

## Healing & the Christian Life

### Part 1

(Submitted by Pastor Ernie Roberts towards completion of requirements for Ordination within the C&MA, January 2012)

Note: This sermon was delivered during a regular Sunday worship service at the Fort Nelson Alliance Church.

Few aspects of Christian history, practice and ministry provoke such feelings of awe, blessing, mystery and controversy as that of healing. For some denominations, spiritual healing is central to their theology and incidents of such miracles serve as a main source of their communal celebration and praise, while for other denominations, spiritual healing is largely looked upon with suspicion and the concept is rarely given much consideration at all. In the middle of those two opposite ends of the spectrum exist a number of theologies and levels of emphases on the topic of spiritual healing. What do you believe with regards to healing, and, perhaps more to the point, on what basis (experiential, biblical, theological, etc.) do you believe it?

In this two-part sermon series on the subject, we'll endeavour to develop a Biblically-grounded theology of healing and examine the scriptures, and reflect on Christian experience, in order to gain further insight into questions such as: 'What exactly is spiritual healing?', 'How does it relate, if at all, to medical healing?', 'Why are some people healed and others aren't?', 'Is ill health related to sin?' and 'How does healing relate to the Kingdom of God?

Though we'll delve more deeply into the precise meaning of 'spiritual/divine healing' in a few minutes, it is important at the outset of any exploration of a theological concept to define our term in a general way. For our purposes, the phrase 'spiritual healing' refers to the dynamic of God physically or psychologically healing a person by miraculous means, through the work of the Holy Spirit, often as a

response to our prayers. We are not talking about psychic healing or other forms of alleged healing such as therapeutic touch, etc. As an aside, as we develop a sound theology regarding healing we would do well to be aware (and wary) of the fact that there is a whole realm of spiritually-based practice known as Occult healing. When dealing with spiritual matters of any sort, including healing, the words of John give clear instruction: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1 John 4:1)

To begin our exploration into spiritual healing and the part it plays in our lives and in our world, I believe it is important to step out of the individual-oriented focus that often surrounds the topic and take a ‘big picture’ view. In other words, it will help us develop a balanced perspective on spiritual healing if we come to understand how it fits not only into our personal lives and into our church ministries but how it relates to God’s overall plan and purpose.

To summarize the Biblical story, we can state that God’s main purpose and plan is to bring all the world to redemption and reconciliation. Since man’s first sin and disobedience towards God, which brought both spiritual and physical separation between humanity and God, God has, through grace, sought to draw all things back to Himself. In the earliest chapters of Genesis, for instance, we know that God’s intent was that through Abram & Sarai “...all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3b). In the New Testament, this wide target of God’s hope and purpose is articulated in Mark’s Gospel as Jesus instructs the disciples: “And He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” (Mark 16:15). Notice that the all of creation, not just the human race, is to be transformed by the message of Salvation.

Though we often tend to think of this redemption and reconciliation in spiritual terms, perhaps citing Jesus’ phrase while talking with Nicodemus of “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” (John 3:5), to do justice to the Biblical

witness we need to acknowledge that God's working toward redemption and reconciliation involves *all* of creation, including the physical. This clear when we look at the beginning of the Biblical story where God creates the spiritual *and* physical world and pronounces that it is 'good', the middle of the story when we see Jesus die an actual physical death and be raised with a transformed, glorified body, and hear the hopeful words at the end of the story of God, in the future, creating a New Heavens and a New Earth. God's future intention with regards to our physical bodies is perhaps best clarified in that classic passage in Romans in which Paul proclaims the basis of hope for both the spiritual and the physical in Christ: "And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." (Romans 8:23). Despite the common focus on the lofty, ethereal images and words of Christianity, then, we can affirm, by clear Biblical evidence, that the physical is important to God.

In a similar vein, when the Scriptures speak of the 'Kingdom of God' they not only portray the reign and power of the transcendent God, but the effect *in this physical world* of that Kingdom. It is precisely this fusion between the heavenly and the earthly that forms the basis of the hope we pray in the Lord's Prayer "...Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven..." Spiritual healing, then, can readily be understood not as some random, mysterious, metaphysical freak incident, but as a prayer-based outcome of God's gracious Kingdom activity in the very midst of our world, of His overall desire to bring redemption and reconciliation to all creation. In her book entitled 'The Healing Power of Prayer', Bridget Meehan articulates the relationship between healing and God's Kingdom very well when she states: "As Jesus healed people who were sick in mind and body, he gave a clear sign by word and action of the power of God that had broken through into the world. In fact, Jesus frequently emphasized that His healing ministry was a sign that the Reign of God was breaking forth." (p. 7). As a case in point, in the midst of the great controversy that surrounded Jesus' healing of a demon-possessed man as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, our Lord stated: "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God,

then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Matthew 12:28). Spiritual healing is fused with the inpouring of the Kingdom of God and is a means by which God works towards redemption of all creation.

Now, it’s one thing to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that God is constantly working to establish His Kingdom of justice, peace and health in this world, it is quite another to face the challenge of recognizing that the Kingdom has (obviously) not come in its fullness. It is stressful, discouraging and sometimes very frustrating to realize that, as theologians often state, the Kingdom of God is ‘already, but not yet.’ We strain our eyes and hope for clarity and the full power of God’s Kingdom, yet, as Paul admits “For now we see in a mirror dimly...” (1 Corinthians 13:12). We are blessed to catch glimpses of the fullness of God’s Kingdom when we witness or experience spiritual healing, but our bodies won’t be completely healed, free from the threat of illness or redeemed until that glorious day when Christ returns to “...transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory...” (Philippians 3:21).

Just as we can rejoice with John’s recognition of Jesus as being “...the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29), but realize that we still struggle in this world with sin, and just as we proclaim with Paul that we have been: “...washed, (but you were) sanctified, (but you were) justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our Lord.” (1 Corinthians 6:11) yet still find ourselves caught up in things that make us feel dirty, unsanctified and guilty, so too can we celebrate Peter’s affirmation in Jesus’ atoning work for us on the cross: “...He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” (1 Peter 2:24) yet realize, and struggle with the fact, that we still presently suffer with physical illness and won’t be fully free from such threats until the Lord’s return. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, come!

So, we're in the midst of God's Kingdom, in the 'already, but not yet', but as Wayne Grudem acknowledges: "The healing miracles of Jesus certainly demonstrate that at times God is willing to grant a partial foretaste of the perfect health that will be ours for eternity." (p. 1063). Having seen how spiritual healing is related to the broader purpose and plan of God for the redemption and reconciliation of all creation, let's now move to examining these 'foretastes of perfect health', how we can best identify and define them and what purposes they play in our lives.

Founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) A.B. Simpson based his vision and ministry on what is known as the 'Fourfold Gospel': 'Jesus Christ our Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer and Coming King.' In his book by that title, originally published in 1888, Simpson outlines several points in terms of 'what spiritual healing is NOT', a few of which I'd like to explore here as a means of more clearly defining the concept.

Simpson begins by the statement "Divine healing is not medical healing." (The Fourfold Gospel, p. 33). He continues to distinguish between divine and medical healing by stating that: "It is the direct power of the Almighty hand of God Himself." (p.33). Clearly, the focus here is on God's ability to bring physical healing in supernatural ways, as evidenced in the Bible by the Prophet Elijah raising the widow's son from death (1 Kings 17:17ff) and by the fact that no less than 20% of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are devoted to spiritual healing. As important as Simpson's identification of God's ability to heal through miraculous means is, however, it begs the question: 'Is God limited to the miraculous to bring healing?' Just to whet your appetite for a deeper exploration into this and other related questions in next Sunday's sermon, could we not consider medicine, penicillin for instance, as being part of God's ability to heal?, and, even more provocatively, are there dangers in avoiding medical practice on the basis of believing that as good, faithful Christians, we should trust, and expect God to work only through answers to prayer and only through miraculous signs?

Simpson also makes the interesting statement that 'Divine healing is not prayer cure.' This seems astonishing because we usually associate healing with prayer. Simpson's point is, however, to distinguish between the effectiveness of God's power to bring healing and the temptation we might fall into in terms of believing that it is something inherent in our prayers that actually brings about the healing. Simpson warns of the following scenario: "If they can secure a certain quantity of prayer there will come a corresponding influence for good upon them, and if all the Christians in the world were to pray for them, they would expect to be healed." ('Fourfold Gospel', p.37). This is a very interesting point, as there is often a tendency for us to believe that the more people we can get to pray for us, the better the chance we'll be healed. Simpson is asserting, however, that though prayer is important, it is not the prayer in an of itself that causes the healing. God alone is responsible for the healing.

The statement is also made that 'Divine healing is not faith cure'. Simpson states: "If you focus on your faith, you will lose the faith itself. It is God who heals always. The less we dwell on the prayers, the faith or any of the means through which it come, the more likely we will be to receive the blessing." ('Fourfold Gospel', p.38). Similar to the matter of prayer, it is possible for us to put too much emphasis on the nature, strength and status of our faith in the realm of healing, thereby being distracted from God and Christ as the source of healing. Though certainly we recognize the stories of healing in which Jesus declares to the person: "...your faith has made you well.", as in the case of the single leper who returned to thank Jesus (Luke 17:19), there are other instances where the faith of the recipient of the healing is less important, if present at all. The story of Jesus healing the man at the pool of Bethesda, in John chapter 5, for instance, is peculiar in this sense. There was a pool in Jerusalem (v.1) which was believed by many to have healing powers, so one man, who had been ill for 38 years (v.5), joined others who were crippled and infirm by the pool hoping to be healed by the waters that were occasionally stirred up by the wings of angels (vss.3-4). It seems that Jesus has some deep insight into this man's heart and mind, as we'll explore in more depth next week, as He asks "Do you want to be healed?" (v.6).

Interestingly, there is no 'yes' or 'no' answer, but rather some diversionary rant about not being able to make into the pool. (v.7). Though the man obviously has faith in the waters in the pool, he doesn't seem to have any faith in Jesus and certainly doesn't pray to God for healing, so when Jesus declares: "Arise, take up your pallet, and walk." (v.8) it is clear that the healing didn't occur on the merit of the man's faith. Recognizing the relative importance of faith can be wonderfully liberating for those who, in addition to their physical or mental illness, feel faith-less or trampled under the foot of discouragement. Consider how this good news is articulated in the passage from Isaiah 61 that Jesus uses as the scripture from which to launch His own ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the favourable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19). There is no reference at all to the faith, or lack thereof, of the recipients of the liberation or healing, of the captives, of the blind, of the oppressed. God is on the move and there is healing in His purpose and in His Kingdom.

Now that we've seen how healing relates to the larger picture of God's redemption of the world and have come to understand better what healing is, and what it is not, I'd like to conclude this sermon with examining several of the purposes that healing has. Scholar Wayne Grudem lists four purposes that we'll explore further. **First** of all, the healings of Jesus provided signs, or visible proof, to give credibility and authenticity to His ministry and mission; to show that the Kingdom of God was, at least in part, present. When Jesus meets resistance from some of the religious leaders (the 'Scribes') after He proclaimed "Take courage my son, your sins are forgiven." (Matthew 9:2b) as part of the overall healing of the paralytic in Matthew's gospel, for instance, Jesus challenges the Scribes by stating: "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say 'Rise, and walk'? "But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"- the He said to the paralytic "Rise, take up your bed and go home." (vss. 4b-6). A **second** purpose healing

plays is to bring health and well-being to the recipient and to show the wonderful caring and compassionate heart of God. Most people have a deep, innate sense of when things are out of sorts physically and mentally and when healing is experienced there is a wonderful sense not only of liberation and of relief, but of knowing that things have been brought into alignment with what God had intended all along. Frequently, this results in ecstatic celebration. Think of the lame beggar who was healed as part of Peter and John's ministry as recorded in the book of Acts, chapter 3. As the book records: "But Peter said: "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene- WALK!" And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. And with a leap, he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God!!" (Acts 3:6-8).

**Thirdly**, healing enables people to pursue their ministries and missions. One biblical example of this is when Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law as recorded in Matthew 8. Jesus visits the woman, who was sick with fever, "And He touched her hand and fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him." (v.15). With her physical impediments gone, the woman was able to serve her Lord more effectively. Though out the scriptures and as evidenced by Christian experience, when God heals people it energizes them to service and ministry. The **fourth** purpose of healing that Grudem identifies is that incidents of healing provide us, individually and as a community, with opportunities to glorify God for His amazing, supernatural, compassionate ability to heal us of our brokenness. Like the lame beggar in Acts 3 we want to cry out and sing and dance because of the liberty God has brought us. As we know from the Psalms in the Old Testament, healing becomes a central source of our praise and worship of God. The praise that comes on the heels of healing is dynamic. We know, for instance, especially in Mark's gospel, that Jesus had a hard time urging recipients of His healing power to keep their celebration to themselves until it was the correct time to announce His being the Messiah. Word spread and the skies were filled with the sounds of hope, of actions, voices and songs all proclaiming the glory and power of God.