

RECONCILIATION AND HEALING

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1. **21** [The Risen Jesus] Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” **22** And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (John 20:21ff)

Luke 15

2. “There was a man who had two sons.
 - 2.1. **12** The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, **give me** my share of the estate.’
 - 2.2. So he **divided** his property between them.
3. **13** “Not long after that, the younger son **got together** all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.
 - 3.1. **14** After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.
 - 3.2. **15** So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.
 - 3.3. **16** He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.
4. **17** “When **he came to his senses**, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’
 - 4.1. **18** I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.*’
 - 4.2. **20** So he got up and went to his father.
5. “But while he was still a long way off, **his father saw him** and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.
 - 5.1. **21** “The son said to him, ‘*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*’
 - 5.2. **22** “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick!
 - i. Bring the best robe and put it on him.
 - ii. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
 - iii. **23** Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.
 - iv. **24** *For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*’ So they began to celebrate.

HEALING

6. The apostolic church considered the mission of healing an important aspect of its mission
 - 6.1. Not only through the miracles attributed to the apostles
 - 6.2. But especially through the anointing of the sick

'And they [the Twelve] were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them' (Mark 6:13).

"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him" - James 5:14–15
 - 6.3. As we know, the anointing of the sick became one of the seven sacraments in the Catholic Church and has been performed ever since.
7. **Can we still pray for healing when**
 - 7.1. Theologically the church became sceptical about whether healing still is part of what faith is about
 - 7.2. Scientifically we are sceptical about the very notion of anything that might be seen as an exception to the law and regularities of nature
 - 7.3. Practically, nobody in Christianity would say to anyone to pray for healing and not go to see a doctor today.
8. Over against this, we have 2 significant considerations to make
 - 8.1. The church has restored the original meaning of the the anointing of the sick: for healing (St Paul's) – what do we do/hope when we come to receive it?
 - 8.2. People keep praying for healing - Prayer is the most common healing practice used outside conventional medicine in the United States.
9. **Do these two factors (the restoration of the anointing + widespread prayer for healing) mean that**
 - i. **we can believe that Jesus performed miracles literally?**
 - ii. **we can expect miracles of healing today?**

Jesus' miracles

10. The historicity and authenticity of the miracle traditions is very well established
11. The historical Jesus was thought by his contemporaries, including both supporters and critics, to be an effective healer and exorcist. (17)
12. Non-Christian sources, both Jewish and pagan, also depict Jesus as a figure famed for his ability to heal and exorcise
 - 12.1. His healings and exorcisms the subject of the earliest anti-Christian polemics of which we have a record, those of **Trypho** and **Celsus** (found in Justin Martyr and Origen respectively), who seem to have access to traditions about Jesus independent of the gospels. Both critics attacked the character of Jesus' miracles and his motivations in performing them, but neither claimed that they had not taken place.
 - 12.2. Criticisms of a similar kind, in which Jesus' miracles were clearly being equated with the miracles of magicians, seem to lie behind the accusations that provoked the earliest work of Christian apologetic literature, that of **Quadratus of Athens** (in Eusebius, The History of the Church, 4.3).

- 12.3. The healings and exorcisms also appear to be alluded to in **Josephus'** Testimonium Flavianum (found in Jewish Antiquities, 18.63–4), or rather in the likely kernel of authentic material that lies at the heart of this much edited passage by the famous Jewish historian.
- 12.4. Indeed, it is fair to say that if Jesus was famous for anything amongst his contemporaries, it was for his healing miracles and exorcisms:
- i. the unidentified exorcists who are recorded as using Jesus' name in Mark 9:38 and Luke 9:49,
 - ii. and the tradition in Acts 19:13 that the seven sons of Sceva attempted something similar, point to the antiquity of this estimation. (19)
13. BUT First, the fact that Jesus was thought to have been a healer and exorcist in his own lifetime does not, in itself, set him apart from his contemporaries. Others were also believed to have such abilities.
- 13.1. For example, from literary sources of the time we hear of **Eleazar**, a Jewish exorcist who carried out an exorcism in front of Vespasian (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, 8.45–8), and an unnamed Syrian exorcist and Chaldean healer who were reputed to have done similar things (Lucian, Lover of Lies, 16, 11).
- Miracles were widely believed in [around the time of Jesus](#). Gods and [demigods](#) such as
- [Heracles](#) (better known by his Roman name, [Hercules](#)),
 - [Asclepius](#) (a Greek physician who became a god) and
 - [Isis](#) of Egypt all were thought to have healed the sick and overcome death (i.e. have raised people from the dead).^[30]
 - Some thought that mortal men, if sufficiently famous and virtuous, could do likewise; there were myths about philosophers like [Pythagoras](#) and [Empedocles](#) calming storms at sea, chasing away pestilences, and being greeted as gods,^[30] and similarly
 - some Jews believed that [Elisha](#) the Prophet had cured lepers and restored the dead.^[30]
 - The achievements of the 1st century [Apollonius of Tyana](#), though occurring after Jesus' life, were used by a 3rd-century opponent of the Christians to argue that Christ was neither original nor divine ([Eusebius of Caesaria](#) argued against the charge).^[31]
- 13.2. It is clear that a number of those who inhabited the first-century world, both Jew and gentile, were believed to be able to carry out such things.
- 13.3. Indeed, there were many people who 'in return for a few coins . . . will expel demons from men, and dispel diseases' by miraculous means (Celsus in Origen, Contra Celsum, 68).
- 13.4. Shrines and statues that were believed to effect miraculous cures were found everywhere.
- i. A cursory examination of the literary and archaeological records of the cult of Asklepios indicates as much – indeed, according to Josephus, even Jews could, on occasion, avail themselves of such sites (Josephus, The Jewish War, 2.21.6 and Jewish Antiquities, 18.2.3).
 - ii. Claims could be made about the healing powers of some of the most unlikely of subjects – for example, Athenagoras, in his A Plea for the Christians (26), informs us that a statue of Peregrinus, an apostate Christian ridiculed by Lucian of Samosata as a religious charlatan, was regarded as having curative powers.
- 13.5. The gospels themselves are insistent that Jesus did not have a monopoly on such miraculous activity. They record Jesus himself saying as much.
- 'If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?' (Matthew 12:27, Luke 11:19 and Mark 13:22; Matthew 24:24).
14. There was considerable diversity in the nature and extent of belief in the supernatural in antiquity, and there was also significant scepticism too.

- 14.1. The New Testament itself contains evidence of some scepticism about some kinds of miracles.. **The gospel of John**, for example, although containing a number of healings, does not contain any exorcisms at all.
- 14.2. The author evidently did not share the same notions about demons as did the other three gospel writers and, indeed, the historical Jesus himself. (21)
- 15. Jesus was not thought by his contemporaries solely to provide resolutions to the social and personal problems of meaning created by illness (the social experience of a sickness). He was also thought to cure disease (the physical experience of a sickness). [...] the blind, it is claimed, received their sight, the lame walked, people with leprosy were cleansed, and the deaf heard. (23)

However

- 16. Scholars should not assume that establishing the historicity of the miracle traditions necessarily implies that Jesus carried out what would usefully be called a miracle by a modern reader (24)
- 17. The judgement of a twenty-first-century person on what exactly constituted an event that is inexplicable would be markedly different [from what might have been considered inexplicable in the 1st century]
- 18. And in purely medical terms, it is very **difficult even just to establish what kind of disorders were suffered by those whom Jesus healed.** As has long been noted, the gospels are notoriously short on detailed clinical description and medical terminology. [...] We can only guess at what is being described. The descriptions of the predicaments of those healed adhere to clear oral and redactional conventions in their depiction of symptoms. [...] Given that it is so difficult for us to have any real idea of the nature of the symptoms that those seeking healing presented to the historical Jesus, it seems unreasonable to claim that we can know anything much about the specific aetiologies of these complaints (and, of course, a specific symptom, such as blindness, can have a myriad of possible causes, physical, organic as well as psychological)
- 19. There is a sense in which we can say that
 - 19.1. Whether or not Jesus did *cure* people
 - 19.2. **He always *healed* them**
 - 19.3. Distinction between curing and healing.
 - i. Curing is ‘the strategy of destroying or checking a pathogen, removing a malfunctioning or non-functioning organ, restoring a person to health or well-being’ (Pilch 2000, p. 153),
 - ii. whereas healing he defines as ‘the restoration of meaning to life. It is the strategy of restoring social and personal meaning for life problems that accompany human health misfortunes.’
- 20. This distinction might seem far-fetched but it is important
 - 20.1. First of all, it does not deny that **Jesus might have *cured* some people**, that is restored the physical health of people
 - 20.2. At a time when medicine was very primitive and mostly ineffective (cf. woman with blood hemorrhage) people ordinarily seeked for cures in spiritual healers, shrines etc...
 - 20.3. Today we would always go to see a doctor first because medicine has become (and will become more and more) able to *cure*
- 21. And yet we know that *curing* is not enough
 - 21.1. Restoration of health is **not a purely physiological mechanism**
 - 21.2. Significantly we talk about **battle** against cancer – the will to live on, fight, is acknowledged to play an essential part in the process

- 21.3. It is not purely *psychological*
 - 21.4. It is what is called *psychodynamic*: the close intertwining of mind and body that psychosomatic medicine has discovered is part of a larger whole
 - 21.5. This is where *spiritual healing* plays an essential role.
- 22. Spiritual healing can be seen as **healing facilitated by spiritual practices** (such as meditation and prayer).
- 23. We need to feed our bodies, souls and psyches, giving ourselves resources to deal effectively with the many complex issues, emotions and interactions that occur in the course of health and healing.
- 24. More and more studies are showing that this is helpful. Through various means, ranging from art therapy to guided imagery, writing a journal and prayer, we help create a place for ourselves to explore the meaning of health and illness, and perhaps to discover new pathways to healing.
- 25. To be clear we are not talking about **placebo** effect here – although even placebo has been shown to be inexplicably effective (as seen especially from its opposite, the *nocebo* effect)
- 26. It is rather a deeper appreciation of the way in which illness and health depend on factors which are not just physiological, but inseparably
 - 26.1. Psychological
 - 26.2. Emotional
 - 26.3. Spiritual
 - 26.4. And social
- 27. This is why curing the physical aspects of illnesses is of limited impact or, on the contrary, successful only when the other aspects are tackled simultaneously.