹⁰ One reason for this is that they see life as an indivisible whole. They believe that 'nothing happens in the physical world that does not have spiritual undertones.'¹¹

Followers of primal and folk religions across the world believe that both benevolent and malevolent spiritual forces influence people's health. The majority of the Ghanaian Akan, the Nigerian Kamwe, the Indian Mizo, the Thai, and the Navajo, for example, perceive that illness is caused by spiritual powers, and that spiritual power is needed for healing.¹² They therefore

regularly seek spiritual help for sickness. Africans, for example, consult traditional spiritual healers far more often than they go to doctors or nurses trained in modern medicine.¹³

Because of this assumption that spiritual forces are at work in sickness, many people expect whatever faith they adopt to address all of life and to provide power to help them with life's challenges. More pointedly, they expect that the Christian God presented to them in the gospel will be able to help them with ill health. Like the people who came to Jesus for healing, they expect God to be a God of the here and now, and believe that 'a God who cannot provide the basic needs for survival is not a true God, especially when, before conversion, their ancestor spirits were able to "bless" them' holistically.¹⁴

II The Downplaying of Divine Healing

Reports of divine healing are often downplayed or excluded from offi-

⁹ Paul G. Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 77; Charles H. Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2008), 242.

¹⁰ Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014), 3.

¹¹ Ben Y. Quarshie, 'African Perspectives on Theological Education for Mission', in *Reflecting on and Equipping for Christian Mission*, ed. Stephen Bevans et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 264.

¹² Lalsangkima Pachuau, 'Mizo 'Sakhua' in Transition: Change and Continuity from Primal Religion to Christianity', *Missiology: An International Review* 34 (2006): 43–45; Cephas

Omenyo, 'New Wine in an Old Wine Bottle? Charismatic Healing in the Mainline Churches in Ghana,' in *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, ed. Cathy Gunther Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 234; Marguerite Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power: A Forgotten Dimension of Cross-Cultural Ministry* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 16, 120.

¹³ Meredith Long, *Health, Healing, and God's Kingdom: New Pathways to Christian Health Ministry in Africa* (Carlisle: Regnum Books, 2000), 118–21.

¹⁴ Wonsuk Ma, 'Asian (Classical) Pentecostal Theology in Context', in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 54.

cial accounts of mission history. Gary McGee has convincingly shown that standard histories of mission from the late 1800s through to the 1970s mostly overlooked miracles in their writings.¹⁵ Possible reasons for this exclusion include doubts about the credibility of sources, questions over the ideological agenda of the authors, historiographical presuppositions of the academy that do not allow for speculation about cause and effect, theological presuppositions that authentic God-inspired miracles ended with the age of the apostles, and fear that the controversial nature of miracles might harm the goal of recruiting people into the missions movement. Yet there is compelling evidence that physical healing has played a role in the conversion of individuals, tribes, and nations from at least the third century through to the present.¹⁶

Theological presuppositions are particularly powerful in persuading Christians to ignore or de-emphasise the role that divine healing might play in ministry. Some adopt a view that miracles ceased with the completion of the canon. In subscribing to this view they believe they are following reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, who are widely understood to have taught that signs and wonders were attestations of new revelation and therefore ceased with the completion of the New Testament.¹⁷

For the reformers, taking this stance minimised the danger that people might be led astray by superstitions or false teachers who claimed miracles as confirmations of their teachings.¹⁸

Yet, both Luther and Calvin affirmed that miracles of healing did occasionally take place; in fact, Luther reported that several people were healed when he prayed for them.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Miroslav Volf argues that Protestant theology, following Luther's lead, has largely tended to focus on salvation as a spiritual liberation of the inner person which does not directly affect the health of the body.²⁰

However, there is a danger in Christian workers downplaying divine healing: it can hinder people from coming to faith in Christ. People who might otherwise be drawn to the salvation God offers them through Jesus may walk away when they cannot see any answer to their need for healing being presented in the communication of the gospel. Ignoring divine healing can also encourage 'split-level' or 'dual-allegiance' Christianity in which people turn to God for eternal life, but resort to amulets, charms, shamans, and alternate spiritual forces for help with sickness.²¹

15 Gary McGee, 'Miracles and Mission Revisited,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 25 (2001): 146–151.

16 McGee, 'Miracles and Mission Revisited,' 146, 147, 149.

17 McGee, 'Miracles and Mission Revisited,' 147.

18 James I. Packer, 'The Empowered Christian Life,' in *The Kingdom and the Power*, ed. Gary Greig and Kevin Springer (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 211.

19 Stanley M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 151–52, 167.

20 Miroslav Volf, 'The Materiality of Salvation: An Investigation in the Soteriologies of Liberation and Pentecostal Theologies,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26 (1989): 453.

21 Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness*, 336;

Filipina anthropologist and theologian Melba Maggay describes such dual-allegiance Christianity in the Philippines. She attributes this partly to the failure of early Protestant missionaries to relate the gospel to illness and healing. Maggay cites a mid-1990s study which found that more than half of Filipino Catholics interviewed performed rituals of penitence during Holy Week with the aim of warding off illness and maintaining good health.²²

According to her analysis, Filipino culture has an 'intense longing for a spirituality that integrates all of life' and a 'vast subterranean tradition of healing' that strongly emphasises spiritual sources of health and healing.²³ But many early missionaries taught people to divide reality into physical and spiritual realms and their message did not address deeper Filipino worldview assumptions concerning sickness and health. Filipinos therefore could not see how one of their deepest needs—health and healing—was addressed by the good news of the gospel.

III Expectations of Divine Healing

The expectations of Christian workers about divine healing influence their responses to the sick. Linguist Jacob Loewen relates a poignant story from his ministry among the Choco in Colombia: 'I suddenly realised that my

western naturalistic and materialistic view of germs and illness actually made it impossible for me to "believe" sufficiently for faith to heal,' he explains. His Choco brothers were praying that God would heal a woman with pneumonia, but they felt they could not invite Loewen or his fellow missionary to join in those prayers. They said, 'I'm sorry ... but we couldn't invite you. You two fellows really don't believe, and you cannot heal by God's power when you have unbelievers in the circle.'²⁴

Regarding expectations of divine healing, Christians can be categorised into three broad groups. Those with low to nil expectation could be termed 'closed.' They may believe that such healing is theoretically possible but have not consciously experienced or witnessed it themselves. Accordingly, this group holds that God in his sovereignty usually does not grant requests for healing by performing a miracle.²⁵ Their God is, in Gordon Fee's words, the God of 'standard-brand evangelicalism,' who 'is very much a God of the ordinary.'²⁶ This expectation is well represented in Kelly Hilderbrand's experience of praying for a Lisu child who had been deaf in one ear since birth.

Honestly, I was not expecting any result. Being a Western Christian, I believe in the power of God, but

Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

²² Maggay, 'Persistence of the Old Gods,' 25.

²³ Maggay, 'Persistence of the Old Gods,' 25, 27.

²⁴ Jacob Loewen, 'Evangelism and Culture,' in *The New Face of Evangelicalism*, ed. Rene Padilla (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976), 182.

²⁵ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of The American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), loc 229-239, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199827695.001.0001.

²⁶ Gordon Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2006), 26.

my worldview does not expect the miraculous to be a daily occurrence. As things were being translated, the little girl spoke to her mother and her mother began screaming and dancing. The translator told me that the girl could now hear in her previously deaf ear. I, of course, assumed that something had been lost in translation, and I asked again if the little girl could hear. I was assured that the little girl could now hear from both her ears.²⁷

A second group may be classed as 'open'. They have a significantly higher expectation that God heals people in response to prayer, an anticipation that is often heightened through ministry experience in which healing occurred. Missionaries like C.T. Studd, Stanley Smith, and other members of the Cambridge Seven, for example, came to believe that divine healing is an ongoing phenomenon in missions because of their own experiences of praying for people and seeing them healed.²⁸

Some of the first Presbyterian missionaries to Korea arrived with the view that miracles ceased with the completion of the canon. Nevertheless, they came to believe that divine healing was a valid part of missionary work as they saw Korean evangelists praying for the sick and people being healed.²⁹ Similarly, a British mission-

ary doctor working in East Malaysia explains that his expectation of divine healing increased markedly as a result of his ministry among young, dynamic, and growing churches. These Malaysian Christians assumed they should pray for the sick and expected God to intervene.³⁰

Christian workers in a third group could be categorised as 'expectant.' With high-level expectations about divine healing, members of this group frequently pray for the sick. Their anticipation is partly a result of experience—they have witnessed healing in the past—and partly a result of their theology. Many believe that Christ's work on the cross not only brings salvation for the soul but also secures healing for the body for everyone who (truly) believes.³¹ Others hold that Jesus empowered his followers not only to proclaim God's kingdom but also to demonstrate its coming through signs and wonders.³² While a subset of this group believes and proclaims that God has obligated himself to heal every sickness for those who have faith, others are cautious not to presume that

²⁷ Kelly Hilderbrand, 'What led Thai Buddhist background believers to become Christians: A study of one church in Bangkok,' *Missiology: An International Review*, 44 (2016): 411.

²⁸ McGee, 'Miracles and Mission Revisited,' 152.

²⁹ Sean C. Kim, 'Reenchanted: Divine Healing in Korean Pentecostalism,' in *Global Pente-*

costal and Charismatic Healing, ed. Cathy Gunter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 268–69.

³⁰ Bill Lees, 'Hesitations about Expectancy,' in *Signs, Wonders, and Healing*, ed. John Goldingay (Leicester: IVP, 1989), 123.

³¹ Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 227; Guy Duffield and Nathaniel Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles, CA: L.I.F.E Bible College, 1983), 412–13.

³² This forms the underlying thesis of John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2009).

healing is always guaranteed.³³

IV Divine Healing in Conversion and the Growth of Millet Churches

Miracles of divine healing are reported in many parts of the world where the church is relatively new and the gospel is being encountered by people for the first time. The question is how to work with God in such situations. Understanding how healing helps people in their journey towards faith in Christ can help Christians to work with God more effectively. One way to deepen understanding of how God uses divine healing to draw people to himself is to analyse the role that healing has played in the birth and growth of a particular group of churches—the Millet churches of Bulgaria.³⁴

Most Millet are pre-occupied with the problems of the here-and-now—

getting enough money to feed their families, staying healthy or finding a cure for sickness, and being protected from evil spirits. Beginning in the late 1980s and accelerating with the fall of communism, thousands of previously Muslim Millet came to faith in Christ and formed Turkish-speaking churches. The number of churches in this previously unreached people group grew rapidly from about five at the end of the 1980s to around one hundred in 1995, with an estimated 10,000 church attendees.³⁵ The majority of those who came to faith in Christ experienced miraculous healing or had a family member who was miraculously healed. One Millet church leader, Richard, interviewed, highlighted the role of healing when he stated, 'Healthy people never start coming to church'.³⁶

To investigate the role of illness and divine healing in Millet Christians' journey towards faith in Christ, conversion narratives and hymns written by believers were analysed. Interviews were conducted in 2008 with thirty-eight Millet Christians concerning how they came to faith in Christ. An experience of divine healing was a significant factor in the conversion narratives of sixteen (42 per cent).³⁷ Indigenous songs written by Christian Millet that mentioned sickness and/or healing were also examined. Of the 221 Mil-

33 Fee, *Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, 20; Frank Macchia, 'Pentecostal Theology,' in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal Movements*, ed. Stanley Burgess (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 1135.

34 The Millet are a Turkish-speaking, traditionally Muslim sub-group of Roma who live in Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Greece, and increasingly across the countries of the European Union where many have gone to work. Nevertheless, the largest Millet population still lives in Bulgaria where they number about 300,000. Marginalised in Bulgarian society, the majority live in segregated ghetto-like neighbourhoods on the edges of towns and cities. More detail can be found in Richard Y. Hibbert, 'Why Do They Leave? An Ethnographic Investigation of Defection from Turkish-Speaking Roma Churches in Bulgaria,' *Missiology: An International Review* 41 (2013): 315–16.

35 Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: 21st Century Edition* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 129.

36 Richard Y. Hibbert, 'Stagnation and Decline Following Rapid Growth in Turkish-Speaking Roma Churches in Bulgaria' (PhD diss.; Trinity International University, 2008), 80.

37 Hibbert, 'Stagnation and Decline', 117.

let songs published in a late-1990s Bulgarian Turkish songbook, forty-two mention sickness and/or healing. Several common themes are evident.

1. Fervent prayer and testimonies of healing by believers as a group

Every conversion narrative involving sickness and healing is unique, but a basic pattern is nevertheless discernible. Illness drives sick people and their families to find help, often initially from the medical system or from Muslim teachers. Next, the person or family seeks God's help through Christians, who pray fervently for them and invite them to a church meeting to be prayed for by the whole group. A woman whose daughter developed a mental illness that the family believed was caused by an evil spirit illustrates this pattern and highlights the role that Christians and churches played in healing:

Because we weren't believers, we took her to the *hoca* [Muslim teacher]. We paid people to do all kinds of *babishki raboti* [folk religious healing rituals]... . When we didn't see any cure, I took her to the doctor, and he sent her to Sofia to the hospital. She stayed there one and a half months, but she didn't get better. She was the same. During that time, faith in the *mahalle* [Millet neighbourhood] started and began to grow. The believers said to me, 'God comes into our dreams and says you should come to faith, and your child will be healed by God.' ... I said, 'I don't know how to pray.' They said, 'We will tell you how to pray.'

The Millet Christians played a key

role in mediating healing by praying for it with conviction and passion, confidently testifying to God's healing power, and praying for the sick in church meetings. One interviewee tells everyone he meets, 'Jesus has power. Whoever has a problem only needs to ask him, and he will heal him.'

Testimonies like this act as a catalyst for people turning to Christians and then to the church for healing. When they get to the church, they are fervently prayed for by the gathered believers. This is reflected in several hymns in phrases such as, 'I came to your house and you healed me' (in which the believer is the speaker), and, 'Come, come to my house and I will heal you' (in which Jesus is the speaker).

2. Being drawn to faith in Jesus through healing

For most of the sixteen interviewees, being healed was a turning point in their journey of faith. Bomann's comment that, 'healing plays a pivotal role in drawing nonbelievers to church services—perhaps more than the idea of salvation, at least as this notion is commonly understood by North American and European interpreters of religion', is as true for the Millet as it is for the residents of Bogota she interviewed.³⁸ Experiencing God as healer led many Millet interviewees to put their faith in Jesus. One man who had been paralysed explains, '[The Christians] prayed for me and I was immediately healed. I began to believe at that moment.'

³⁸ Bomann, 'The Salve of Divine Healing,' 194.

Healing seems to act as a window through which people see something of God's nature and character. Those healed see beyond the cure to what it communicates: God's power and mercy. Experiencing God's power and love leads some to put their faith in Christ.³⁹ A few lines of a song express how many Millet encounter God through experiencing healing:

Jesus Christ, my Lord ... I cannot
see your face ...

[But] by faith I have seen you; You
healed me.

I have believed in you, my God,
without seeing your face.

Being healed is a tangible experience of God's power that gives those healed 'the sense of being tenderly cared for by a loving God'.⁴⁰ Several Millet hymns praise God for his love and power expressed through healing; phrases include, 'You healed me, my mighty Father!' and, 'You give us healing; you give us love'. Some interviewees recalled that they also felt peace and 'warmth' when they were healed. One said, 'A peace entered me. A newness came into me.' Another was healed as she listened to a Christian in the hospital bed next to hers singing hymns and reading from the Bible. She recalls, 'Those words the sister was saying and the hymns she was singing worked in my heart and made me warm.'

Through healing not only the person healed but also their family members are often drawn to the church and to faith in Christ. Many interviewees immediately began telling their family and neighbours what had happened to them.

Not every person who is prayed for is healed, however. Several interviewees spoke of ongoing sickness or pain, but also of their hope of complete healing one day. One woman told Richard, 'My legs hurt, every part of me hurts, but God says, "I am with you. I am going to raise you from the dead. I am going you heal you. I am not going to leave you."' A pastor and hymn writer, who suffered for many years from spinal tuberculosis and eventually died from it, emphasises the need to keep praying because God helps his people in their suffering:

Everyone has problems. Everyone
suffers.

I am giving you endurance. That is
sufficient for you.

Whether I am sick, or am in pain, or
dying, always pray to God.

3. Healing, forgiveness, and heaven

As Millet Christians reflect on their experiences of being healed and coming to faith in Christ, they express a close link between healing and forgiveness. Their hymns frequently portray this close connection through juxtaposition; for example, 'You forgive us our sins; you heal us.' Forgiveness and physical healing are both aspects of salvation for the Christian Millet, as expressed in this hymn:

I was very sinful, my Father
I was very sick

³⁹ Elizabeth S. Sanzana, "'Silver and Gold Have I None,'" in *Pentecostal Mission and Global Christianity*, ed. Wonsuk Ma, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 132–33.

⁴⁰ Bomann, 'The Salve of Divine Healing', 201–202.

Jesus my Lord found me
And healed me

While Millet Christians keenly seek physical healing, they also believe that people need a healing of the heart in order for them to enter heaven. This is highlighted in several hymns. In one, a sick person prays for physical healing, and Jesus responds:

Let me come into your heart.
Let me wash your heart clean with
my blood...
In the end I will heal you and give
you heaven.

V Biblical Perspectives on Divine Healing

As with Millet hymns, the Bible has much to say about divine healing. Yet, even attempting to catalogue all the relevant passages is beyond what we can accomplish here. In this article, we focus on the psalmists' perspectives regarding divine healing.

Like most people in today's world, the psalmists do not separate the spiritual from the physical, and they recognise the influence of sin and the demonic in illness. They resist dualistic conceptions of sickness that exclude God from the sick person's experience. This recognition that God is involved in their illness results in fervent prayer. The psalms therefore present examples of how to pray for and give testimony about God's healing. They also model how to respond when believers' prayers do not result in healing and stress the role of the community in the experience of sickness and healing.

Before focusing on the Psalms, however, it is worth considering the broader biblical-theological sweep of

the Scriptures with respect to healing. The apostle John paints a poignant eschatological picture: '[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' (Rev 21:4 NIV). The certainty of final restoration and the swallowing up of death in victory (1 Cor 15:54) are made possible by Christ's death and resurrection, which inaugurate a new world as well as pointing forward to its full realisation.⁴¹

Thus Christ overcomes the full effects of Genesis 3 and makes possible the transformation of the cosmos. Sickness is part of the 'old order of things' and is a consequence of the decay of the human body towards death. Sickness brings pain and grief to individuals and their communities. The promise of a new heavens and earth includes the certain hope shared by all believers that their bodies will be released from inevitable disease and decay and will be restored to physical wholeness.

However, questions remain. What should believers do in the present age, while still in 'bondage to decay' (Rom 8:21), or when confronted with the ravages of sickness in their family and friends? How should Christians think biblically and theologically about divine healing? The psalms provide some answers to these questions.

⁴¹ In the Gospels, Jesus's healing miracles function as signs of the inbreaking Kingdom of God (e.g., Mt 11:2–5; Jn 4:54), a kingdom that is both 'now' (Mt 12:28; Lk 4:17–21) and 'not yet' (Mt 25:31–34; Mk 1:15).

1. Causes and outcomes of sickness

The psalmists challenge reductionist views of the world, advocating instead a holistic conception that upholds divine sovereignty even in illness.⁴² For example, the writer of Psalm 88 complains:

*You have put me in the depths of the pit,
in the regions dark and deep.*

*Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all
your waves. Selah*

*You have caused my companions to
shun me;
you have made me a horror to
them.*

...

*Afflicted and close to death from my
youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am help-
less.*

*Your wrath has swept over me;
your dreadful assaults destroy
me. (Ps 88:6–8, 15–16 ESV
[emphasis added])*

The second person language reveals an understanding that YHWH is responsible for both blessing and calamity (cf. Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6–7), calamity that, in the context of Psalm 88, includes extreme illness.⁴³ Barry

Webb outlines the necessity of such language:

Here we make contact with an angst which is at the very heart of Israelite religion with its uncompromising monotheism. For if there is but one God, who is sovereign over all things, no final explanation for anything is possible other than that he is behind it, and there is nowhere else to run but into [God's] arms.⁴⁴

Yet, while YHWH is uncontestedly sovereign, there is scope for a degree of asymmetry with respect to causation—that is, YHWH stands directly behind what is good; indirectly behind what is not good.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the language used by the psalmists emphasises that the appropriate response to calamity, including sickness, is to seek God for help, regardless of its cause.

The Psalms also illustrate that there can be a connection between lack of physical wellbeing and sin. This correlates with the wider testimony of the Scriptures (e.g., Num 12:9–12; Acts

Psalm 88 is the 'lament of a desolate man in mortal illness'—Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II. 51–100: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 17; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 302. See, similarly, H. D. Preuss, 'Psalm 88 als Beispiel alttestamentlichen Redens vom Tod,' in *Der Tod—ungelöstes Rätsel oder überwindener Feind* (ed. August Strobel; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1974), 71.

⁴² For further discussion, see G. Geoffrey Harper, 'Lament and the Sovereignty of God: Theological Reflections on Psalm 88,' in *Finding Lost Words: The Church's Right to Lament* (ed. G. Geoffrey Harper and Kit Barker; ACTMS Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

⁴³ The causes of lament in Psalm 88 have been variously construed. Certainly, physical symptoms are mentioned (vv. 4, 9) and are at least part of the problem. Thus, for Dahood,

⁴⁴ Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther* (NSBT 10; Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 64.

⁴⁵ The language of asymmetry is borrowed from D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?: Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990). Such asymmetry is demonstrated, for example, by the role of 'the satan' in Job 1–2.

12:21–23; Rev 16:10–11), even while recognising that sin is not necessarily the cause of illness (e.g., Job 1–2; Jn 9:1–3). When there is a connection, however, confession and repentance are required (cf. Jas 5:15–16). The penitential psalms (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) demonstrate this dynamic.⁴⁶ Psalm 38 makes a sin-illness nexus explicit:

Because of your wrath there is no health in my body;
there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.
My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.
My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly.
I am bowed down and brought very low;
all day long I go about mourning.
My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body.
I am feeble and utterly crushed;
I groan in anguish of heart. (vv. 3–8 NIV)

The psalmist accordingly declares, 'I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin' (v. 18 ESV). Psalm 32 evidences a similar movement: 'when I kept silent, my bones wasted away ... I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin' (vv. 3, 5 ESV). As with the recognition of God's sovereignty in illness, recognition of sin's part in illness drives the sinner to God to seek forgiveness and physical restoration.

Also acknowledged by the psalmists

is the possibility of demonic oppression as a reason for illness. With respect to Psalm 91, for instance, Qumran evidence (11Q11) reveals that parts of the psalm were used for exorcisms in the first century AD.⁴⁷ Particularly important were verses 5–6, where several key terms had demonic associations in an Ancient Near East context. The 'arrow that flies by day' (v. 5) may denote one of the sickness-bearing arrows of Reshef, the god of pestilence.⁴⁸ Similarly, the LXX translates v. 6b ('the plague that destroys at midday' [NIV]), as the 'noonday demon'.⁴⁹ Accordingly, Meir Malul argues that Psalm 91 'abounds with names of ... demons'.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the point of the psalm is clear: even when endangered by the demonic, YHWH is a refuge and fortress (v. 2; cf. vv. 4, 9). Those who make the Most High their dwelling will be delivered from harm and disaster (v. 9–10). YHWH vows to rescue, protect, answer, deliver, and satisfy those who love and call upon him (vv. 14–16). As Andrew Schmutzer concludes, 'God

⁴⁷ Andrew J. Schmutzer, 'Psalm 91: Refuge, Protection, and Their Use in the New Testament,' in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul* (ed. Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard; Chicago: Moody, 2013), 98–99. This section is indebted to Schmutzer's insights.

⁴⁸ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (trans. Timothy J. Hallett; London: SPCK, 1978), 85.

⁴⁹ δαιμονίου μεσημβρινοῦ. See Schmutzer, 'Psalm 91,' 97.

⁵⁰ Meir Malul, 'Terror of the Night לילה פחד,' in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 852.

⁴⁶ Elements of physical distress appear in five of these psalms (6:2, 6–7; 32:3–5; 38:3–8; 51:8; 102:3–5).

... pledges his self-involvement to believers.⁵¹ Psalm 91 therefore urges readers to actively seek refuge in God, even when faced with demonic oppression.

Jesus likewise saw a connection between healing and overcoming Satan's power. When he sent out his disciples in Luke 10 and commanded them to 'heal the sick' (v. 9), they returned with joy declaring that even the demons submitted to them (v. 17). Jesus's response adapts the wording of Psalm 91:13. 'I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you' (Luke 10:19 NIV).⁵²

2. Praying for healing

The psalms provide a model of what prayer for healing ought to look like. The sovereignty of God over all things, taken as granted by the psalmists, evokes fervent petition. Voices of complaint and lament in the psalms do not reflect crises of faith, or theological vacillation; on the contrary, it is unmoved confidence in YHWH's rule that provokes such appeal.

Psalms 1 and 2, functioning as an introduction to the Psalter, set the expectation clearly: the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked but meditates on *torah* will be blessed (Ps 1:1–2); that blessing is secured by taking refuge in the king YHWH has installed on his throne (Ps 2:6, 12). It is the non-realisation of this blessing that provokes the cries of the psalmists. Their pained use of 'Why?' and 'How long?' is thus an appeal for God

to bring about the fullness of what he has promised:

Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;

heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.

My soul is in deep anguish.

How long, LORD, how long? (Ps 6:2–3 NIV)

Moreover, fervent prayer is maintained over time, even in the absence of response, because the psalmist knows there is no one else to turn to: 'Day and night I cry out before you ... I call out to you, O LORD, every day; ... Why do you hide your face from me?' (Ps 88:2, 9, 14 [auth. trans.]). Their knowledge of God—his promises and his character—drive the psalmists to persistent, fervent prayer fuelled by an unshaken belief that God is bringing about the restoration of all things.

The psalms thus provide a model for how believers can cry out to God for the not-yet in the midst of their pain. They can express doubts and fears, yet still remain steadfast in their confidence in God's sovereignty. When God delays the restoration that his character commits him to, the righteous response is to lament. The godly should cry out 'Why?'; they ought to complain to God and demand to know 'How long?'⁵³

Indeed, rather than such questioning being merely *permitted*, the psalms go further by suggesting this is the way the people of God *must* respond, for all the psalms are presented as virtuous responses—lament just as much as

51 Schmutzer, 'Psalm 91,' 107.

52 Schmutzer, 'Psalm 91,' 106.

53 As in all theological discourse, correct grammar is essential. There is a world of difference between complaining *to* God and complaining *about* God.

praise. God offers his people a variety of expressions to use, depending on circumstances. Thus, lament gives followers of Christ a voice which enables them to express faith even in the absence of sought-for healing.⁵⁴

3. Testifying about healing

Many psalms are testimonies to God's healings that proclaim to the world what God has done and encourage others to seek the same. Thus, the psalmists instruct pray-ers regarding the rightful place of thanksgiving. It is here that insights derived from form criticism, particularly the identification of multiple genres within the Psalter, prove beneficial.⁵⁵

Psalmic types are not only identifiable, but can be seen to work in concert. Walter Brueggemann demonstrates this by charting a flow from praise (his 'Psalms of Orientation') through lament ('Psalms of Disorientation') to thanksgiving ('Psalms of Re-Orientation').⁵⁶ Important to note

is that thanksgiving psalms derive increased force when seen as responses to situations of lament. These psalms accordingly reflect on a time of past trial, acknowledge God's deliverance, and then move to praise. Psalm 40 illustrates the movement:

I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God. (vv. 1–3 NIV)

This, then, provides a template to instruct believers on how to communicate what God has done for them.

4. The importance of community

The psalms reveal the importance of community for matters of life and faith, including the issue of dealing with sickness. Although psalms are often utilised for *individual* spirituality, this appropriation is somewhat at odds with the collection as a whole.⁵⁷ Even granting that psalms were written by single authors, they have nevertheless been collected for communal use. This is true even for psalms which use first person language.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ For an exploration of how lament might be recovered in corporate Christian spirituality, see G. Geoffrey Harper and Kit Barker, eds., *Finding Lost Words: The Church's Right to Lament* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

⁵⁵ The classic work remains Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (trans. James D. Nogalski; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998 [orig. 1933]). See also, Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981 [orig. 1965]).

⁵⁶ Walter Brueggemann, 'Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function', *JSOT* 17 (1980), 3–32: 6–10. Brueggemann also refers to 'Psalms of Disorientation' as 'Psalms of Dislocation' (7).

⁵⁷ The historical development of individual piety vis-à-vis the psalms is charted by Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms. Volume 1* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 26–30.

⁵⁸ The rhetorical function of first-person voicing is helpfully explored by Andrew Sloane, 'Weeping with the Afflicted: The Self-Involving Language of the Laments', in *Find-*

The famous words of Psalm 22:1, for instance, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ seem best suited to individual use. Yet, the superscription— ‘For the director of music’—reveals that even this language has been adopted for corporate expression. Psalm 88 illustrates the point. The psalmist is afflicted (physically and perhaps even spiritually), a distress compounded by social isolation (vv. 5, 8, 18). Yet the *corporate* vocalisation of the psalm (note ‘For the director of music’), undoes the author’s sense of isolation and so begins to address the seemingly unheard cries of the psalmist.

This corporate dimension is no less important for followers of Jesus. Christian communities can help to mediate healing as they, together with the sick person, seek God’s presence, power, forgiveness, restoration, and refuge.

In summary, then, while the Bible has more to say on the topic of divine healing, the psalms provide several helpful (and needed) perspectives. They remind us that the appropriate reaction to illness is to petition God in fervent prayer with other Christians. When divine healing occurs, there should be public testimony and thanksgiving. If healing is withheld, ongoing lament is the righteous response. The next section teases out several implications for Christian workers.

VI Conclusion and Implications

1. Recognise that God uses healing to drive people to himself

The role that divine healing has played across history and in the birth and growth of the church among the Millet highlights that sickness and divine healing are often used by God as invitations to turn to him. Despite this, western Christian expectations of seeing the power and love of God expressed through healing are often not as high as they should be.⁵⁹ Yet, if missionaries and other Christian workers ignore a felt need for healing, people will be left on their own to find solutions. They may feel they have no option except to live out a double allegiance—to Christ and to other spiritual powers which can help them with sickness.

Christians should be wary of western cultural assumptions that dismiss other-than-physical dimensions in illness. The psalms indicate that God is sovereign over illness even if sometimes it is caused by sin or demonic activity. Yet, whatever the cause, the appropriate response is to seek God. Like the psalmists, we need to recognise that humans are integrated wholes; spiritual concerns cannot neatly be excised from physical ones, or vice versa. Our aim in engaging with people who are ill, whether or not they are Christians, should be to help them to turn to God. In order to do this, we should, in our Christian communities, pray

ing Lost Words: The Church’s Right to Lament (ed. G. Geoffrey Harper and Kit Barker; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

⁵⁹ Packer, ‘The Empowered Christian Life,’ 211.

fervently and encourage testimonies about healing.

2. Pray fervently for divine healing

Christians play a key role in mediating healing. When Christians pray for sick people who are searching for a supernatural source of healing, the sick are sometimes healed. Healing is a tangible experience of God's love and power through which many begin to believe in Jesus. Christians can pray fervently for healing, following the example of the psalmists, confident in God's commitment to restore creation to wholeness and to bring about blessing for his people. Divine healing is a God-given foretaste of the complete restoration to come. Those who fervently pray for healing are more likely to see people healed and turning to God than those who ignore this pathway to salvation.

The psalms are mimetic—that is, they invite conformity to their words and modes of expression as models of virtuous response. Yet differing circumstances require differing responses. Accordingly, instances of healing should be met with thanksgiving; periods of protracted or even terminal illness should evoke ongoing lament. Both are faithful acts. Both are rightly carried out by individuals and communities. Christians must learn to 'rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep' (Rom 12:15 ESV).

3. Encourage testimonies about healing

Just as the psalmists declared God's work in their bodies, so we also should encourage Christians to declare how God has healed and delivered them. Testimonies are public declarations of human helplessness and despair that have been addressed by the God who heals and restores his creation. As in the psalms, testimonies should culminate in thanksgiving to God for what he has done. Public testimonies continue God's work through calamity to draw others to himself, as hearers are encouraged to seek God in their own pain, mourning, crying, and need.

4. Do all this as a community

Divine healing is a corporate affair. Although healing occurs in individual bodies, it occurs as believers, together, pray for the person who is afflicted. Testimonies of healing draw more people into the community of faith, and the community of people among whom Christ dwells, in itself, can provide restoration and relief for sufferers. At the same time, when people are not healed, their lament does not have to be an individual cry. Together, believers can express their pain to God and support each other, just as the psalms were sung together by the community of Israel. Corporate lament and thanksgiving are both expressions of faith in the sovereign, healing God.