Healing: “Signs of Healing to Follow”
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Text: Mark 16:9-20

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To begin, I want to say that I know that the text I have chosen is not without controversy in scholarly circles. Moreover, I realize that this section of scripture is not found in some of the earliest manuscripts of Mark’s gospel. And yet my convictions regarding God’s providence over the preservation and collection of the canonical writings, combined with the fact that the message of the text seems consistent with other portions of the scripture, settles the question for me. I am led, therefore, to declare with authority “that signs of healing will follow” those who are believers in Christ.

The Question Came

It was bound to happen. I am not sure why it the question didn’t come earlier. For I have served many years in ministry among people who faced cancer, and other debilitating diseases. But the query did come; when it came it was as loaded as a sagging diaper on an untended baby. I was not on my home court, if you will, when the question was raised. In other words, I wasn’t in my church office, surrounded by all my theological tomes, my degrees on the wall, and comfortably seated in my leather office chair a full six inches higher than my visitor. No, when she asked the question I was in her living room, the trappings of one fighting a terminal illness all around. Seated next to her husband and my friend Lyle, who was fighting Esophageal Cancer, Sister Sharon, asked:

“Do you believe in healing?”

The question caught me off guard, and I hesitated a bit. I knew that if I answered, “NO” it would dash her waning hope. I also felt that answering in this manner might make me look like some kind of heretic. I have to be honest, I would have been partially right in answering “No.” For I do not believe the claims of some who teach that all one must do is muster the conviction that he or she will be healed, and then God is bound to do as they wish.

On the other hand, I knew that if I answered the question with a Sunday school answer, “Yes, Praise the Lord! I believe in healing,” then the follow up question would have no doubt been, “Why doesn’t God heal my dear husband of forty-seven years?”

On this particular day, in the living room of my friend and parishioner, Lyle Shuler, I think his wife let me off easy, with a qualified answer which went something like:

“I believe God can heal, but I don’t understand why he doesn’t always do it.”

The question has stayed with me, “Do you believe in healing?” Had it not been for Dr. Sebastian’s generous invitation to consider, doing a sermon on healing as a part of a series covering themes on our chapel stained glass window, I would have continued, perhaps, to put off a more in depth look at our movement’s teaching on what has been and should continue to be an important doctrinal practice of the Church of God Reformation Movement.
Witnesses to God’s Healing Power

Our founders were part of the Restorationist push in the mid to late nineteenth century. These pious men and women sought to reform the church using as a model the early apostolic church. These early pioneers believed that the glory of the apostolic church could again be a reality among God’s people today. They believed that the power of the Holy Spirit which produced signs and wonders in the days of Jesus and the apostles would do the same today. If God had given early church leaders like Peter and Paul the power to heal, then it must be available to us as well, they believed. It is no wonder that those who commissioned this window to be placed here in the chapel included a decorative frame depicting Christ’s power to heal.

Church of God pioneers went forth preaching about healing; they also practiced the laying on of hands to heal. The historic record demonstrates that as a result, many testified to being healed and helped. In Dr. Froese’s excellent book, *People of Faith in Turbulent Times*, (2010) one can read about the stories of how God worked among his people in Eastern Europe and in Russia.

Or take for example, Enoch E. Byrum, one time editor of the Gospel Trumpet. He was one of the early pioneers who claimed that God had blessed him with the gift of healing. Byrum travelled the country preaching a Church of God message and laying hands on the sick.¹ Again, there were many who attended who would subsequently testify to receiving a healing touch from God. I once met a man who had been a part of one of Byrum’s healing meetings in Springfield, Ohio. In our discussion he acknowledged the efficacy of these healing campaigns.

Dr. James Massey discusses the work of Emma Crosthwaite. Like her sister Lena, she testified of healing of Tuberculosis after Elder George Lorton prayed for her. According to Massey, Sister Emma had heard the Lord speak to her urging her to “Call for the Elders of the church.” Sharing this message with her sister, Lena, the latter explained that the passage was found in the scripture. After Lorton’s prayer of healing, Emma and her husband were converted and began a ministry of healing.²

Speaking of healing, several of you testified in our chapel service today about your own experience of God’s healing. These are authentic testimonials to God’s work in your life and in the lives of those you love.

By 1960, some fifteen years or so before the window was installed, it was an open question whether or not healing would continue to be a central tenet of church of God, teaching and practice. In Dr. Merle Strege’s *I Saw the Church* the author states that by the beginning of the sixth decade of the twentieth century the practice of healing was not being emphasized as a “core doctrinal practice” as it had been by early movement leaders. As evidence of this fact, Strege, claims that Eugene Sterner, author of “We Reach Our Hands in Fellowship,” a tract written to introduce people to the Church of God, did not include healing as a unique doctrinal practice. The doctrinal landscape of the movement hand changed.³

Development Doctrine

Making use of Strege’s work in tracing the development of the doctrine of healing, we learn that over time, the convictions about healing among members of the church became more nuanced. Consider the case of Clarence and Nora Hunter who lost their twin daughters, Mary and Martha, and this despite the fervent prayers of the faithful gathered at Yellow Creek Lake Campground in northern Indiana. Another example of one of the key leaders of the movement having to suffer through a difficult impairment without the benefit of a healing intervention was Charles Naylor, the church of God hymn writer. As the movement matured, more and more room was being made for the idea that suffering had merit as in the words of a song penned by Clarence Hunter and Charles Naylor, “God’s Way is Best.”

**Changes in the Practice of Medicine**

It is important to realize that when the early pioneers were forging their convictions about healing they did it at a time when the practice of medicine was experimental and largely unregulated. It is no wonder that J.W. Byers would write,

It is a lamentable fact that where there is one person helped by human skill, there are two sent to their graves by human ignorance. Thousands of intelligent people to-day have ignored the use of medicines and drugs from a scientific standpoint; but if there is any virtue in any of them, and sinners and poor doubting professors will take their chances of being hurried to their graves by swallowing the deadly poisons called medicines, let them have them.\(^5\)

E. E. Byrum would say it this way,

A prominent physician once said to me: “Modern medical practice in the treatment of sickness and disease is largely experimental and unreliable.” Whether or not his statement is true, we would not decry any good that the medical profession may be able to accomplish. But could the evils and impositions associated with the profession be eliminated, humanity would be delivered from a great amount of suffering from the effects of poisonous drugs, opiates and injurious treatments.\(^6\)

Both Byers and Byrum suggest that great good could come from the improvement of medicine. Byers even leaves his options open by saying:

If there is any earthly help by which suffering and pain can be alleviated and the poor groaning world benefited in the least, every heart in which there is any sympathy would rejoice and thank God. If such be the case and man has really discovered any such natural means, it has been but the discovery of God’s laws which he in his providence has permitted for the good of fallen man.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) Ibid., 232-234.

What these two pioneers of the movement seemed to pine for occurred over the next decades. It was as if God had a treasure trove of remedies, formulae, scientific know-how, and he emptied it from heaven. You had the discovery of Penicillin and other sulfa-based drugs, the development of a polio vaccine, a procedure to do organ transplants and the like. The life expectancy in this country shot up as a result.

This doesn’t mean we stop praying for physical healing. God has given people in the medical field much knowledge. Yes, oftentimes it appears God chooses to heal through medicine. This is not inconsistent with what our early church of God founders seemed to anticipate in the above quotes. When our loved ones are sick, we pray. But there is no reason to fail to take advantage of the multiplication of healing through medicine and otherwise.

My son, Garrett’s story here might be helpful. While in the neonatal unit his O2 Saturation level was dropping dangerously low. Desperate, I prayed as did my brother, Bill. After a few moments, the nurse and respiratory therapist switched sensors on his finger. His O2 level shot up. I felt as though God had answered my prayer for physical healing.

Stretching the Definition of Healing

Eugene Sterner worked to stretch the definition of healing by stressing the mind/body connection and by foregrounding the need for healing for the mentally ill and emotionally disturbed. This is similar to what I want to do.

I want to stretch the definition of healing to include the relational aspect of this historic Church of God practice.

This past month I was blessed to attend the Mid-Year Leadership Meeting of the National Association of the Church of God. I was privileged to sit in on a workshop on reconciliation given by Dr. Curtis DeYoung. In his talk, he described the early churches as “healing communities.” In this description he was emphasizing the fact that early Jewish believers who had been living under the oppression of the Roman occupiers were finding healing. Healing was being experienced as these early believers came to recover their identity as children of God in Christ. Romans also came into these fellowships and were being disabused of any notion that they were superior to their Jewish brothers and sisters. Healing was going on as the church became that place where there was neither “Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.”

This past week my class was discussing the Azusa Street Revival of 1906. Many individuals reported being healed in this revival. And yet, there was a healing of another sort going on. For it was in this meeting that whites and blacks, Hispanics and Asians came together to worship. This just wasn’t happening around the country at this time. The intercultural nature of the meeting was a sign of healing.

As I think about the question asked me in the living room of my friend Lyle’s home “Do You Believe in Healing?” I would like one more chance to answer. I would declare, “Yes, Yes, Praise the Lord, Yes. I believe in healing, physical, emotional, and relational.”

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8 Galatians 3:28
Each time we come together into this chapel and we look to the front and see this beautifully crafted window, consider the section set aside for the practice of healing. And remember signs of healing should attend your ministry as well.