

A Theology of Healing
Some Reflections on Faith Healing

by
Daniel J. Lewis

© Copyright 1990 by Diakonos, Inc.
Troy, Michigan
United States of America

Preface

In the Spring of 1969, while driving back to the campus with two college friends, we managed to catch A. A. Allen's healing program which was aired on the car radio from Miracle Valley, Arizona. The program was introduced with a catchy little tune and a lyric that went something like this:

Faith, faith, faith, just a little bit o' faith;
Faith, faith, faith, just a little bit o' faith;
It don't take a whole lot--just use what you've got;
Faith, faith, faith, just a little bit o' faith.

At the time, I was vaguely aware that Asa A. Allen was considered by many to be a fraud. However, given my own Pentecostal roots, I did not feel comfortable in making too critical a judgment regarding his theology and methods, for despite the possibility that he might have been less than genuine, his approach to faith healing was close enough to my own heritage to make probing questions disconcerting. Today, such defensiveness has given way to a better level of objectivity and a wider perspective. Though I am no longer a Pentecostal, I have a deep appreciation for my Christian heritage among the Pentecostals. At the same time, the subject of faith healing stands to bear some serious scrutiny in light of the Bible and the theology of the church.

| | |
|--|----|
| A Theology of Healing | 1 |
| Preface..... | 2 |
| The Rise of the Faith Healing Movement..... | 5 |
| John Wesley | 5 |
| Pietism..... | 6 |
| A New Emphasis on Faith | 6 |
| The Holiness Movement..... | 6 |
| Pentecostalism..... | 7 |
| The Theology of Faith Healing..... | 7 |
| The Positive Confession Movement..... | 9 |
| Reactions to the Faith Healing Movement | 10 |
| Warfield and Faith Healing..... | 11 |
| Modern Evangelical Dissent to Faith Healing..... | 12 |
| Reaction to Positive Confessionism | 13 |
| Problems in Faith Healing Theology | 14 |
| Practical Problems | 15 |
| Low Success Rate | 15 |
| Guilt and Blame | 15 |
| Lack of Counsel Toward Enduring Faith | 15 |
| Theological Problems | 16 |
| Quantitative Faith..... | 16 |
| Saving Faith and Healing Faith | 17 |
| Self-Generated Faith | 17 |
| Denial of Divine Sovereignty | 17 |
| Sickness as Judgment..... | 18 |
| Exegetical Problems | 19 |
| Hebrew Parallelisms | 19 |
| Fulfilled Prophecy..... | 21 |
| The Definition of Faith in Faith Healing Theology..... | 22 |
| The Notion of Carte Blanche Faith..... | 24 |
| The Reality of Christian Suffering and the Problem of Evil | 26 |
| Christians Can Be Legitimately Sick..... | 27 |
| God’s Uses the Existence of Evil for Constructive Purposes..... | 28 |
| The End of Evil is Eschatological, Not Immediate | 28 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Problems in the Reaction of Some Evangelicals | 29 |
| The Idea of Sign-Gifts | 29 |
| Theological Problems with Sign-Gift Theology | 30 |
| Historical Problems With Sign-Gift Theology | 31 |
| Divine Healing in the NT Church | 33 |
| Healing Cults in the First Century | 33 |
| Divine Healing in the Synoptic Gospels..... | 34 |
| Healings as Signs of the Kingdom..... | 34 |
| Healings as the Overflow of Compassion..... | 35 |
| Implications of Jesus' Healing Ministry for the Church | 36 |
| Divine Healing in the Fourth Gospel..... | 37 |
| The Problem of Faith | 38 |
| Implications for Healing in the Church | 39 |
| Divine Healing in the Primitive Church | 40 |
| 1 Corinthians 12:9, 28-30 | 42 |
| James 5:14-15 | 42 |
| Divine Healing and the Sovereign-Gracious Nature of God | 43 |
| Sovereign-Graciousness..... | 44 |
| God's Favor Toward the Helpless | 45 |
| The Exceptional Nature of Miracles and Healings..... | 45 |
| The Abba Relationship | 47 |
| Healing and the Atonement of Christ | 48 |
| Faith - With or Without Deliverance | 50 |

A Theology of Healing

With the rapid growth of the media church since the 1970s, the theology of faith healing has been widely disseminated throughout America and much of the world. Even more recently, new dimensions to faith healing have been created in the stream of thinking popularly called “positive confessionism.” Christians are often polarized over the issue. Some are completely devoted to it as truth; others are as completely convinced it is flagrant charlatanism. Amidst the pros and cons, various personalities have almost become household names among Christians, even among those Christians who do not necessarily subscribe to the faith healing theology. Many Christians are now quite familiar with such media personalities as W. V. Grant, Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Rex Humbard, Fred Price, Marilyn Hickey, R. W. Shambach, T. L. Osborn, Pat Robertson and the now infamous Jimmy Swaggert and Jim and Tammy Bakker. All these people function within the Pentecostal-charismatic sector of American Protestantism, and all embrace the theology of faith healing. Yet, as well known as these people have become, they have not completely eclipsed the popularity of equally well-known figures of a few decades ago from within the same heritage, figures like, Aimee Semple McPherson, William Branham, and A. B. Simpson. It is the popularity of the movement and its theology that calls for closer biblical examination.

The Rise of the Faith Healing Movement

Knowing the roots of any movement, religious or otherwise, is important if one is to truly appreciate the meaning of the movement itself.

John Wesley

While John Wesley (1703-1791) was not a faith healer, his theological trends helped to prepare the way for the faith healing movement. Wesley preached salvation as a cure for the disease of sin, and he held forth a model of salvation with a twofold character, justification and sanctification, often described as the “double cure”¹. In

¹ A phrase from the well-known hymn “Rock of Ages” by Augustus Toplady contains a lyric that hints of this twofold nature of salvation, cf. V. Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 13-32. Of course, Toplady was not Methodist (he was a Calvinist), but his lyric became exceedingly popular among Methodists.

*Let the water and the blood,
From thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,*

preaching that men and women could be spiritually restored to the full image of God, Wesley implicitly raised the question as to what extent physical restoration might also be expected. If disease itself is ultimately to be traced to Adam's sin, and if this sin has been removed in salvation, then might not that mean that Christians can be exempt from sickness? It was Wesley's followers who pursued this question to its logical end.²

Pietism

Pietism, a spiritual movement in the German Lutheran church in the 17th and 18th centuries, called for the need to move beyond sterile formulas about God to a more intimate experience with him.³ Among some later pietists, the theology was developed that sin is the cause of sickness and that, therefore, the forgiveness of sins and physical healing stand in an inner relationship to each other. Physical healing and improvement of health was thus expected as a benefit of responding to the gospel.⁴

A New Emphasis on Faith

In England and America, the connection between faith and answered prayer was developing rapidly. George Muller of the Plymouth Brethren founded an orphanage in 1835 in Bristol, England, and though not a wealthy man himself, he never asked for funds. Rather, all needs were supplied through faith and prayer. In America, Charles Finney (1792-1875) advocated "effectual" prayer, insisting that "faith always obtains its object" and that the real reason Paul was not relieved of his thorn in the flesh (2 Co. 12:1-10) was because he had not prayed "in faith".⁵

The Holiness Movement

Out of this mix of ideas, faith healing theology developed and was adopted by the leaders of the American holiness movement in the middle and late 1800s. Various biblical texts, such as James 5:14-15 and Psalms 103:2-3 and Isaiah 53:3-5 and Matthew 8:16-17, became key passages used to argue that the physical healing of the sick was one of the benefits of Christ's atonement. The Presbyterian A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Baptist A. J. Gordon, both prominent figures in the holiness movement toward the end of the 19th century, strongly articulated the belief that the atonement of Christ reached "far as the curse is found," and this included physical healing. Simpson even argued against the use of

Save from wrath and make me pure.

² D. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1987) 117-119.

³ M. Noll, "Pietism," *EDT* (1984) 855-858.

⁴ Dayton, 120-121.

⁵ Dayton, 122-130.

doctors and medicine, and Gordon argued that from the ministry of Jesus flowed two parallel streams of blessing, one for the recovery of the body and one for the recovery of the soul.⁶

Pentecostalism

When Pentecostalism emerged at the turn of the century (1901), it was firmly wedded to the faith healing movement. Charles Parham's Bible college in Topeka, Kansas, usually credited with being the birthplace of the Pentecostal movement, was conducted on the "faith home" policy, similar to Muller's. Infirm persons, who were regularly instructed in faith healing, were not charged for services and were maintained solely through unsolicited gifts of interested Christians.⁷ The Pentecostal version of the gospel, called the "Four-fold Gospel" or "Full Gospel,"⁸ focused on four fundamental teachings: salvation, healing, the baptism in the Spirit, and the second coming of Christ.⁹ As the Pentecostal movement continued to grow, it carried with it the theology of faith healing. The Azusa Street mission in Los Angeles became a veritable Pentecostal mecca from which the news of supernatural signs and wonders were broadcasted across America.¹⁰

The Theology of Faith Healing

At the heart of the theology of faith healing is the conviction that physical sickness was atoned for when Christ died on the cross. Christ's substitutionary death paid for not only the sins of humankind, but also for the diseases of humankind. The root cause of sickness is the curse put upon Adam when he sinned, and sickness is essentially a spiritual matter to be handled in a spiritual way. Some faith healers view modern medicine as Satan's instrument to defeat the believer's exercise of true faith,¹¹ though most faith healers do not call for a restriction on medicine. Still, medicine, even if it is permitted, is viewed as a secondary means for healing arising out of a weak or incomplete faith. The theology of faith healing has been articulated in many books and pamphlets by faith healers, but the following examples are stereotypical and express the fundamental tenets of the position:

⁶ Dayton, 122-130.

⁷ J. Nichol, *Pentecostalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 27.

⁸ One Pentecostal denomination has incorporated this four-fold concept into its denominational name, the Foursquare Church, begun by Aimee Semple McPherson and still existing today.

⁹ Dayton, 21-22.

¹⁰ Nichol, 34.

¹¹ A good example of this extreme position can be found in the sermon by John Alexander Dowie (1895), an early faith healer, on "Doctors, Drugs and Devils; or the Foes of Christ the Healer," cf. P. Chappell, "Heal, Healing," *EDT* (1984) 496.

The vicarious suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ paid for the healing of our bodies, the same as for the salvation of our souls, for '...with His stripes we are healed' (Isaiah 53:5). Matthew 8:17 reads, '...Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses' (See also I Peter 2:24).¹²

In the atonement Jesus paid the price for the healing of our bodies as well as the salvation for the soul.

When Jesus took away our sins He removed the primary cause for sickness among us. As a result of disobedience, death came to the human race, and with it sickness. Here is seen the original cause of sickness.

When Jesus died, He bore not only our iniquities but also our sicknesses. In the atonement is salvation for the soul and healing for the body. This is known as the double cure: salvation and healing. A beautiful type of this is seen at Marah (Exodus 15:23-26). The tree that was cast into the bitter waters is a type of the cross of Calvary. The bitter waters is [sic] a type of sin. With the sweetening of the waters was given a promise of health and healing.

It should be no more difficult to believe God for physical healing than for spiritual salvation. The need for each goes back to the same primary cause, and God's Word gives a solid foundation for believing for both of them.

Even as salvation is provided for whosoever will, divine healing is provided for all who will meet the conditions. [This writer goes onto describe conditions for healing in terms of faith and obedience. Hindrances to faith healing are seen to be in unconfessed sin, an unforgiving spirit, lack of discernment of the Lord's body and lack of recognition of health rules. Obedience is seen to be in prayer, a call for the church elders, a symbolic anointing with oil and the laying on of hands.]¹³

Healing for the body is part of the atonement wrought by our Saviour when he was beaten with stripes, as Peter said, '...by whose stripes ye were healed.' I Peter 2:24. (See Isaiah 53:5, also).¹⁴

By these Scriptures (Isaiah 53:5/I Peter 2:24) we see healing for the BODY in the same atonement as we see salvation for the SOUL. HEALING IS IN THE ATONEMENT. WE HAVE HEALING IN REDEMPTION. [Emphasis his] If we are saved, we should be healed. If we are healed, then we should be saved. Our Lord could not be satisfied with a half salvation.

He [the believer] begins to sing with David:

'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not ALL HIS BENEFITS. (Most folk have forgotten just one-half the benefits of the atonement; David had not.) Who forgiveth ALL thine iniquities; who healeth ALL thy diseases' (Psalms 103:2, 3). He shouts: 'FORGIVETH ALL! and HEALETH ALL!' in the same breath.¹⁵

¹² *Manual: United Pentecostal Church International (Incorporated)* (Hazelwood, MO: Pentecostal Publishing House, 1981) 22.

¹³ R. Reynolds, *Truth Shall Triumph* (St. Louis, MO: Pentecostal Publishing House, 1965) 70-75.

¹⁴ O. Vouga, *Our Gospel Message* (n.p., n.d.) 22.

¹⁵ T. Osborn, *Healing the Sick* (Tulsa, OK: T. L. Osborn Evangelistic Association, 1959) 35-36. Osborn is a well-

The Positive Confession Movement

In the 1970s and 80s, a new development occurred on the American Pentecostal landscape. Drawing both from classical Pentecostalism, with its roots in the 19th century holiness movements, and from the Charismatic movement, with roots in a spiritual renewal movement within the Roman Catholic, Episcopal and Lutheran churches, this new movement expressed itself primarily in independent congregations having no denominational affiliation and in non-denominational radio and television ministries. While some of the media ministers were denominationally affiliated, such as, Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert (both ordained through the Assemblies of God) and Oral Roberts (who joined the United Methodist Church), denominational affiliation was downplayed and remained in the background. For the most part, such media ministers have stayed clear of strong denominational connections.

Largely through the teachings of Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland,¹⁶ a new emphasis in faith teaching developed which has become extremely popular among the most recent groups of Pentecostal-Charismatics.¹⁷ This new emphasis, which is promulgated through the media as well as extensive audio-tape ministries and tractates, embraces a complex of ideas sometimes referred to as the “laws” of faith. Faith, according to this view, operates on the basis of certain spiritual laws analogous to the physical laws of the universe. These laws have been set in motion through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and now they function in a fixed and unalterable way in the spiritual realm, just as does gravity and the laws of thermodynamics in the natural realm. Hagin can say, “It’s not a matter of His [that is, God] healing you. He’s done all He is ever going to do about it.”¹⁸ Rather, the Christian is responsible to tap into the spiritual force behind these laws and use them for his/her own benefit. Among these laws of faith are the following ideas:¹⁹

known Pentecostal faith healer who has conducted crusades in many countries of the world.

¹⁶ Hagin and Copeland have been singled out because of their popularity. However, other figures are also significant, such as, Fred Price, Don Gossatt, Hobart Freeman and Burton Seavey. All of the above, including Hagin and Copeland, draw heavily from the writings of E. W. Kenyon, cf. C. Farah, Jr., “The ‘Roots and Fruits’ of Faith-Formula Theology,” (paper presented at a meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Tulsa, OK, November 1980) 4-6. E. W. Kenyon produced a comprehensive Pentecostal treatment of the power of the name of Jesus (1927), teaching that through this name all the power of the person and work of Jesus is made present in the church today, cf. D. Reed, “Aspects of the Origins of Oneness Pentecostalism,” *Aspects of Pentecostal-Charismatic Origins*, ed. V. Synan Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975 160-161.

¹⁷ Evidence for the popularity of this faith teaching is that between May of 1980 and May of 1981, while the top ten religious television broadcasts suffered a an overall 6.6% decline in viewers, Kenneth Copeland’s program, at that time ranked ninth out of the ten, increased his audience by 50.5%, of. J. Fickett, *Confess It, Possess It: Faith’s Formula?* (Oklahoma City, OK: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984) 5.

¹⁸ K. Hagin, *Bible Faith Study Course* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1980) 90 as quoted in J. Fickett, 8.

¹⁹ K. Copeland, “How to Pray for Healing,” *Welcome to the Family* (Fort Worth, TX: KCP Publications, 1983) 27-

- a) “You are an heir to the blessing which God gave to Abraham.” This blessing covers every area of your existence: spirit, soul, body, finances, and social life (Ga. 3:13-14, 29; Ge. 17; Dt. 28:1-14).
- b) “You have the right to live free from sickness and disease.” Sickness comes from Satan. Because physical healing is accomplished in the atonement of Christ on the cross, every Christian has a right to command Satan to get out of his/her life.
- c) “Healing is part of your inheritance, part of the blessing of Abraham; but in order to live in your inheritance, you have to believe it for yourself and accept it as a reality in your own life.” If Christians suffer or experience any evil in their lives, it is not God’s fault; it is a result of ‘wrong thinking, wrong believing and wrong talking.’
- d) “God intends for every believer to live completely free from sickness and disease. It is up to you to decided whether or not you will.” The best way to activate God’s power, that is, to tap into the spiritual laws that govern health, is to continually confess health and healing. The verbal confession with the mouth guarantees that God will perform what you say.
- e) Verbal confession, as the method of operating the laws of faith, is so fundamental that even God himself works by it. “God created the world by faith.” “How did he do it? God believed that what He said would come to pass.” “He created it with the force of faith...” “Evidently God has faith in His faith...”²⁰ The confession of faith creates reality.

Reactions to the Faith Healing Movement

The faith healing movement has received mixed reactions. Some Christians embraced it readily, but others saw it as extremism and, in some cases, outright deception. Those who objected did not necessarily do so with a flat denial that God could and did heal persons, but they sharply objected to the simple cause and effect approach to faith and healing promulgated by the faith healers. Other Christians through the ages had affirmed God’s power to heal. Church fathers, such as, Irenaeus, Origen, Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Augustine, verified the practice of divine healing in the early centuries of Christianity. Even Pope Innocent I described anointing and prayer for the sick as a right which every sick believer should expect. While there was a decline in the practice of divine healing, Martin Luther and the English reformers renewed the emphasis in their ministries. Such Protestant groups

35. See also K. Hagin, *God’s Medicine* (Tulsa, OK: Rhema Bible Church, 1977).

²⁰ The quotes are from Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland taken from sermons and pamphlets, cf. Fickett, 9.

as the Brethren, Mennonites, Quakers, Moravians and Wesleyans had believed in and practiced divine healing at one level or another.²¹ However, their approach was much less systematic than that of the 19th century faith healers, and it certainly was not conceived of as simply cause and effect. Luther, for instance, did not believe that James' instructions (Ja. 5:14-15) were for the present day, though later in life his disciple, Philip Melancthon, was restored to health after Luther's own prayers.²²

John Calvin's comments probably described the general position of most evangelical Christians prior to the rise of the 19th century faith healing movement:

*James spoke for that same time when the church still enjoyed a blessing from God...but we experience otherwise...the Lord is indeed present with his people in every age; and he heals their weaknesses as often as necessary, no less than that of old; still he does not put forth these manifest powers, nor dispense miracles through apostles' hands. For that was a temporary gift and also quickly perished.*²³

The faith healing theology of the 19th century, however, went far beyond what had been believed by the various Christians since the apostolic era. As such, faith healing theology became a catalyst that provoked an ongoing debate that is still alive in American Protestantism.

Warfield and Faith Healing

B. B. Warfield (1851-1921), a conservative Protestant scholar who held the chair of theology at Princeton Seminary, became the evangelical theologian early on who marshaled the primary arguments against faith healing. While he was pleased with the spiritual zeal of conservative evangelical Christians, he also feared that they were drifting toward anti-intellectualism. He was especially antagonistic toward the perfectionism (second work of grace theology) which was so prevalent in the holiness movements²⁴ as well as toward the Pentecostal insistence on the practice of special spiritual gifts, such as faith healing and speaking in tongues.²⁵ Warfield argued that such gifts were signs intended to authenticate the message of the apostles. When the New Testament message was complete, they were no longer necessary or valid.²⁶ Warfield relegated the spectacular claims of the faith healers to either psychosomatic illnesses (diseases caused by states of the mind) or to neuropathic illnesses (nervous

²¹ P. Chappel, "Heal, Healing," *EDT* (1984) 498.

²² Dayton, 116.

²³ As quoted in Dayton, 116-117.

²⁴ Warfield's polemic against perfectionism is summarized in his work *Perfectionism* (rpt. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

²⁵ M. Knoll, "Warfield, Benjamin Breckinridge," *EDT* (1984) 1156.

²⁶ G. Osborne, "Tongues, Speaking in," *EDT* (1984) 1103.

diseases), both of which might be “cured” by altering the state of mind or by soothing the nervous condition of the sufferer. Warfield writes:

One often hears healing claims concerning goiters, tumors, and cancer, such as, ‘They disappear right before your eyes!’ But - There was a woman in St. Luke’s Hospital, in New York City, who had a tumor, to all, even the most skilled diagnosis. But the tumor simply disappeared on the administration of ether and the consequent withdrawal of nervous action.

...the majority of patients cured under such conditions (Lourdes) are neuropaths. That is to say, they are persons whose illness is to a preponderant extent due to mental causations.

After three years of investigations, a special committee of the British Medical Association has this to say in their report, ‘Divine Healing and Cooperation Between Doctors and Clergy: As far as our observation and investigation have gone, we have seen no evidence that there is any special type of illness cured solely by spiritual healing which cannot be cured by medical methods which do not involve such claims.’²⁷

Modern Evangelical Dissent to Faith Healing

Many modern evangelicals continue to argue against the claims of faith healing. Those of a dispensational persuasion often follow the reasoning of Merrill Unger, who takes his cue from Warfield and argues that the gifts of signs, wonders and miracles served only to establish Christianity and to vindicate the authenticity of the apostles (Ac. 14:3; 2 Co. 12:12; Ro. 15:18-19; He. 2:3-4). After the apostolic era, they no longer functioned in the church. Unger is careful to point out, however, that upon occasion God still grants special miracles, including healing, as divine acts which meet human needs and bring him glory, but these are not to be viewed in the same light as the apostolic gifts of power.²⁸

Other conservative Protestants discredit not only the theology of faith healing but the apparent results. Such disclaimers are particularly characteristic of the Churches of Christ movement. During the campaign of a well-known faith healer in Florida, a local Church of Christ congregation offered \$1000.00 to anyone who was healed of cancer, tuberculosis, or other constitutional diseases as long as the healing was verified by three local physicians. There were no takers.²⁹ This same sort of challenge has been issued many other times with the same results. Some evangelicals

²⁷ Quoted in W. McRae, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 71.

²⁸ M. Unger, *The Baptism & Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974) 138-139. Warfield’s and Unger’s basic arguments are repeated by other evangelical authors, such as, A. Hoekema, *Tongues and Spirit-Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 11.61-65.

²⁹ McRae, 70.

simply react with paranoia at what they perceive to be unbalanced extremism, such as, the emergency poster once posted in Culbertson Hall at Moody Bible Institute which detailed instructions for residents in case of fire, tornado, air raid, bomb threat, emotional upset, suicide, sickness or injury, and charismatic activity (call the dean).

Reaction to Positive Confessionism

Because the Positive Confession movement is relatively new, the arguments against it have been for the most part verbally issued from the pulpits of dissenting evangelical ministers. Three types of dissent are worthy of special mention.

The first is the kind of dissent which identifies positive confessionism as somewhat parallel with three other models of religious heresy--deism, gnosticism, and religious humanism. Like English Deism (17th century)³⁰, positive confessionism views God under the rubric of unalterable, fixed laws. God is no longer directly involved; rather, his fixed laws are tapped into by the seeker at the seeker's will. Like gnosticism,³¹ positive confessionism embraces a dualistic view of the material and spiritual worlds and a special claim to "revelation knowledge." As to dualism, positive confessionists view the material world as misleading, so much so, that people are encouraged to verbally claim divine healing even when all the symptoms suggest otherwise. They believe that they have been healed in spite of the "lying symptoms." As to "revelation knowledge," their interpretations of the Bible do not come through the more academic means of studying grammar and theology, but they claim to be received by intuitive revelations directly from God. This kind of knowledge is available only through intensive, Spirit-mediated meditation. Finally, like religious humanism,³² positive confessionism supplants the sovereignty of God with the autonomy of humans. Its appeal is to the present, self-centered goals of men and women, particularly the desire for material prosperity.³³

A second kind of dissent to positive confessionism is that developed by Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon.³⁴ The gist of their argument is that the last great apostasy is upon us, and part of that deception will come through the teachings of positive confessionists.³⁵

³⁰ M. MacDonald, "Deism," *EDT* (1984) 304-305.

³¹ G. Borchert, "Gnosticism," *EDT* (1984) 444-447.

³² R. Clouse, "Humanism, Christian," *EDT* (1984) 535-536.

³³ This line of argumentation is developed by J. Fickett, *Confess It, Possess It: Faith's Formula?* (Tulsa, OK: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984).

³⁴ D. Hunt and T. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity: Spiritual Discernment in the Last Days* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1985).

³⁵ In fairness, Hunt and McMahon do not single out positive confessionism as the sole expression of the great eschatological lie, but they nevertheless mention by name such figures as Paul Yonggi Cho, Fred Price, Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin, Charles Capps and Robert Tilton as purveyors of deception, 84, 97-98, 101-102, 113,

Finally, a third kind of dissent against positive confessionism is based on the perceived abuse of Scripture. Adherents regularly ignore historical and cultural contexts, sometimes make outright blunders in terms of grammar and the lexical meanings of words, and then credit the Holy Spirit with their interpretations. To disagree is to challenge the Holy Spirit.³⁶

The arguments against positive confessionism are addressed toward the system as a whole, not just the question of faith healing. However, since faith healing is very much a part of the positive confessionist stance, the uneasiness of evangelicals with the movement as a whole also affects the faith healing issue.

Problems in Faith Healing Theology

Without question, there are some positive factors in faith healing theology, not the least of which are the enthusiastic affirmation that God is not aloof from human pain and suffering but is deeply concerned with the human dilemma, and the affirmation that God still interacts in the plane of human history, just as he did in biblical times. With any Christian believer who has been truly helped by faith healing, either physically or otherwise, we are compelled to rejoice. (It would seem to verge on uncompassionate cynicism to do otherwise.) At the same time, a careful examination of faith healing theology reveals some disturbing flaws that cannot be glossed over. These flaws arise directly out of the context of faith healing theology's central claims, that is:

- 1) It is everyone's right to be healed just as it is everyone's right to be saved, based on the atoning work of Christ.³⁷

139-140, 143-144, 153, 218-219. Positive confessionism is portrayed by Hunt and McMahon as being the same delusion of godhood offered by Satan to Eve in Eden and an integral part of the religion of Antichrist, 88

³⁶ The examples are too numerous to deal with here, but a couple of samples will suffice to demonstrate the general direction of this dissent. Positive confessionists argue that the person of faith must focus on the present, drawing their biblical support from He. 11:1. "Now faith is, present tense. If it's not present tense, it's not faith," cf. K. Hagin as quoted by Fickett, 11. As any competent student of New Testament Greek knows, the word "now" in He. 11:1 is simply the transitional word *de* (= but, now), and it hardly has reference to present time, cf. F. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965) 45. Similarly, the opening greeting of 3 John 2 is often used by positive confessionists as a theological statement of the believer's right to health and wealth. This interpretation completely ignores the fact that such a statement was a conventional expression in Greco-Roman letter writing and to be found in many examples of non-Christian letters, cf. R. Brown, *The Epistles of John [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982) 703. It is comparable to our common expression in letters, "I hope all is well with you and yours." In fact, such conventional expressions were so well known in the ancient world that in Latin letters they were often written by an abbreviation, i.e., S V B E E V (*si uales, bene est; ego ualeo* = if you are well, that is good; I am well), cf. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 147.

³⁷ Faith healing theology is rarely if ever Calvinistic, and it habitually assumes the position that the atonement of

- 2) Faith and obedience are the sole conditions to be met for physical healing.
- 3) Faith is to be viewed in quantitative terms and is believed to be self-generated.

Practical Problems

Among the practical problems of faith healing theology are the following:

Low Success Rate

The most obvious practical problem of faith healing theology is that so many sincere and suffering seekers are not healed. Unlike the healing ministry of Jesus, in which he healed them “all” (Ac.10:38; cf. Mt. 4:23-24; 9:35; 12:15; 14:14, 35-36; 19:2; 21:14; Mk. 1:34; 3:10; 6:13, 56; Lk. 4:40; 5:15; 6:17-19; 9:11), the vast majority of people who come to faith healers with real physical maladies are not healed.

Guilt and Blame

If faith and obedience are the sole conditions for physical healing, then when a person is not healed, he/she must be blamed. The very fact that healing is approached on the level of human merit implies that those who are not healed do not deserve to be healed, whether due to a lack of faith on their part or due to some other moral failure in their lives. Even if blame is never verbalized (though it must be conceded that frequently it is), it still suggests to the afflicted that guilt and blame should be fixed upon them. Conveniently, of course, when healing is not forthcoming, blame is rarely shouldered by the faith healer him/herself.

The guilt which is laid upon the sufferer may be handled in various ways. It may be shrugged off in the hope that God, in his own way and time, will eventually hear and answer the victim’s plea for healing. Alternatively, the sufferer may indict God for lack of fairness, especially if the sufferer deems that he/she has truly met the requirements of faith and obedience. More often, however, the afflicted person merely becomes discouraged by his/her own lack of ability to believe, and when this happens, the pressure of guilt tends to destroy the victim’s basic trust in God. Initial discouragement evolves into a downward spiral ending in despair.

Lack of Counsel Toward Enduring Faith

If one accepts the conclusion that everyone has a right to be saved just as everyone has a right to be healed, then victims are rarely, if ever, counseled about how to face death and dying or extended illness with enduring faith. Rather, they are

Christ was universal for all humans rather than restricted to the elect only.

continually coached regarding their lack of faith or perceived shortcomings in life. Ironically, it is never considered that if it is everyone's right to be healed, then no one would ever die. Even when it is conceded that people must die (if for no other reason, then because the Bible says so), it is still tacitly assumed that it is the Christian's right to die apart from disease and that a long, healthy life is God's promise to believers.

Theological Problems

Theologically, the following problems stand out in the faith healing movement:

Quantitative Faith

Faith healing theology usually defines faith as quantitative, that is, that the sick person will be healed if and when he/she musters "enough" faith. This definition of faith depends upon passages in the Bible that speak of "great" faith (cf. Mt. 15:28; Mt. 8:10//Lk. 7:9), "little faith" (Mt. 6:30//Lk. 12:28; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8), and the plea to "increase" faith (Lk. 17:5). As such, faith is treated like a substance, and if one can just manage to muster a sufficient quantity of the precious stuff, almost anything can be accomplished on demand.

Such an approach seems to miss the intent of the biblical passages cited, however. In each case mentioned, the evaluation of "great" faith (*me-gas* = great, large) or "such" faith (*tosoutos* = so great, so large) or "little faith" (*oligopistos* = little faith) seems to be given on the basis of a recognition of who Jesus truly was, that is, it was directed toward a person (Jesus) not a solution to a felt need (healing). In the cases of the Syro-Phoenician woman and the centurion, "great" faith was a recognition of Jesus' power and authority as opposed to those who did not accept his power and authority. It was not a self-generated substance to be used merely to accomplish personal objectives. Similarly, when Jesus berated his disciples for "little faith," it is due to their lack of recognition that they were safe when they were with him, even if they were in a storm or even if they lacked food and clothing. To the plea by the disciples, "Increase our faith," Jesus responded that even the tiniest bit of faith, if it is real, is quite sufficient (Lk. 17:5-6). One does not need great quantities!

Furthermore, it is probable that the expressions "great" faith and "little faith" are meant as metaphors for the presence or absence of faith altogether rather than quantitative amounts of faith. The Markan account of the stilling of the storm, for instance, does not speak of "little faith" (as in Matthew), but reads, "How is it that you do not have faith?" (Mk. 4:40), and the Lukan parallel reads, "Where is your faith?" (Lk. 8:25).

Saving Faith and Healing Faith

There is an insidious danger in positing a direct relationship between saving faith and healing faith. On the one hand, it may sound greatly encouraging to say that if one has expressed faith in Christ for salvation, then he/she also has the faith to be healed. But if faith for physical healing rests on the same basis as faith for salvation, then logically one must assume that the person who lacks the faith to be healed also lacks the faith to be saved. Sick believers become pseudo-believers, and if a sufferer is not healed, then his/her basic faith in Christ must be suspect.

Self-Generated Faith

In faith healing theology, the believer's faith is viewed as self-generated. The responsibility for faith is placed squarely and solely upon the sufferer. While it cannot be denied that in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, faith does seem to arise as a human response to God's gracious power (cf. Mt. 9:22//Mk. 5:34//Lk. 8:48; Mt. 9:29-30; Mk. 10:52//Lk. 18:42; Lk. 17:19; Ac. 14:8-10; Ja. 5:15), it must also be recognized that faith is to be viewed as the gift of God, not merely a humanly contrived positivism (cf. Ep. 2:8; Phil. 1:29). On one occasion, Jesus confronted a man with a suffering child who quite frankly confessed his mixture of belief and unbelief, and Jesus still healed the afflicted son (Mk. 9:24). Even though Peter credited the healing of the lame man at the temple to faith, he clearly describes this faith as coming through Jesus.³⁸ Faith, therefore, cannot be viewed as exclusively a human response; it is also God's enablement. Even when speaking of faith from the perspective of human response, faith cannot be passed off as only the responsibility of the sufferer. On the occasion previously mentioned, it was the disciples' lack of faith and prayer which prevented the healing of the demoniac lad (Mk. 9:17-19, 29).³⁹

Denial of Divine Sovereignty

Healing on demand implicitly compromises the sovereignty of God and replaces it with the sovereignty of faith. Faith healers often contend that it could never be God's will for people to be sick. Suffering, in their view, is exclusively satanic in origin. If the thief (Satan) comes only to steal, kill and destroy, then sickness must be satanic (cf. Jn. 10:10).

It must be admitted that in the Bible sickness is indeed sometimes connected with satanic forces. The afflictions of Job were caused by Satan (Jb. 2:7). Jesus said

³⁸ The Greek construction *dia autou* (= through him) is a genitive of agency. It does not mean faith "in him," as faith healers often take it, but rather, faith which comes through the agency of Christ. This is hardly self-generated faith!

³⁹ Though the KJV reads "prayer and fasting" in 9:29, the word fasting is missing from the earliest manuscripts and is almost certainly a gloss, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975) 101.

that the crippled woman whom he healed on the Sabbath had been bound by Satan for eighteen years (Lk. 13:16). Paul described his “thorn in the flesh” as a messenger of Satan (2 Co. 12:7). On at least one occasion in the gospels, disease and demon possession appear to be directly linked (Mt. 17:14-18). However, the assertion that sickness and suffering cannot have any role within God’s purposes denies his sovereignty and the testimony of Scripture that sometimes this is precisely the case. Though Satan attacked Job, he did so with God’s permission and under divine control (Jb. 1:12; 2:6). When Yahweh convinced Moses to go to Egypt as his spokesman, he insisted that even deafness, muteness and blindness were under divine sovereignty (Ex. 4:11). Whatever the exact nature of Paul’s “thorn,” it was in that weakness that God demonstrated his strength, and it was through that weakness that God prevented Paul from becoming conceited (2 Co. 12:7-9). That human suffering can and does occur within the will of God is plainly asserted by Peter (1 Pe. 4:19). Concerning the man who was born blind, Jesus said that his condition had happened (presumably within the purposes of God) so that God’s work might be displayed in his life (Jn. 9:3).

Furthermore, the fact that God has allowed evil to exist in the world at all implies that through this state of affairs a higher good can be gained than could be achieved in any other way. Human pain, disease, tragedy, suffering and the like jar humans out of self-sufficiency. If they never experienced suffering and death, it is highly unlikely that they would ever seriously value life or God.⁴⁰

Sickness as Judgment

Alternatively, and somewhat inconsistent with the assertion that God does not make people sick, faith healers often make a direct connection between sickness and punishment, that is, they sometimes view sickness as a judgment from God due to spiritual shortcomings or disobedience. Sin and sickness are viewed in a cause and effect relationship.

As before, there is a partial truth here. Sometimes sickness does seem to be the tragic result of sin. Certainly some kinds of sins bring their own consequences, but even beyond that, God at times uses sickness as a disciplinary judgment. Uzziah’s leprosy was an affliction from Yahweh due to his pride and usurpation of priestly function (1 Chr. 26:16-20; cf. Nu. 12:10-15). Herod Agrippa was struck with an internal disorder by an angel, because he accepted adulation as a god (Ac. 12:21-

⁴⁰ The fact that God has allowed evil to exist in the world becomes a philosophical problem for Christians, a problem which does not come under the scope of this study. However, two very readable treatments from a Christian perspective are D. Trueblood, “The Problem of Evil,” *Philosophy of Religion* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 231-256, and C. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

23).⁴¹ Some Corinthian Christians suffered physical weakness, sickness, and even death because they did not practice the Lord's table in mutual love and the proper recognition of the whole church, the Lord's body (1 Co. 11:27-30). To the ungrateful invalid whom Jesus healed at Bethsesda, the Lord gave the stern warning, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (Jn. 5:14).

However, even though this cannot be denied, it goes too far to make sickness the exclusive and direct result of sin. Such an idea was the position of Jewry in the days of Jesus,⁴² and it lay behind the disciples' question, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus replied that neither had sinned (Jn. 9:1-3). Even though James recognizes a possible connection between sin and sickness, he is careful to say, "If he has sinned (not *since* he has sinned), he will be forgiven" (Ja. 5:15). The multitudes of afflicted people who came to Jesus for healing in the gospels were treated with compassion as victims, not criminals. All that can be said is that *sometimes* sickness may be a direct result of sin. It is far more likely that most sickness is simply a part of the order of things in a fallen world. In one case, the sickness of Hezekiah, the king's illness came about as simply God's time for him to die (2 Ki. 20:1//Is. 38:1). Even though God spared him from this sickness when Isaiah placed on his boil a poultice of figs (2 Ki. 10:7//Is. 38:21-22), there is no suggestion that the sickness was a judgment.

Exegetical Problems

In addition to the practical and overarching theological problems of faith healing theology, there are problems with the way advocates of faith healing handle specific passages and/or specific words or ideas in the Bible.

Hebrew Parallelisms

Two of the popular passages used by advocates of faith healing are from poetic sections of the Old Testament in which an apparent connection is made between forgiving sin and curing disease (Ps. 103:2-3; Is. 53:4-5). This seeming connection is made within the regular structure of parallelism, universally recognized as the most important feature of biblical Hebrew poetry.⁴³

⁴¹ It is of interest to note that the biblical narrative is corroborated by Josephus (*Antiquities*, XIX.8.2), who says that Herod was struck with a severe pain in his belly, which began a most violent attack. After five days of terrible suffering, he died.

⁴² Some Jews believed that a person could actually begin to sin prenatally. Other Jews, who had interwoven Greek Platonism into their theology, believed that all souls existed prior to the creation of the world and that even before entering a body, they were already good or bad. Still other Jews believed that the sins of the parents were punished in the lives of their children, cf. W. Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) II.37-38.

⁴³ Discussions of Hebrew poetry are to be found in most up-to-date Bible dictionaries, introductions to collections of

In Ps. 103:3, the parallelism is synonymous and completely congruent (based on the Hebrew text):

The-one-forgiving to-all [the]-sin-of-you
The-one-healing to-all [the]-diseases-of-you

In such parallelism, word pairs such as forgiving/healing and sin/disease are synonyms or near synonyms so that they are almost interchangeable in character. The verb *salah* (= to forgive or pardon) is very close in meaning to the verb *rapha'* (to heal, restore), just as are the words in the parallelism '*awon* = activity that is crooked or wrong) and *tahelu'im* (= diseases, suffering).⁴⁴

The background for Ps. 103:3 is the Deuteronomic covenant with its blessings and cursings, and the word rendered "diseases" is a rare one in the Old Testament (this is the first occurrence of the word after Dt. 29:22). It is almost a certainty that Psalm 103 is to be taken as a comment on covenant restoration for the nation, rather than as a promise of personal physical healing for a constitutional disease. This is the thrust of the verb rendered "renew" in 103:5, the reference to Yahweh's anger in 103:9, and the affirmation of God's love to those who keep covenant in 103:18. In the Deuteronomic code, the curse for disobedience was to be a divinely sent disaster (Dt. 28:15-68; 2 Chr. 7:19-22), but the promise was held forth that if and when Israel returned to Yahweh, the nation would be healed and restored (Dt. 30:1-10; 2 Chr. 6:24-31, 36-39; 7:13-14). If this is so, then the use of this passage in faith healing theology to refer to individual rights for personal cures based on the atoning death of Jesus is a mistake regarding the Old Testament context and meaning of the Psalm. Rather, Psalm 103:3 refers to Yahweh's promise to forgive and restore the fortunes of the Israelite nation when its people repented.

The second Old Testament parallelism is in the Fourth Song of the Servant, a series of visions in the latter part of Isaiah which the New Testament writers understood to be prophecies of the Lord Jesus (cf. Lk. 22:37; Ac. 3:13; 8:32-35).⁴⁵ In this Fourth Song (Is. 52:13-53:12), which describes the vicarious suffering of the servant for the sins of others, the following parallelisms are to be found:

biblical poetry or individual poetic books, as well as in textbooks on the subject. A standard work of the latter type is W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield, England: JSOTS, 1986).

⁴⁴ It may be noted that the term *tahelu'im* is broader than just a reference to constitutional diseases. The word is used first in Dt. 29:22 to refer to natural disasters, like drought, which Yahweh would send upon Israel as a curse because of the nation's violation of covenant, and it includes all outward as well as inward sufferings (cf. Heb. text of Je. 14:18; 16:4), cf. F. Delitzsch, *The Psalms* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) III.120.

⁴⁵ For an insightful treatment, see F. Bruce, "The Servant Messiah," *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968 83-99).

- 53:4 *hali'* (= infirmity, violent illness)
mak'ov (= pain, suffering, sorrow)
- 53:5 *pesha'* (= revolt, rebellion)
awon (= activity that is crooked)

Contextually, it cannot be denied that the primary force of the passage is directed toward the expiation of sin. Even the LXX translators understood it so, for they translated the first word in the series as *harmartia* (= sin). It is in response to the above collection of human dilemmas that the prophet says, “By his wounds⁴⁶ we are healed,” that is, we are healed of our infirmities, sufferings, rebellions and iniquities. The verb *rapha'* (= to heal, restore) cannot be restricted solely to the healing of constitutional disease, for in other Old Testament contexts it refers to the restoration of water to purity (2 Ki. 2:19-22; Eze. 47:8, 11), to the restoration of a sinner (Je. 17:14), to the possible restoration of a nation’s fortunes (Je. 51:8-9), and to the restoration of the land after drought or pestilence (2 Chr. 7:14). In a secondary sense, it can be legitimately argued that physical maladies are to be included within the larger body of human woes, but even though Christ suffered vicariously in behalf of all these woes, those advocating faith healing usually do not assert that Christians have a divine guarantee that they need never face adversity. In any case, the final rectification of human woe, even for Christians, will not come until the conclusion of history at the coming of Jesus (cf. Ac. 3:18-21; Rev. 22:2)

Fulfilled Prophecy

Two passages in the New Testament directly refer to the statements just treated from the Fourth Song of the Servant and assert that they are fulfilled in the life of Jesus of Nazareth (Mt. 8:17; 1 Pe. 2:24). In the first, Matthew connects the healings and exorcisms of Jesus’ Galilean ministry with the statement that the Servant “took our infirmities and carried our diseases.” However, while Matthew certainly sees the Isaianic prediction to have an application in Jesus’ earthly life, he does not connect it to the passion of Jesus. Rather, in Matthew’s view the fulfillment occurs *before* the passion of Jesus, a fact that has not been sufficiently appreciated by those in the faith healing movement.

Peter, for his part, quotes the final phrase of Is. 53:5 in the context of suffering

⁴⁶ The KJV rendering “stripes” for the word *haburah* (wound, blow, stroke, stripe) has often been taken by advocates of faith healing to mean that the scourging of Jesus was the specific part of the passion that atoned for physical healing. Some have even attempted to make a connection between an alleged list of 39 constitutional diseases in the world which were atoned for by the 39 stripes of Jesus. However, it is unlikely that the Hebrew word *haburah* can be restricted only to the scourging of Jesus, and there is no biblical evidence that Jesus received 39 lashes, which was the Jewish manner of scourging (Jesus was scourged by the Romans, not the Jews). Furthermore, the categorization of 39 constitutional diseases in the world is arbitrary, to say the least.

unjustly and bearing sin. Christian slaves had been experiencing severe abuse (1 Pe. 2:18-20; 4:12-16), and Peter calls to their attention that Christ also wrongfully suffered, and in doing so, left Christians a pattern to follow (1 Pe. 2:21-23). The point Peter makes is quite the opposite of what faith healers find in this passage. Faith healers wish to say that it is everyone's right to live above sickness, because by Christ's wounds we have been healed. Peter, on the other hand, asserts that it is every Christian's responsibility to follow Christ in a life of undeserved suffering while entrusting oneself to the justice of God.

The Definition of Faith in Faith Healing Theology

Perhaps the most serious exegetical problem arises over how faith is to be defined. The usual definition within the faith healing movement is that faith is the simple belief that God has promised healing to all who believe and that he will do what he has said he would do. However, it quickly becomes clear that faith healers intend this broad definition in a very particular way. Thus, faith is a kind of positivism, a dogmatic confidence that whatever one desires will certainly happen. Faith is a positive mental attitude based upon the interpretation that it is every believer's right to be healed as an inviolable pledge from God. Consider some samples of faith healers' descriptions of faith:

There are just two platforms on which to stand, and we must take one or the other. The one is BELIEF; the other, UNBELIEF. The Word of God is true, or it is not true. God will do what he has promised, or He will not do it. His promises are reliable, or they are not reliable. Then the question is, Will we believe the Word of God to be true? or will we believe it to be false?

Genuine FAITH... means a decisive act of belief against all opposing elements and mountains of difficulties that may seemingly bar the way to an answer to our prayer.

I am the Lord that healeth THEE' (Exodus 15:26) is useless to those who will not accept and act upon that promise made by Jehovah. 'With His stripes Ye were healed' is worthless to the one who refuses to believe that all his sicknesses were healed at Calvary.⁴⁷

I am not moved by what I see or hear; I am moved by what I believe.⁴⁸

God intends every believer to live completely free from sickness and disease. It is up to you to decide whether or not you will.

By confessing God's Word concerning health, you will build the image of divine health in your heart until you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is

⁴⁷ Osborn, 51-52.

⁴⁸ From the biography of Smith Wigglesworth, a faith healer in the earlier part of this century, S. Frodsham, *Smith Wigglesworth: Apostle of Faith* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1948) 68. Wigglesworth was reported to have frequently said that it did not matter where he went in Scripture for a text, he nearly always ended up preaching that the Lord not only forgives all sin but heals every disease, Frodsham, 57.

*God's will for you! Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*⁴⁹

...faith is the clue. It's the secret.

Faith is what makes divine healing work.

Don't look at anything else. Just look at that Word. And that word says, 'by whose stripes ye were healed.' Past tense. Ye were. Then, if that Word doesn't depart from before your eyes, you're bound to see yourself well.

*If you see yourself sick [sic]. If you see yourself unhealed [sic]. If you see yourself getting worse [sic]. That Word has departed from before your eyes.*⁵⁰

Now, it cannot be denied that in the earthly ministry of Jesus healing and faith were often directly connected. When healing the blind, Jesus plainly said, "Your faith has made you well" (Mk. 10:52//Lk. 18:42//Mt. 9:28-29). The same words were spoken to the woman with a hemorrhage (Mk. 5:34//Lk. 8:48//Mt. 9:22). To Jairus, whose daughter was already dead, Jesus said, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mk. 5:36//Lk. 8:50). To the centurion of Capernaum, whose slave was healed, Jesus asserted, "It will be done just as you believed it would" (Mt. 8:137 cf. Jn. 4:50). To the Samaritan leper, Jesus said, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Lk. 17:19). To Martha, at the grave of her brother, Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" (Jn. 11:40).

Furthermore, the synoptic gospels demonstrate that Jesus curtailed his healing acts when there was obvious unbelief. In Nazareth, only a few sick folks were cured due to the villagers' unbelief (Mk. 6:5-6//Mt. 13:58), and the disciples' ineffectiveness with the demoniac boy was due to their lack of faith (Mt. 17:19-20).

In view of all these references, an important question must be raised. Was the meaning of faith in these instances a mental positivism or a firm belief that Jesus, who was physically present, was capable of performing the miraculous deed? If mental positivism is the correct definition, then the dynamics of healing should be operative with or without the physical presence of Jesus. On the other hand, if the physical presence of Jesus is the real object of faith, then no amount of positivism will suffice if he is not there. It would seem from the miracle stories themselves that the element of faith is bound up, at least to a large degree, in the actual, personal confrontation between the living, earthly Jesus and the people seeking help for sickness or demon possession. The gospels generally do not record Jesus as healing over long distances, and if Mary and Martha's words at all reflect the common response, then the immediate presence of Jesus before the one seeking help was crucial (Jn. 11:21, 32). Also, it should be remembered that these healings occurred

⁴⁹ Copeland, *Welcome*, 32-33

⁵⁰ Hagin, *God's Medicine*, 9, 11, 13

before the atonement at Calvary, so a healing theology that is argued from an atonement emphasis is anachronistic.

In the broader sense, faith must be defined as trust rather than positivism. Positivism is egocentric; trust is theocentric. Positivism makes faith itself the decisive factor so that the consequence of faith depends upon the human believer who is in control. Trust makes faith in Jesus Christ the decisive factor so that the consequence of faith depends upon God who is in control.⁵¹

The Notion of Carte Blanche Faith

Though not as popular among classical Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals as among positive confessionists, the notion of faith as the full range of discretionary powers to anyone who believes is very strong. Sometimes this kind of faith is illustrated as a blank check, signed by God, and awaiting the believer to fill in the amount. Consider the following expressions:

To tell you the truth about it, what I confess, I possess. That's all I will ever possess.... The law of that confession is that I confess I have obtained before I consciously possess it.

Faith is released from the mouth.... You can have what you say! In fact what you are saying is exactly what you are getting now. If you are living in poverty and lack and want, change what you are saying. It will change what you have!

How many of us have been taught that you have in you, ready for use, all the power, all of everything else you'll ever need to put you over? No, we've been taught everything else but that.

I told them that it was unscriptural to pray 'if it is the will of God.' If you put an 'if' in your prayer, then you re praying in doubt.⁵²

Statements such as these seem arrogant at first glance, but the biblical passages which are used to support such statements are equally shocking, especially if stripped of their context. Jesus said to his disciples, "If you have faith and do not doubt...you can say to this mountain, 'Go throw yourself into the sea, and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer'" (Mt. 21:21-22//Mk. 11:22-24). On another occasion, he said, "Everything is possible for him who believes"

⁵¹ It is not without significance that all standard Greek lexicons note the quality of trust as essential to a correct definition of *pistis* (= faith), cf. *BAG* (1979) 662.

⁵² Quotations are from Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland (as quoted in J. Fickett, 24).

(Mk. 9:23). In the Passover discourse in John's gospel, Jesus repeatedly makes statements, such as, "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these... And I will do whatever you ask in my name... You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (Jn. 14:12-14). "Ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you" (Jn. 15:7, 16; 16:23-24). What is to be said about such biblical statements?

In the first place, any sane interpreter must assume that there are some conditions involved, even in the presence of such unqualified kinds of statements. Otherwise, one who has faith could ask for the most preposterous things, no matter how ridiculous or destructive, and they would occur. Similarly, two persons might end up in an impasse if they should both ask in faith for two opposites. Thus, asking for "anything" must initially be qualified by what is intrinsically possible or what is moral. Even God cannot do things that are intrinsically impossible,⁵³ and he will certainly not do things that violate his moral character.

Secondly, any sound theology must also assume that even in apparently unqualified kinds of statements, the sovereignty of God is still in effect. To construe these verses to say that God grants human omnipotence to anyone with faith flies in the face of what the rest of the Bible says about God and humans. James rather pointedly says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (Ja. 4:3).

Finally, there is a special significance that is usually missed by faith healers regarding the Johannine passages which speak of asking "in my name" (Jn. 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24, 26). Faith healers usually understand this to be a verbal formula spoken out by the petitioner, i.e., "In Jesus' name I command that such and such be done." Such an interpretation ignores the Semitic idiom which denotes "in the interests of" or "for the sake of" or "in the authority of." The statements of Jesus, in their cultural and linguistic context, did not give some sort of magical power and were not intended as pure verbal formulae. Rather, to pray in the name of Jesus was to pray in union with Jesus, that is, it was to pray as prompted by the mind of Christ and in accord with his character.⁵⁴ This is nothing less than praying within God's will, and it is hardly a *carte blanche* faith. John writes that if anyone asks "according to his will," God hears them (1 Jn. 5:14). It is axiomatic that if one asks against God's will he/she will not be answered. Paul is quite clear that "God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Ep. 1:11).

⁵³ See the discussion on intrinsic impossibilities and the omnipotence of God in C. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 27-29.

⁵⁴ See the insightful discussion in R. Abba, "Name," *IDB* (1962) III.507; R. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) 636

The Reality of Christian Suffering and the Problem of Evil

Few faith healers go to the extreme of actually denying the reality of suffering in the world as does the religion of Christian Science,⁵⁵ but faith healing in general, and its more extreme form, positive confessionism, does tend to treat superficially the problem of evil. Serious questions regarding the problem of human suffering have been raised and addressed within the Bible itself, and they are no less real for the modern Christian, questions such as, ‘why do the righteous suffer,’ and, ‘‘Why is there death, even unexpected, premature and cruel death?’’ In the Old Testament, the Book of Job and the whole corpus of the writing prophets address these questions in one form or another. In the New Testament, the same questions are addressed from a Christian perspective in Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Peter and Revelation.

The Book of Job warns the reader away from the conventional assumption that evil is simply a matter of cause and effect. Job’s friends repeatedly attempted to find some cause in Job’s past life which would indicate that he merited his suffering (Jb. 4:7-9; 5:17, 27; 8:1-6, 11-13, 20; 11:4-6, 13-15, etc.). Yet the overwhelming testimony of the book is that Job was innocent. The author repeatedly stresses Job’s righteousness in the opening scenes (Jb. 1:1, 5, 8, 20-22; 2:3, 9-10),⁵⁶ Job never ceases to defend his integrity in the dialogue of the book (Jb. 6:24-30; 27:1-6; 31:5-35), and God himself vouches for Job in the conclusion of the book (Jb. 42:7-9).⁵⁷ Rather than evil being punitive, Job had the insight to see that evil consequences fall upon the innocent as well as the guilty (Jb. 9:22-24). Alternatively, good things also happen to bad people, as Jesus taught (Mt. 5:45; cf. Ps. 10:1-6). If this is so, then personal tragedy and suffering will sometimes happen simply in the order of things in a fallen world, and it cannot necessarily be blamed on personal sin or some other direct cause.

The fact is, Christians do suffer due to the reality of evil in the world, and this suffering includes not only persecution, but also illness and tragedy. If the atonement of Christ reaches ‘‘far as the curse is found’’ in the sense that all who believe will be insulated from the effects of a fallen world, then not only would Christians not be

⁵⁵ Christian Science, developed by Mary Baker Eddy in the 19th century, affirms the reality of mind, but not of sin, sickness, evil or death, W. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1977) 123, 130-132. What appears to be evil is only illusory. The closest thing to Christian Science within faith healing is positive confessionism, but while there are some similarities, the two movements are not to be identified with each other.

⁵⁶ The positive confessionists’ response to the Book of Job, i.e., that his troubles were the result of a negative confession (cf. Jb. 3:25), misses the entire point of the book.

⁵⁷ While it is sometimes argued that Job overstepped his boundaries by becoming arrogant in maintaining his innocence [though against this see the discussion in F. Anderson, *Job: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976) 50-52, 66, 245-268], it still cannot be argued that Job deserved the tragedy he suffered, which in any case, occurred before he had a chance to become arrogant in his suffering.

sick, they would not have thorns in their gardens (cf. Ge. 3:17-18). Such a view of the atonement has no explanation for the suffering of innocent children and no place for the suffering of a righteous Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-25). Furthermore, it misses the theological meaning of evil in the Bible.

Christians Can Be Legitimately Sick

Paul wrote to the Galatians that it was “because of an illness” that he first preached the gospel to them (Ga. 4:13).⁵⁸ Whether or not this illness is in any way connected with Paul’s famous “thorn in the flesh” is uncertain (2 Co. 12:7). It is often interpreted that his “thorn in the flesh” was probably a recurring illness of some kind.⁵⁹ Whether or not that is so, it is quite clear that this same Paul was on one occasion forced to leave behind his fellow-worker Trophimus due to illness (2 Ti. 4:20) and that Epaphroditus, the representative of the Philippians, also contracted an illness in his service to Paul (Phil. 2:25-27). There is no indication that either of these Christians were miraculously healed. We know from Paul that Timothy, his understudy, was frequently sick, and Paul’s advice was medicinal, not faith healing (1 Ti. 5:23). Such comments are not intended to glorify sickness. Rather, they are made simply to point out that even in the New Testament there were Christians who experienced illness in the ordinary course of life without any suggestion that they had a divine mandate to seek miraculous healing.

Faith healers, on the other hand, seem to imply that it is morally wrong to be sick, or at least it is an indication of deficient faith. Those who are sick have allowed themselves to be deceived or oppressed by the devil, and if they were truly up to standard, they would demonstrate their faith by getting rid of this sickness. To fail to do so is to indict God, the Bible and the atonement. Accepting sickness as a part of the order of our fallen world is, for them, reprehensible. To oppose faith healing techniques is tantamount to doubting God and denying Holy Scripture.

⁵⁸ The term *astheneia* (= weakness, sickness) may be taken in the more general sense of weakness, but frequently in the New Testament it refers to disease (cf., Mt. 8:17; Lk. 5:15; Jn. 5:5; Ac. 28:9; etc.), and the context here seems to suggest that it should be taken in the sense of illness. Most English translations certainly take it in this way, i.e., “because of an illness” (Goodspeed, cf. NEB, JB, NIV), “handicapped by illness” (Phillips), “because I was sick” (TEV), “bodily ailment” (RSV, NAB). It is quite possible that his mention of illness is connected to a problem with his eyes (Ga. 4:14-15), cf. D. Guthrie, *Galatians [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 119-120, though other suggestions have been offered as well.

⁵⁹ Arguments about the exact nature of Paul’s problem are fruitless. Various constitutional illnesses have been suggested or defended, such as, epilepsy, malaria, ophthalmia and convulsions, and other kinds of problems not related to illness have also been suggested, including depression, persecution, and unbelief, cf. F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 248. Defenders of faith healing usually emphatically deny that Paul’s thorn could have been a physical illness, but their contention seems motivated more by defensiveness than by exegesis.

God's Uses the Existence of Evil for Constructive Purposes

A factor that faith healing theology regularly ignores is that God has allowed evil to continue in the world, and apparently he does so because he can use it for a constructive purpose, that is, for a greater good than could be achieved otherwise. In God's divine plan, he predetermined to make creatures who would be holy and blameless, creatures who would be adopted as sons of God (Ep. 1:3-6). It is quite clear that this "good" involved a process, a process that involved choice and that was not merely a mechanistic goodness. This good involved freedom, and such freedom required the possibility of evil. One can theoretically imagine a world in which the neglect of hygiene would always be divinely thwarted so that disease could never prevail, but such a world would not be a free world. In the beginning, evil evolved from the abuse of freedom, and God has determined to tolerate it temporarily so as to protect human freedom, to provide the opportunity for moral choice, and to make possible the constructive and redemptive effects that can occur when people confront and cope with evil.

This is not to say that God is indifferent to sickness or that sickness should necessarily be tolerated or accepted as part of divine providence and without recourse. To the contrary, sickness as well as other evils provide the arena in which Christians can live out the altruistic love of Jesus (2 Co. 1:3-5; Mt. 25:31-46). Christians should be actively involved in making people whole, and incidentally, they may also feel free to weed their gardens. The notion that all sickness must necessarily and immediately disappear because Christ died is due to a lack of recognition of the present order of things, an order which includes all aspects of a fallen world, thorns, sickness, and death itself. Faith healers believe, along with other Christians, that the atonement of Christ corrected the problem of death. However, even faith healers do not teach that humans can avoid dying if they only believe.

The End of Evil is Eschatological, Not Immediate

Evil will come to an end, of course, but this end is eschatological. In the present age we have only tasted of this ultimate eschatological reality. Natural evils in the present life must be balanced against the promise of everlasting life which is incorruptible (2 Co. 4:16-18; 1 Co. 15:50-57). The entire cosmos has been affected by evil, and it awaits redemption along with God's people (Ro. 8:18-25). While the kingdom of evil has been invaded by the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ (Lk. 11:20; 17:20-21), and while believers have been rescued from the one kingdom and put over into the other (Col. 1:12-13), it is the second coming of Christ which will bring complete liberation (1 Co. 15:20-28; Re. 11:15; 14:1-5; 19:1-9). In the present time, even though in some sense the powers of evil have been disarmed (Col. 2:15), the battle still goes on (Ep. 6:12). Furthermore, healing itself is an

eschatological category (Re. 22:2; cf. Is. 11:6-9). The miracles of Jesus were signs of his power and promises of his total victory, but that victory will not be consummated until the end of history when he returns.

Problems in the Reaction of Some Evangelicals

As pointed out earlier, there was a polarized reaction among evangelicals over the issue of faith healing. Those from a Holiness-Pentecostal persuasion embraced faith healing as one of their theological distinctives. Middle-of-the-road evangelicals affirmed the possibility of divine healing under the sovereignty of God, but they rejected the theology and techniques of the faith healers.⁶⁰ Reactionary evangelicals denied altogether that God miraculously healed persons after the apostolic era. It is this latter reactionary position that bears closer theological scrutiny. At the outset, it must be conceded that some of the criticisms launched against faith healers were legitimate--criticisms of faulty biblical interpretation, psychological manipulation, and opportunism. Nevertheless, the assertion that there was a theological moratorium on miracles in general and healing in particular after the end of the first century was a regrettable overstatement.

The Idea of Sign-Gifts

The rejection of both faith healing and divine healing often goes hand-in-hand with a theology which interprets divine healing as one of the "sign-gifts," and this theology is most pervasive among, though not exclusive to, dispensational theologians. As such, sign-gift theology distinguishes between what are termed permanent gifts as opposed to temporary gifts. Permanent gifts are those spiritual gifts which are given to the church for all times, gifts which not only were exhibited in the early church, but gifts which are still functioning in the body of Christ today, such as, teaching, exhortation, mercy, evangelism, pastor-teachers, and so forth. Temporary gifts, on the other hand, are special gifts which are believed to have been functional only during the apostolic era, that is, the first century when the apostles were alive. They were thought to be especially significant in order to confirm the legitimacy of the apostles themselves and to initiate the message they bore. With the death of the apostles, such gifts ceased. Lists of temporary gifts, then, will usually include the gifts of apostleship, miracles, healings, tongues and interpretation of tongues,⁶¹ gifts which are believed to have died out at about the end of the first

⁶⁰ A distinction should be maintained between "faith healing" and "divine healing." Belief in divine healing is the faith that God can and does miraculously heal sick persons, even in modern times. Belief in faith healing is the commitment to a certain technique which moves God to miraculously heal sick persons. All who believe in faith healing also believe in divine healing, but not vice versa.

⁶¹ Some theologians will categorize other gifts as temporary, such as, prophecy, discerning spirits, the word of

century.

Theological Problems with Sign-Gift Theology

The essence of the problem with sign-gift theology is that it is based on inferences rather than clear biblical statements, and more to the point, inferences that are questionable. Even supporters of the theology are forced to admit, "...there is no clear text which states that there are temporary and permanent gifts."⁶² Rather, the discussion proceeds along the lines of a series of logical inferences, such as:

1. *Apostleship*: Apostleship is a gift restricted to those who had personally been with the Lord Jesus (Ac. 1:21-22), who had seen the risen Christ (Ac. 1:2-3, 1 Co. 9:1; 15:8), and who had been appointed as special witnesses of the resurrection (Ac. 1:8; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 10:39-42; 13:31). Apostleship, by definition, is a temporary gift; it is a "foundational gift" (Ep. 2:20), restricted to the era of the primitive church.
2. *Apostolic Signs*: The authority to work miracles of healing and exorcism was given directly by Jesus to the twelve apostles during his earthly ministry (Mk. 6:7, 13//Mt. 10:1, 8//Lk. 9:1-2, 6). These miracles were signs of authentication (Ac. 2:43; 4:33; 5:12-16; 14:3; Ro. 15:18-19; 2 Co. 12:12; He. 2:3-4).
3. *Certain Gifts Will Cease*: Paul asserts that the gifts of tongues, [word of] knowledge, and prophecy will pass away (1 Co. 13:8). These gifts, sometimes referred to as "revelatory gifts," are believed to have been functional for the teaching and direction of the church, particularly in the early period during the absence of any standard written New Testament texts. With the circulation of canonical New Testament texts, the need for such gifts expired.

Based on the above, the interpretation is advanced that since the gift of apostleship was temporary, and since the miraculous sign-gifts were given to the apostles to authenticate them and their message, and since other gifts were expected to cease after the oral stage of apostolic authority had been replaced with the written text of the New Testament, then the gifts of healings (as well as other gifts, such as, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and miracles) necessarily ceased when the apostles had died. This interpretation, of course, flies in the face of Pentecostalism, since it clearly argues that the very distinctives of Pentecostalism, including faith healing, are wrong.

Without entering into a full discussion of Pentecostal distinctives, it is only fair

wisdom and the word of knowledge, but this categorization depends upon the definition of such gifts, definitions which are more debatable.

⁶² McRae, 90.

to point out that the above inferences seem to smack of overstatement. In the first place, while it must be conceded that the apostleship of the twelve is a unique category and non-recurring, the New Testament also uses the idea and vocabulary of apostleship in a secondary sense. As such, Barnabas (Ac. 14:4, 14), Andronicus and Junia (Ro. 16:7), some unnamed brothers of Corinth (2 Co. 8:23), James the Lord's brother (Ga. 1:19), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), and Silas and Timothy (1 Th. 1:1; 2:7) are called apostles, probably in the sense of our modern words "missionary" or "representative." Paul, who does not categorize himself as one of the twelve (1 Co. 15:5, 8)⁶³ also describes his apostleship in terms of his missionary activity (Ro. 1:1; 1 Co. 9:2; Ga. 1:15-17; 1 Ti. 2:7, etc.). Furthermore, some who were not categorized with the twelve were certainly regarded as apostolic authority figures beyond the sense of missionary activity, such as, James (Ac. 15:13ff.; 21:18; Ga. 2:9) and Paul (2 Co. 11:5; 12:11). Thus, to restrict apostleship to the twelve only, or to say that apostleship is *ipso facto* a temporary gift given only to those who had personally seen the earthly Jesus, is an overstatement. Paul and James had seen the Lord (1 Co. 15:7-8), but it is unlikely that the others mentioned had experienced that privilege.

Again, it must be conceded that the gifts of miracles and healings indeed are to be especially observed in the ministries of the apostles. No one would wish to deny the obvious evidence of the New Testament. However, to restrict such gifts to apostles only is an oversimplification and overlooks some important exceptions, such as, Stephen (Ac. 6:8), Phillip (Ac. 8:5-8, 13), and Ananias (Ac. 9:11-12, 17-18), all of whom were used by God in special acts of healing.

Finally, the interpretation that the discontinuance of tongues, prophecy and the word of knowledge is related to the circulation or canon of New Testament Scripture is rejected by most reputable biblical scholars.⁶⁴ That which is "perfect" (*to teleion* = the completed thing) is almost certainly an eschatological category referring to conditions at the second coming of Jesus, and as such, cannot refer to events at the end of the first century. Paul's statement does not mention divine healing in any case, so the point is moot.

Historical Problems With Sign-Gift Theology

Associated with the theological interpretation that certain temporary gifts

⁶³ Without entering into the debate as to whether or not Paul was the twelfth apostle (which is coupled with the notion that the election of Matthias was a mistake), it is sufficient to say that few scholars would adopt such a position

⁶⁴ The comments of Paul Marsh are typical of the scholarly perception of this passage in which he says, "To suggest that perfection refers to the completion of the Canon of Scripture fails to find any support in the biblical usage of 'perfect', or in any of its cognate forms. Such an interpretation exists only by virtue of the need to explain the absence of certain *charismata* in many churches today," cf. P. Marsh, "1 Corinthians," *The International Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. F. Bruce (England and America: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986) 1377.

ceased after the deaths of the apostles is an historical buttressing of that viewpoint based upon the assertion that Christian theologians, beginning in the post-apostolic period, said so. Thus, it is often asserted that the so-called sign-gifts ceased near the end of the first century, and church history “proves” it.

The appeal to church history, however, is at best inconclusive. In the first place, it is an overstatement to say that accounts of healings ceased at the end of the first century. Justin Martyr (110-165 A.D.) said that “many of our Christian men...have healed and do heal”.⁶⁵ Irenaeus (120-202 A.D.) says, those who are in truth...do in his name perform [miracles]...according to the gift which each one has received from him. []Others, still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole”.⁶⁶ From the post-apostolic period comes a set of instructions for praying for the sick by “men who have received the gift of healing from God”.⁶⁷ In a collection of traditions generally admitted to be not later than the 4th century, those with miraculous gifts are counseled not to exalt themselves above those who do not have such gifts.⁶⁸ While the comment by Pentecostal theologian P. G. Chappell is overly optimistic that “there is also abundant evidence through the early Church Fathers to verify the continued widespread practice of divine healing,”⁶⁹ it must at least be admitted that in the Ante-Nicene Period there was no clear teaching which attempted to confine divine healing to the first century. As a general statement, it may be said that the common opinion since the time of Augustine was that certain gifts, healing included, were especially intended for the period of the early church,⁷⁰ but this fact must be balanced with the additional testimony that gifts of healing have never been totally absent from the church’s life. Those such as Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, John Wesley, the Waldenses, the early Moravians, the Quakers, and others have intermittently experienced such gifts.⁷¹

It seems fair to say that the testimony of church history is not as positive toward divine healing as Pentecostals would like it to be nor as negative as reactionary evangelicals insist. In any case, church history has no binding authority

⁶⁵ *Second Apology* VI.

⁶⁶ *Against Heresies*, II.xxxii.4.

⁶⁷ *I Clement Concerning Virginity* XII. The *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity*, attributed to Clement of Rome (AD 30-100), are usually placed in the “Pseudo-Clementina” and regarded as spurious. However, they are generally recognized as the earliest of the pseudepigraphical writings attributed to Clement, certainly in circulation by the 4th century (they were known to Jerome), and there are those who argue in favor of their genuineness, of. B. Pratten, “Translators Introductory Notice,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) VIII.54.

⁶⁸ *Constitutions* VIII.1.

⁶⁹ “Heal, Healing,” *EDT* (1984) 498. Unfortunately, Dr. Chappell, of the School of Theology at Oral Roberts University, does not back his assertion with any traceable citations.

⁷⁰ R. Spittler, “Spiritual Gifts,” *ISBE* (1988) IV.604.

⁷¹ R. Cottle, “Healing, Gifts of,” *ISBE* (1982) II.648.

for evangelical faith, though, of course, one must remain informed by it.

Divine Healing in the New Testament Church

It seems appropriate, in light of the problems attending both the faith healing movement and the evangelical reaction against it, that a fresh examination of divine healing in the New Testament be conducted. Using the discipline of biblical theology, it is in order to address the question of divine healing in the context of primitive Christian life and the writings of the New Testament.

Healing Cults in the First Century

At the outset, it should be recognized that the notion of divine healing was not unique to the Christian faith. Among the Jews, there were guilds of exorcists who professed to expel demons (cf. Lk. 11:19; Ac. 19:13-16). Whether the unnamed individual whom John observed expelling demons was part of such a company or some other group is uncertain, but at least he was not within the circle of disciples (Mk. 9:38//Lk. 9:49). Jewish tradition had it that God enabled Solomon to learn the skill of exorcism and that he devised incantations to cure distempers as well as to expel demons. (It should be kept in mind that sickness and demon possession were commonly linked in the general world-view of the times.) This alleged skill was passed down, and by the first century, was still acknowledged and practiced. A certain Eleazar of the first century supposedly expelled a demon in the presence of Vespasian (Roman Emperor, AD 69-79) and his army by uttering a Solomonic incantation and by putting a ring with a special root in it before the nose of the afflicted person, thus drawing out the demon.⁷² In the Qumran Scrolls, a passage depicts Abram driving out an evil spirit which had afflicted Pharaoh and his household, and other rabbinical stories of exorcisms are known also.⁷³

In the Hellenistic world, wonder-workers called *theioi andres* (= divine men) wandered throughout the provinces allegedly performing exorcisms and healings.⁷⁴ Apollonius, from Tyana in Cappadocia, was believed to have performed healings, exorcisms and even to have raised the dead.⁷⁵ The Greco-Roman god Asclepius was believed to grant cures to petitioners. In Corinth, for instance, the temple complex *Asclepion*, dedicated to Asclepius the god of healing, had facilities for bathing, dining, exercising and sleeping.⁷⁶ Temples dedicated to Asclepius were to be found in

⁷² Josephus, *Antiquities* VIII.2.5.

⁷³ J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 920.

⁷⁴ L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 29-30.

⁷⁵ C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1987) 83-84.

⁷⁶ V. Furnish, "Corinth in Paul's Time - What Can Archaeology Tell Us?" *BAR* (May/June 1988) 14-27.

Athens, Pergamum and more than 300 other places in the Roman world.⁷⁷ It was believed that the gods gave directions for cures in dreams, and the walls of such temples were adorned with the relics of limbs and organs that had been restored as well as plaques attesting the powers of the god. In one votive monument, a dreaming patient was depicted as being healed of a wounded shoulder when the god, appearing in the form of a snake, licked his wound. Asclepius was believed not only to have accomplished miraculous healings, but also to have raised the dead.⁷⁸

The presence of such healing cults would seem to indicate that early Christians, like modern Christians, were obliged to cast a critical eye toward faith healing claims. Clearly for Christians, though there were many gods and many lords recognized in their world, for them there was only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Co. 8:5-6).

Divine Healing in the Synoptic Gospels

No one denies that the gospels portray Jesus as a healer. The theological question before us is not, “Did Jesus heal the sick,” but rather, “Why did Jesus heal the sick,” and “What are the synoptic gospels trying to teach the church when they describe Jesus as healing the sick?” In the first place, it should be observed that Jesus did not attempt to effect cures in the sensational manner as the *theioi andres* of his time. Repeatedly, Jesus went out of his way to avoid public commotion. Mark’s gospel, especially, stresses Jesus’ efforts to keep his messiahship a secret. He forbade demons to identify him (Mk. 1:25, 34; 3:12), and he counseled many whom he healed to keep the event to themselves (Mk. 1:44; 5:43//Lk. 8:56; Mk. 7:36; 8:26; Mt. 9:29-30; 12:15-16).

He even charged his disciples not to share their experience on the mount of transfiguration until after the resurrection (Mk. 9:9). While Jesus did not generally avoid healing the sick in public, it is apparent that he did so on several occasions (Mk. 9:25; Mt. 9:23-26//Mk. 5:37, 40//Lk. 8:51; Mk. 8:23; cf. Jn. 5:13). Together, this profile suggests that Jesus sought to avoid public exposure when possible. His miracles of healing were not intended to sensationalize the public.

Healings as Signs of the Kingdom

Though the healings and exorcisms of Jesus were not intended to draw public attention to himself, there does seem to be a clear relationship between his miracles and his teaching about himself. His announcement in Nazareth that he was fulfilling

⁷⁷ H. Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia, Berlin and New York: Fortress Walter de Gruyter, 1982) 174.

⁷⁸ Ovid, *Fasti* 6:743-762.

the prophecies of Isaiah in his ministry certainly included the aspect of a healing ministry (Lk. 4:18-21; cf. Is. 61:1-2). The same connection was made in his message to John the Baptist: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Mt. 11:4b-5//Lk. 7:21-22). As such, the healings and exorcisms were indicators, especially to those with faith, that the messianic age had arrived and that the kingdom of God was even then dawning upon them (Mk. 9:35). John the Baptist’s question was, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus’ answer, in effect, was, “Look no further!” In his own words, Jesus asserted, “If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Lk. 11:20//Mt. 12:28). When Jesus authorized his disciples to perform the same miracles he was performing, he interpreted these healings as indicators of the kingdom of God (Mk. 3:14-15; Mk. 6:7, 12-13//Mt. 10:1, 7-8//Lk. 9:1-2, 6; cf. Lk. 10:19-20).

It is important to observe that primarily the miracles of Jesus in the synoptic gospels serve as attestations of Jesus messiahship to the circle of believing disciples. When asked by his enemies for a “sign,” Jesus bluntly refused (Mk. 8:11-12//Mt. 12:38-40//Lk. 11:16, 29-30; cf. Mt. 16:1-4; Lk. 23:8-9). Rather, he said that the kingdom of God does not come “visibly” (Lk. 17:20). Jesus’ miracles did not seem to impress those who were predisposed to reject him (Mt. 11:20-24//Lk. 10:13-15; Mk. 6:2-3; Jn. 11:47-50; cf. Lk. 19:37, 41-42). At the same time, it was the consensus of the apostles that the miracles of Jesus were indications that he was accredited by God (Ac. 2:22; 10:38-39). In this way, then, the healings and exorcisms of Jesus were signs for some but not for others. They were signs for the benefit of his disciples, but they had no compelling value for those who rejected Jesus.

Healings as the Overflow of Compassion

To view the healings and exorcisms of Jesus as signs only, even if only to believers, is to miss some critical evidence. In the first place, if the only value of Jesus’ miracles was to herald the inauguration of the kingdom of God, then it seems strange that Jesus so often avoided public exposure. It should also be recognized, therefore, that Jesus’ healings and exorcisms were stimulated by his compassion for people in the midst of their devastating needs. His ministry of both healing and teaching was closely connected with his perception of the crowds as “harassed and helpless” (Mt. 9:35-36//Mk. 6:34). He healed the sick because he “had compassion on them” (Mt. 14:14//Lk. 9:11; Mt. 20:34; Mk. 1:41-42).⁷⁹

⁷⁹ The aspect of compassion is often overlooked by those who are committed to the so-called “sign-gift theology.” McRae, for instance, can boldly say that the “healings by our Lord...were not for the purpose of relieving people from their suffering and sickness”, McRae, 69. This sort of statement flies in the face of what the gospels actually

Implications of Jesus' Healing Ministry for the Church

The question must also be addressed as to whether or not the healing miracles by Jesus and the apostles in Galilee and Judea have any paradigmatic value for the church. Regardless of when one postulates a beginning point for the church,⁸⁰ all would agree that in the ministry of Jesus there was the beginning of something new. The choosing of twelve apostles more than likely denotes the beginning of a new community of faith in some sense, just as the twelve sons of Jacob constituted the nucleus for the old community of faith.⁸¹ Similarly, just as the number twelve has profound theological significance, the number 70 does also.

Just as he did with the twelve in Galilee (Mk. 6:7-13; Lk. 9:1-6; Mt. 10:1-42), Jesus sent out 70 disciples throughout Judea to preach and to heal (Lk. 10:1, 9, 17). It seems probable that this number has symbolic value in that it represents the universality of the mission of Jesus. The common Jewish belief was that there were 70 nations in the world, based on the fact that the table of nations in Genesis 10 contains 70 nations.⁸² If this is so, then the preaching/healing tours of the twelve in Galilee and the 70 in Judea are to some degree paradigmatic for the church. Certainly some of Jesus' instructions to the twelve seem more in keeping with events recorded in the Book of Acts than in the lifetime of Jesus (e.g., Mt. 10:17-23). It is instructive to observe that some of the instructions given to the disciples for these preaching tours were later repeated as normative guidelines for early Christian outreaches (cf. Lk. 10:7; 1 Co. 9:14; 1 Ti. 5:18; *Didache* 13:1 and Mk. 6:13; Ja. 5:14).

The paradigmatic character of these tours by Jesus and his disciples seems to indicate that, at least in the broad sense of the word, a ministry of healing appropriately belongs to the mission of the church (cf. Mk. 16:15-18).⁸³ Early

say, and it allows the sign value of Jesus' healings to completely swallow up the compassionate nature of those same healings.

⁸⁰ Dispensationalists usually assert that the church only properly began on the Day of Pentecost. This assertion is grounded upon the belief in a sharp discontinuity between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God. The statement by Jesus in Mt. 16:18 is interpreted as being fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, cf. H. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 312-313. Others, particularly those from a reformed background, see a profound continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament. For them, the church is the people of God through the ages, Old Testament and New Testament, and Pentecost was not the beginning of the church, but rather, its transition from a national, Jewish character to a universal character, cf. L. Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933) 284.

⁸¹ Ladd, for instance, says, "By the acted parable of choosing the twelve, Jesus taught that he was raising up a new congregation to displace the nation that was rejecting his message," cf. G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 109.

⁸² The textual variants (70 or 72), far from weakening this argument, actually make it stronger. The Masoretic Text lists 70 nations in Genesis 10 and the LXX lists 72. Regardless of which number is correct, it is likely that the alternate number arose precisely because the symbolic value of the number was so clearly understood, cf. I. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke [NIGTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 415.

⁸³ While the textual validity of this passage in Mark's Gospel is highly questionable and almost certainly was not

Christian evangelists both preached and healed in Acts. At the same time, it should be recognized that preaching and healing are to be viewed with different relative values. The preaching of the gospel is paramount, while the healing of sick persons is secondary and, to judge by the accounts in Acts, dispensable. The gospel was always preached; healings were occasional and exceptional.

Divine Healing in the Fourth Gospel

It is quite clear that the Fourth Gospel contains at its very heart a theology of signs. The Beloved Disciple concludes his book with a statement of his central purpose:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30-31

John⁸⁴ was selective about which miracles of Jesus he chose to write, and by his own testimony, there were many of them at his disposal (Jn. 21:25). In a structural way, the Fourth Gospel may be divided into at least two major parts, a “signs section” (chapters 1-11, sometimes referred to by scholars as the “Book of signs”) and a “passion section” (chapters 12-21, sometimes referred to by scholars as the “Book of Glory”).⁸⁵ Unlike the synoptic gospels, which portray Jesus as performing miracles and healings frequently and in great numbers, the Fourth Gospel confines itself to only seven. It is in the “signs section” that John recounts these seven miracles of Jesus, four of which are healing miracles. They are:

- 1) Changing the water into wine (2:1-11)
- 2) Healing the nobleman’s son (4:46-54)
- 3) Healing the man who had been crippled for 38 years (5:1-9)
- 4) Feeding the 5000 (6:1-14)
- 5) Walking on the water (6:15-21)
- 6) Healing the man born blind (9:1-7)

part of the original document, it must also be remembered that it represents very ancient tradition (probably going back to at least the first half of the second century) and was canonized by the church.

⁸⁴ Traditionally since Irenaeus (c.AD, 130-200) the authorship of the Fourth Gospel has been credited to John the son of Zebedee, though in the gospel itself the author only refers to himself as the “beloved disciple.” For convenience, we shall preserve the tradition of calling the author John, and the tradition may very well be correct. On the question of authorship, see the introductions, and especially, R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John i-xii [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) LXXXVIIff.

⁸⁵ It is actually proper to say that John has four parts if one wishes to distinguish as structural entities a prologue at the beginning (1:1-18) and an appendix at the end (21:1-25), but for the sake of simplicity, most interpreters recognize the two major sections mentioned above even if not the others.

7) Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44)

Interwoven around these seven miracles are extensive blocks of teaching which call for faith in Jesus. It is clear that the miracles have a special value as signs, that is, as pointers beyond themselves to the true nature of Jesus. John begins his narration of signs in such a way as to suggest to the reader that there is a progression. The first miracle is plainly labeled, “This deed...is the first of the signs by which Jesus revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him” (2:11, NEB). Similarly, the second miracle is also labeled, “This was now the second sign which Jesus performed” (4:54 NEB). Not only did such signs lead his disciples to believe in him (2:11), they produced widespread faith in others (2:23; 3:2; 12:18, 42).

The Problem of Faith

Though it is clear that signs in the Fourth Gospel can lead to faith, it is equally clear that they do not necessarily do so (12:37). In fact, signs may even lead to a superficial faith, a faith that is not truly Christian faith. John emphasizes that although the desire for signs was great among the Jews (2:18; 4:48; 6:30), they did not always understand the meaning of the signs which they saw (12:37-41). So superficial was the faith of those who believed in Jesus on the basis of signs only, Jesus could not trust them (2:23-25; 12:45-56).

To the crowd whom Jesus fed, he remarked, “You are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill” (6:26). There is a play on the verb “to see” here, for in one sense of the word the crowd did indeed “see” (sensory perception) what Jesus had done (6:14). However, in another sense, they emphatically did *not* “see” (faith perception). “Seeing the sign” involves far more than merely receiving the benefit of a miracle! The invalid at Bethesda, for instance, not only did not come to mature faith in Jesus after being healed, he even had the audacity to report Jesus to his enemies (5:9b-15). Those who ate loaves and fishes had a superficial understanding of Jesus, and they seriously misunderstood the nature of his messiahship (6:14-15). When he disillusioned them by his statements regarding eating his body and drinking his blood, these same followers rejected him altogether (6:53-66). The same ones who at first were described as believing in Jesus (8:31) are later to be seen picking up stones with which to stone him (8:33-59). It is apparent in Jesus’ conversation with his brothers that he took a dim view of faith established solely on the basis of signs (7:3-6).

The only real level of faith that is acceptable is faith that accepts and fully trusts the self-claims of Jesus (6:67-69; 11:25-27; 16:29-31; 17:6-9, 20; 20:31). One of the closing narratives in the Fourth Gospel describes the weak faith of Thomas who refused to believe unless he “saw” (20:24-25), and in the sequel, John tells his readers, “Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have believed”(20:29)

Implications for Healing in the Church

It seems apparent that John had more than a casual interest in the viewpoint Christians held toward the subject of miracles. The community for which he wrote his gospel is unknown, but it might well have developed too strong an emphasis on signs as a basis for faith. In any case, the task of pointing out the ambiguous value of miracles for faith is certainly part of John's purpose. What does this say to the larger church? It at least says that the church must not give to healing the same kind of value that it gives to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus as the Son of God. Yet it also suggests that if John was concerned that believers did not put too much emphasis on signs, he at least did not espouse a view in which such signs were nonexistent in the church. If there were no signs at all in the continuing life of the church, then much of the Fourth Gospel would have been irrelevant in its attempt to demonstrate the superficiality of a faith that is based on signs only.

This interplay between performing signs and preaching the gospel may figure strongly in the correct interpretation of John 14:12 where Jesus says, "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." The first part of this statement surely seems to indicate that miracles would be a part of the life of the church, and the Book of Acts bears this out. However, the "greater things" probably refer to the wider response of faith to the gospel which would come through the preaching of the early church. Two things suggest this. In the first place, the miracles in the post-Easter church can never be called greater in either magnitude or numbers than those performed by Jesus, so the term "greater works" can hardly refer to simply a greater quantity of miraculous signs. Second, the idea of "greater things" is used elsewhere in John's gospel to refer to spiritual truths which are to be revealed about Jesus rather than more stupendous signs. It is a "greater thing" to understand that Jesus is the true mediator between God and the human race than it is to merely witness supernatural knowledge (1:47-51). It is a "greater thing" that Jesus has the power to give eternal life to whomever he wishes as well as to judge the world than it is that he is capable of healing a cripple (5:16-23). As such, then, the "greater works" which would be part of the life of the church would be greater than merely the performing of signs, which have an ambiguous value in any case. The "greater works" would consist of evangelistic fruit-bearing (15:7-8, 16, 26-27; cf. 16:7-11; 17:20; 20:21).

If this interpretation is correct, it is surely in harmony with John's larger theology of signs, that is, that believing in and understanding the self-claims of Jesus is far more important than witnessing miracles. Miracles are indeterminable for true faith. Knowing who Jesus is, with or without signs, is of the essence of true faith.

Divine Healing in the Primitive Church

The life of the primitive church, as described by Luke in Acts, continues the connection between the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of healing ministries. Notable healings were performed both by apostles and non-apostles. Early on a beggar who had been crippled for 40 years was healed in Jerusalem (Ac. 3:1-10; 4:22). Other examples of healings include Saul who had been blinded (Ac. 9:10-18), Aenas who was an eight year paralytic (Ac. 9:33-35), Tabitha who had died (Ac. 9:36-43), a man from Lystra who had been crippled from birth (Ac. 14:8-10), a demoniac young woman in Philippi (Ac. 16:16-18), a young man who tragically died in a late-night Christian worship service when he fell out of an upper window (Ac. 20:9-12), Paul who was bitten by a viper (Ac. 28:3-6), and the father of a state official at Malta (Ac. 28:7-8). Besides such specific accounts of healings, there are some general accounts of miracles and healings by the Hellenistic-Jewish evangelists, Stephen and Phillip (Ac. 6:8; 8:6-7, 13), as well as general accounts of healings by the larger body of apostles including Paul and Barnabas (Ac. 5:12; 14:3; 28:9). What Luke describes as “extraordinary miracles” were performed by God through Paul in which personal articles which had been worn or used by Paul were taken to the sick and demon-possessed so that they might be healed (Ac. 19:11-12).⁸⁶ Similarly, Peter’s shadow even seemed to be effective for healings when it fell upon the sick (Ac. 5:15-16).

Though mentioned far less frequently, there are brief allusions to miracles (which probably included healings) in the letters of the New Testament. Paul’s missionary work was characterized by “signs and wonders” in Asia Minor and Greece (Ro. 15:19), Corinth (2 Co. 12:12), and Galatia (Ga. 3:5). He mentions “workers of miracles” in his list of gifts to the Corinthians (12:10, 28-29). Hebrews contains another general reference to such miracles (He. 2:4).

At the very least, all these incidents seem to reinforce the paradigmatic character of the ministry of Jesus as a pattern for life in the primitive church. While it must be granted that the majority of such healings were performed by recognized apostles, such miracles were not exclusive to apostles nor to the special group known as the Twelve.

At the same time, it should also be recognized that divine healings were not forthcoming in all situations. Those who attempted to use the name of Jesus as a magic incantation were soundly beaten by a demoniac (Ac. 19:13-16). When Paul was stoned to the point of death in Lystra (Ac. 14:19-20) and severely beaten along

⁸⁶ These articles, quite literally “sweat-rags and aprons,” were pieces of material from Paul’s working clothes, the former being used for tying around the head to absorb perspiration and the latter being used for tying around the waist, cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 389.

with Silas in Philippi (Ac. 16:22-23, 33), there were no healings. The same can be said of Sosthenes, who was beaten in Corinth (Ac. 18:17). Paul was not healed of his thorn in the flesh (2 Co. 12:7-9),⁸⁷ and in fact, he first preached in Galatia due to an illness (4:13-14).⁸⁸ Paul even says that he “boasts” and “delights” in such weaknesses (2 Co. 11:30; 12:5, 9-10). Other Christians, also, were not healed, such as, Trophimus, whom Paul left sick in Miletus (2 Ti. 4:20), and Epaphroditus, who contracted a serious illness when visiting the incarcerated Paul (Phil. 2:25-27). Luke, apparently, still practiced medicine after his Christian conversion (Col. 4:14), and Paul advises Timothy as to a medicinal remedy for dyspepsia (1 Ti. 5:23).

Not only were not all Christians healed, the writers of the New Testament suggest that all miracles and healings are not to be credited to God. Jesus warned of false prophets who would perform signs and miracles (Mt. 24:24/Mk. 13:22), and Paul warned that the eschatological man of lawlessness would work counterfeit miracles through the power of Satan (2 Th. 2:9; cf. Re. 13:13; 16:14; 19:20). Paul took a dim view of those who “demand miraculous signs” (1 Co. 1:22), and Jesus said that in the great judgment, many would be rejected even though they had performed exorcisms and miracles (Mt. 7:21-23). Thus, while healings were part of the life of the primitive church, there is no reason to believe that healings were always expected nor that healing claims were accepted without critical inquiry.

Other than the miscellaneous passages mentioned above, which are simply

⁸⁷ Far more attention has been spent on deciphering Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” than it probably deserves. He does not describe it, so speculation cannot be verified. In the post-apostolic church, there were those who identified it with a physical illness (Tertullian, Jerome, Pelagius, Primasius) and those who identified it with persecution (Chrysostom, Augustine, Theodoret, Theophylact). Luther believed that Paul suffered from some kind of temptation. Other interpreters have built cases for headaches, epilepsy, convulsions, near-sightedness, malaria, depression, a speech impediment, hysteria, rheumatism, fever, and even leprosy, cf. discussions in R. Lenski, *I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963) 1302; P. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 441-448; Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, 248; Furnish, 547-550. The phrase *te sarki* (= in the flesh) coupled with the use of the term *astheneia* (= weakness, sickness, disease) may tip the balance in favor of a physical illness, and this idea is favored by several translators with renderings such as “a sharp pain in my body” (NED), “a physical handicap” (Phillips), and “a painful physical ailment” (TEV).

Unfortunately, the issue over the options of a physical ailment versus a non-physical problem has sharpened due to the fact that the reference becomes problematic for the faith healing movement, that is, for those who claim that it is everyone’s right to be healed given the sufficient quantity of faith. If Paul’s “thorn” was a physical ailment for which he prayed without success, then it is apparent that physical healing is not necessarily for everyone. Faith healing advocates, therefore, frequently deny that Paul’s thorn could possibly be a physical malady, though it seems that their vehemence is motivated more by preconceptions than by exegesis. Soren Kierkegaard’s wry comment is doubtless true: “This passage seems to have afforded an uncommonly favorable opportunity for everyone to become an interpreter of the Bible.”

⁸⁸ Whether or not this illness is in any way related to Paul’s famous “thorn” is debatable. Just what was the circumstance of the illness which necessitated his passing through Galatia is also unknown. Verses 4:14-15 might possibly suggest it had something to do with Paul’s physical appearance or eyesight. Similarly, the fact that Galatia was higher in altitude than the seacoast might have had something to do with it. In any case, Paul’s language seems to indicate that his illness caused him to travel to Galatia, apart from which he might never have preached there at all, cf. D. Guthrie, *Galatians [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 119.

descriptions of healings, and the two passages to be addressed below, there are no direct instructions issued in the New Testament regarding the practice of healing. These latter two passages, however, deserve special attention.

1 Corinthians 12:9, 28-30

In Paul's listing of spiritual gifts for the Corinthians, he mentions the charism of healing, which unlike any other of the gifts, always appears in a plural form, *charismata iamatov* (= gifts of healings). The precise reason for this plural is unclear. It may be that particular illnesses required someone with the gift for healing that particular affliction, or perhaps the plural simply indicates the great variety of sicknesses which were cured. It has also been suggested that the plural may indicate that a gift of healing is not so much a power exercised by the healer as it is a benefit bestowed upon the one who is healed, though the use of the singular *allo* (= to another) makes this latter seem less likely unless the victim was beset with multiple afflictions. However the plural is to be understood, Paul makes it clear that gifts of healings are not for everyone.⁸⁹

James 5:14-15

James offers the only specific prayer instructions for the sick in the New Testament. The one who is sick is privileged to call for the elders⁹⁰ of the church who in turn will anoint the afflicted with oil in the name of the Lord and will pray for healing. If the sick person has sinned, the sin will be forgiven also.

There is a difference in scholarly opinion concerning the use of oil in this passage. In the first place, anointing with oil had a long tradition in Jewish history, early on as a symbol of divine appointment in ordinations and coronations (i.e., priests and kings), and later in the treatment of wounds (2 Chr. 28:15; Is. 1:6; Lk. 10:34). Jewish tradition also records the custom of using oil in curing the sick,⁹¹ and Herod the Great was once given a bath in oil in the hopes of effecting a cure.⁹² In conjunction with this tradition, some would argue that there is a theological distinction between the two Greek words for anointing, *chrío* (anoint), referring to what is sacred and religious, and *aleipho* (= smear), referring to what is mundane and

⁸⁹ The use of the interrogative with *me* in the indicative mood introduces a question to which a negative answer is expected, and thus the question might adequately be translated, "All do not have gifts of healings, do they?", cf. E. Goetchius, *The Language of the New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1965) 229-230; also NASB.

⁹⁰ The term *presbyteros* (= elder) is a technical term in the New Testament for church leaders, and it functions more or less synonymously with the titles *poimen* (= pastor) and *episkopos* (= bishop).

⁹¹ *Talmud of Jerusalem, Berachoth* 1, 3a, 9 as quoted by B. Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter and Jude [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 59.

⁹² Josephus, *Antiquities* XVII.vi.5.

profane.⁹³ Because the latter of these two words is used in James, some interpreters believe that the use of oil here is medicinal and that James is prescribing prayer and medicine.⁹⁴ Others view the use of oil as representative of the healing presence and power of the Lord, a symbol of the Holy Spirit which gives healing.⁹⁵

Four things seem to swing the debate in favor of the ritualistic rather than the medicinal use of oil. First, James is giving a general instruction for sickness, and the use of oil as a medicine could only have been effective in a limited number of ailments, thereby making the use of oil as a medicine unlikely. Second, it is clearly the Lord who makes the sick person well, not the oil. Third, the distinction between *aleipho* and *chrío* is not as sharp as some would indicate. *Aleipho*, for instance, is used in the LXX to refer to ritual anointing (Ge. 31:13; Nu. 3:3), and sometimes the two terms are used interchangeably in the LXX (Ex. 40:13-15). Fourth, it is not unlikely that the use of oil is patterned after a similar use of oil as practiced by the Twelve when Jesus sent them out in Galilee on a missionary tour (Mk. 6:13). Jesus also used other visible symbols on occasion.

As such, it is appropriate to digress long enough to look briefly at the use of visible symbols since they appear in both the gospels and the Book of Acts. On different occasions, Jesus and/or the early Christians used saliva (Mk. 7:33; 8:23; Jn. 9:6), oil (Mk. 6:13; Ja. 5:14), and the imposition of hands in the act of healing (Mk. 5:23; 6:5; 7:33; 8:23, 25; 16:18; Lk. 4:40; 13:13; Ac. 9:12, 17; 28:8). It is doubtful whether these visible actions were considered to have any power in themselves, and certainly there is no hint of magical properties in such actions. Rather, such visible actions seem to be expressions of blessing or representations of the Holy Spirit whose power was sought. None of these actions seem to be indispensable, for apparently many more healings occurred without them than occurred with them.

Divine Healing and the Sovereign-Gracious Nature of God

The foregoing discussion has admittedly called into question the claims of the faith healing movement on the one hand and the reaction of some evangelicals on the other. It has pointed out the theological weakness of saying that it is every Christian's right to be healed on the basis of quantitative faith. Yet it has also pointed out the overstatement of those who wish to restrict miracles of healing to the first century. Finally, on the basis of the New Testament itself, it has suggested that divine healing

⁹³ R. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 136-137.

⁹⁴ D. Burdick, "James," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12.204.

⁹⁵ T. Leahy, *JBC* (1968) 11.376. The debate is apparently an old one, for John Calvin says of the passage, "I cannot agree with those who think that it was medicine", cf. *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. J. Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) XXII.355-356.

has a legitimate role in the ongoing life of the church. This latter affirmation is not an unqualified approach to divine healing, but rather, it is a constructive alternative to the other two positions, both of which are viewed as being too extreme. This constructive alternative, which will be examined further below, attempts to take seriously the sovereign-gracious nature of God, who has the power to heal the sick as a part of the outworking of his kingdom. At the same time, it views divine healing as exceptional rather than normative, rare rather than common. It rejects the claim that every believer has the unqualified right to divine healing, and it poses a particular framework from which persons who are sick may request God to heal them. Other than the passage in James 5, there are no direct instructions for the church in the New Testament regarding how one should approach God with respect to healing. Thus, one must develop the theology of healing along broader lines.

Sovereign-Graciousness

Since divine healing is a category of restoration, whether it occurs in the Old Testament, the New Testament or modern life, it cannot be divorced from the reconciling character and purposes of God. God always acts in sovereign freedom.⁹⁶ His power and will are not to be defined in terms of philosophical determinism, but rather, in the freedom to do everything he wishes so that he may accomplish his loving purposes. In this way, the Bible proclaims the sovereignty of God, yet it does not cancel out the free course of history. Furthermore, God's essential nature is holy love.⁹⁷ His love is not a permissive weakness, but a generous, self-giving, redeeming, judging and disciplining love. Divine healing ought to be viewed in light of these divine characteristics.

God is free to heal or not to heal. The determining factor has to do primarily with his loving purpose, not our sense of need. His nature is generous, yet at the same time, his purposes may not necessarily be accomplished by an immediate deliverance. Sometimes God allows seemingly unjust situations to continue for long periods of time because, in the end, God knows how these situations will fit into his ultimate plans (cf. Ge. 45:4-8; Jn. 9:1-3). Both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, there are times when God heals and times when he does not. This is not to say, of course, that Christians should expect to fully understand the purposes of God or be able to determine why healing is only sometimes forthcoming. God's ways are higher than ours (Is. 55:8-9). Just as it would be a mistake to apathetically assume

⁹⁶ For a balanced discussion of God's sovereign freedom, see especially D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 1.27-32. For a broad discussion as to the relationship of divine sovereignty to human freedom, see J. Feinberg et al., *Predestination & Free Will*, ed. D. and R. Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986).

⁹⁷ Bloesch, 1.32-34.

that God never heals, it would be a mistake to optimistically assume that he always does. In any consideration of divine healing, it is important to recognize that the deciding factor of whether or not healing is forthcoming rests with God, not with men and women.

This sovereign freedom of God is clearly displayed in sacred history. In the Old Testament, Yahweh is depicted as the Lord who gives, prevents and heals sickness (Ge. 20:17; Ex. 4:11; 15:26; Ps. 32:3-4; 38:2-11; 103:3; Is. 38:1-21//2 Kg. 20:1-11; 45:7). Prayers by afflicted people for healing appear in the Psalms (Ps. 6:2-7; 30:1-3, 8-12; 41). Elisha the prophet both raised the dead (2 Kg. 4:32-35) and healed the sick (2 Ki. 5:2-14). Still, these miracles, like other miracles, were exceptional and occasional, not normative or regular. None of the writing prophets were healers, though Isaiah instructed that Hezekiah should apply a poultice of figs to a boil for healing (Is. 38:21). John the Baptist, the greatest of all the prophets, never performed a single miracle (Jn. 10:41). Thus, the extreme positions toward divine healing of either “always” or “never” seem inappropriate in light of biblical history.

God’s Favor Toward the Helpless

While Christians must affirm the sovereignty of God with regard to healing, it is not necessary to think that God’s action is arbitrary, that is, that he heals or does not heal according to whim. The purposes and actions of God, while they may not always be clear to us, are not capricious. Rather, God’s actions are in service to his love. In his loving purposes, God demonstrates a favoritism toward the helpless and needy. He elected Israel and preserved her because he loved her, not because she merited his attention (Dt. 4:37; 7:7-8; 8:3-4; 9:5; Ps. 105:37; Ex. 15:26). He brought her out, sustained her, and healed her, not because she was worthy, but because it was his nature to do so. The pattern of salvation in the New Testament is grounded in this same sovereign-graciousness. Salvation is not to the one who earns it but to the one who believes in the God who justifies those who do not deserve it (Ro. 4:3-5; Ep. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5-7). The Christ who preached to the poor and healed their diseases did so out of God’s favor toward the helpless (Mt. 11:4-5; Lk. 4:18; 6:20).

Thus, when divine healing is understood in the context of God’s sovereign-graciousness, it becomes clear that healing is not a divine right but a divine gift. It is not earned payment but unmerited favor. If and when healing occurs, it comes as the gracious gift of God. The afflicted person who is healed can only be grateful, while the one who is not healed must, like Paul, understand that God’s saving grace is enough (2 Co. 12:9).

The Exceptional Nature of Miracles and Healings

If divine healing is to be understood in the context of God’s sovereign-

graciousness, then the nature of divine healing is not radically different in the New Testament than it is in the Old Testament. It is appropriate to recognize an escalation of gracious acts because of the inauguration of the kingdom of God,⁹⁸ but it is improper to understand the healings in the New Testament as being on different grounds altogether from the Old Testament. Just as grace and faith characterize salvation in both Testaments, gracious healings characterize both Testaments. At the same time, one should also recognize that the Christ-event gives far greater understanding of the gracious nature of God than was known previously, and in fact, his victory over the forces of evil provides a greater availability for his gracious acts as the overflowing benefits of his advent in the world (Jn. 1:16).

To the careful observer, miracles in general and healings in particular have occurred in greater numbers at some times than at others. The exodus and conquest of Canaan, the exploits of the judges and the ministries of Elijah and Elisha were all times of spectacular divine in-breakings into human history. On the other hand, during the lives of the patriarchs, the era of the writing prophets, and the post-exilic and intertestamental periods, God's activity was not of this same spectacular sort. The ministry of Jesus was filled with the most wonderful and breathtaking miracles in redemptive history as a sign of his authenticity and the inauguration of the kingdom of God. The early apostolic era followed in kind, though to a lesser degree. Then follows a more passive period in early church history. The ebb and flow of signs and wonders in the history of Christianity seems typical of biblical history.

It seems both more reasonable and more biblical to see miracles and healings to be the special in-breaking of God into human history at particular times so that his loving purposes may be accomplished than it is to see them as the norm which should always characterize the church at all times. Even the healing of Naaman in the days of Elisha occurred, as the ancient record reads, so that "...he will know that there is a prophet in Israel" (2 Ki. 5:8). If so, then miracles occur more at God's prerogative than ours. Divine healing, when it occurs, comes as a gracious act of the sovereign Lord who bestows such gifts according to his loving purposes and at times of his own choosing.

This approach certainly tends to dampen enthusiasm for healing campaigns, which tend to bill divine healing as though it were controlled by a human leader. Instead, it encourages believers to trust in God--with or without divine healing. When God heals, the believer can be thankful; when God does not heal, the believer must trust him.

⁹⁸ The essence of inaugurated eschatology is different than either realized eschatology or thoroughgoing eschatology. Inaugurated eschatology is the viewpoint that in the Christ event the kingdom of God invaded space-time history, but it will not be concluded until the personal return of Jesus Christ to the earth, cf. G. Ladd, "Eschatology," *ISBE* (1982) 11.130-143.

The Abba Relationship

Jesus introduced his disciples to a new intimacy with God in his use of the Aramaic word *Abba* as a divine address.⁹⁹ The word *Abba* means “Father,” but in the more colloquial sense of Papa or Daddy, and it was the familial designation of a child as it came to its father, or as Jeremias says, as it came “...confidently and securely, and yet at the same time reverently and obediently¹⁰⁰. Not only did this form of address underlie the opening words to the Lord’s prayer (Mt. 6:9//Lk. 11:2), it was adopted by Paul as the natural response of newly born sons of God through regeneration (Ro. 8:15; Ga. 4:6). A proper understanding of the *Abba* relationship enables one to approach God with the naturalness and simplicity of a child, indeed, just as Jesus himself said, “Allow the little children to come to me” (Mk. 10:14-15; cf. Mt. 18:2-4; Lk. 9:47-48).

In such a relationship, the Christian can be assured that the heavenly Father will only give what is best (Mt. 7:7-11//Lk. 11:9-13). At the same time, because the Father’s purposes are higher than those of the child, he will not grant every request that is made. God’s central purpose for his children is not so much that they will be happy, but that they will grow to spiritual maturity and become like him. In fact, it may seem to the child of God that he refuses more requests than he grants. Yet the child of God understands and is assured that the Father has his/her own best interests at heart.

Certainly it is always the privilege of the believer, as the child of God, to ask for healing because of the *Abba* relationship. One need never feel hesitant in requesting God to heal. Still, the choice is the Father’s, not the child’s. No more than a child can force the hand of a truly loving earthly father can the believer force the hand of his loving heavenly Father, for only the heavenly Father knows what is best. It is the indulgent father, the one who does not truly love his child and/or who wishes not to be bothered, who gives his assent to all petitions.

Martin Luther illustrates this relationship admirably when he speaks of praying the Lord’s prayer either “forwards” or “backwards.” Christians pray “forwards” when they observe the order of the clauses--first the hallowing of God’ name, then the coming of his kingdom, then the doing of God’s will, and only then the petition for personal needs. They pray “backwards” when they start with the seventh clause, thus seeking their own honor and glory rather than God’s. What people want who pray “backwards,” Luther explains, is deliverance from all misfortunes in order that they might live in happiness and please themselves.¹⁰¹ Luther is not of a mind to

⁹⁹ See discussion in J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Scribners, 1971) 61-68.

¹⁰⁰ Jeremias, 67.

¹⁰¹ P. Watson, *Let God Be God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947) 39-40.

eliminate the straightforward petitioning of God, however. If people omit the request for personal needs, this must surely imply that they suppose themselves capable of managing their own affairs and supplying their own needs without God. Would not such an attitude be the supreme self-confidence? The fact is, apart from God one can do nothing and one can receive nothing. It is precisely by petitionary prayer that Christians clearly and fully acknowledge this fact.¹⁰²

Healing and the Atonement of Christ

The above emphasis on the sovereign-graciousness of God does not deny a relationship between divine healing and the atonement of Christ, even though it rejects the notion that it is everyone's right to be healed just as it is everyone's right to be saved. In fact, a relationship does exist between divine healing and Christ's atonement in the sense that all aspects of redemption, whether the reconciliation of human wills or the reclamation of the universe itself (cf. Ro. 8:20-22), must be traced to the reconciling work of Christ in the cross and the resurrection (Col. 1:19-20). In this larger sense, the work of Christ is not only the expiation of sin but also the reconciling of all things to Christ's lordship, whether heavenly or earthly, spiritual or human (Ep. 1:8-10; 1 Jn. 3:8; He. 2:14-15). That reconciling work has already begun in the Christ-event, but it shall not be completed until all enemies are subdued before Christ, including death itself (1 Co. 15:24-26). In the end, there will be no more death, sorrow, crying, sickness or pain (Re. 21:4; 22:2-3a).

Healing as a mighty act of God may occur in the present as a manifestation of God's loving purpose at the request of his children. At the same time, healing and the removal of the curse are eschatological, and perfect healing will not be complete until "the sun of righteousness will arise with healing in its wings" (Mal. 4:2).

Between the first and second advents of Christ, believers live in an eschatological tension between what has already begun and what has not yet been consummated.¹⁰³ The old age cannot be said to have ended until the second coming of Christ, yet the new age has already begun in his first coming. This overlapping of the ages is well stated by Leander Keck:¹⁰⁴

Like other Christians of his time, Paul understood himself to be living between the 'already' and the 'not yet,' somewhat the way participants in a new

¹⁰² Watson, 41.

¹⁰³ The "already/not yet" tension of the present age has been addressed by a number of important scholars, such as, O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, rev. ed., trans. F. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964); H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 44-53; L. Keck, *Paul and His Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 78-81; A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 18-22, etc.

¹⁰⁴ Keck, 81.

administration live between election day and inauguration day. Already those who participate in Christ live out of the impending future into the present. The future is no longer an extension of the present, but an alternative to it. To live by participation in what is not yet fully here is to live by anticipatory participation; it is to claim the life of the future ahead of time and so get out of step with the present. Participation accents the present accessibility of the future; anticipation accents the futurity of that in which one participates. Participation emphasizes the already, anticipation the not yet.

Thus, the New Testament can speak of both the old age (present age) and the new, coming age (Ep. 1:21). The sacrifice of Christ was made so that humans might be delivered from the old age--from what Paul describes as the “present evil age” (Ga. 1:4). However, the death of Christ is to be considered as occurring at the “end of the ages” (He. 9:26), or at least in the final days of the present age (He. 1:1-2; 1 Pe. 1:20). Since the first advent of Christ, the new community of faith considers itself to be living in the final hours of the old age (1 Co. 7:29-31; Ja. 5:8-9; 1 Jn. 2:8, 17-18). At the same time, in Christ Christians have already entered into the future age in that they presently sit together in heavenly places in Christ (Ep. 1:3; 2:6), and they have tasted of the powers of the age to come (He. 6:4-5). In the present era believers struggle with the evil forces of the old age (Ep. 6:11-12), and they are waiting in hope while they continue to live out the remainder of the old age (Tit. 2:11-13).

This kind of dualism gives rise to a tension between what we already have in Christ and what we do not yet have in Christ. Such a tension is to be seen in a variety of areas in the New Testament. Primary among them is the New Testament treatment of the kingdom of God. The delivering power of Christ from Satan is to be viewed as a sign of the presence of the kingdom of God (Mt. 12:28//Lk. 11:20). At the same time, the kingdom in a final sense has not yet arrived. Satan has been judged (Jn. 12:31) but is yet to be vanquished (Ro. 16:20). The believer is beyond the power of Satan (1 Jn. 5:18) yet is constantly overcoming him (Re. 12:10-11). The kingdom is now (Lk. 17:20), yet it is also future (2 Ti. 4:1).¹⁰⁵ The sovereign-lordship of Christ has been established (Phil. 2:9-11; Ep. 1:20-21), yet he reigns in the midst of enemies which are gradually being defeated (1 Co. 15:25-26). In one sense, everything is now under his feet (Ep. 1:22); in another sense, everything has not yet been subdued to him (He. 2:8-9).

This New Testament viewpoint of the ages has great significance for the issue of divine healing. If the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” is true, then divine healing should be viewed in its context. God heals, not only on the level of his

¹⁰⁵ For a fuller discussion of the kingdom as a present reality as well as a future hope, see especially G. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952).

mighty acts in the Old Testament, but also on the level of the future age which is even now breaking into the present age. At the same time, as Paul so aptly puts it, "...outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Co. 4:16). The invitation to request healing is unmistakable (Ja. 5:14-15). Nevertheless, the whole creation continues in its frustrating bondage, waiting for the final liberation at the end (Ro. 8:18-25). Only at the close of history, when this body of death shall be swallowed up in the victory of transformation, shall sickness and suffering completely end (1 Co. 15:35-57; 2 Co. 5:1-8).

Is healing part of the atonement then? Certainly it is, but just as the believer "will live, even though he dies" (Jn. 11:25), Christians will ultimately be healed even though they may presently bear the marks of the present evil age. If God chooses to heal a sickness as an act of grace and a sign of the kingdom, we should rejoice; if he declines, we shall await the triumph of the end, for as Paul also says, "Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (Ro. 8:24b-25).

Faith -- With or Without Deliverance

Given the understanding that divine healing is a sovereign-gracious gift of God, Christians need not retain guilt or an impaired sense of faith when they suffer sickness. One can have a vibrant faith with or without deliverance. There is ample encouragement in the Bible for such an attitude, and an excellent example is the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist. John lived in the transition period when the powers of the kingdom of God were breaking in on the present age in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. John, meanwhile, was languishing in Herod's prison. After faithfully pointing his followers to Jesus, the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29-31), John began to have second thoughts while he awaited his eventual execution. He sent some of his disciples to inquire of Jesus if he were indeed the awaited messiah. Could such an expectation be a false hope (Mt. 11:2-6//Lk. 7:18-23)? Even in prison, John had heard of the miracles of Jesus, and in this inquiry, there was a veiled plea--if Jesus was really the messiah and performing such mighty works, could he perhaps remember the plight of his loyal herald?

After watching Jesus cure many diseases and perform many exorcisms, the disciples of John were sent by Jesus back to report. "Tell John what you have seen," they were instructed. Then, one more thing: "Tell John," Jesus said, "that the man is blessed who takes no offense in me." What did Jesus mean? He meant that there seemed to be a miracle for many in Galilee--but not one for John. True, God did open jail cells on some occasions (Ac. 5:18-20; 12:5-11; 16:23-26), but not for John. Like Christ in his passion, John had to be content with entrusting himself to God who decides justly (1 Pe. 2:23). Like Paul, he was obliged to consider God's grace as

enough (2 Co. 12:7-9). John was the man for whom there was no miracle, even in the midst of the powers of the kingdom of God. Christ called him to be faithful without deliverance and challenged him to accept such a call without offense.

Similarly, when healing is forthcoming, all believers should, like the grateful Samaritan leper, return to give thanks to God for his gracious gift (Lk. 17:11-19). When healing is not forthcoming, the afflicted person does well to realize that even the most adverse situations in life can become the foundation for an unshakable faith. With Job, they must take care not to charge God with wrongdoing (Jb. 1:22). With the three Hebrew exiles, they can stand firm in the teeth of desperate circumstances, with or without deliverance. "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace," they said, "the God we serve is able to save us from it. But even if he does not, we want you to know that we will not serve your gods" (Da. 3:16-18). With the company of the faithful, the one who is not healed can still experience strength out of weakness, and if necessary, die in faith without deliverance (He. 11:34b, 35b-39). With Paul, they can learn to say, "God's power is made perfect in human weakness" (2 Co. 12:9). They can rest in the confidence that nothing, whether life, death or distress, can separate them from Christ's love (Ro. 8:35-39). Their earthly bodies, which will be planted in the grave in weakness and dishonor, will be raised in glory and power on the last day (1 Co. 15:42-43, 54-55), as Paul also says, "I suppose that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Ro. 8:18).

Should Christians, then, as the children of God, ask for God to heal their sicknesses? Of course! Would not a child ask his father? "If any is afflicted, let him pray! If any is sick, let him call! The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective!" The New Testament hardly calls for stoic suffering. Yet if God responds, as to Paul, "My grace is enough," let there be no offense.