

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH'S MINISTRIES OF ...

EDUCATION

HEALING

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WORSHIP

Papers and reflection questions prepared by
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SOME THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY OF HEALING

Introduction: the purpose of this paper

This paper is primarily to help licensed Lay Ministers of Anointing and Laying on of Hands for Healing to understand their ministry theologically. Others also may find it useful. The Church's Ministry of Healing is exercised in a variety of contexts and through a variety of people, some ordained, some licensed laity, some "ordinary" laity responding to human need and the leading of the Spirit. This ministry depends on the grace of God, not human knowledge or wisdom. Nevertheless, there are various ways of understanding how this grace works. Some ways are sounder than others, and some ways so twist the practice of the healing ministry that suffering people are hurt further by such ministry.

A What is "healing"?

The term "healing" can be used narrowly to refer to God's healing of the body, or to God's gracious transforming of other aspects of disordered and fragmented human existence, beginning with the individual, but moving to the collective. The further "out" from the body reference we get, the more "healing" overlaps with other terms for God's gracious action, and the more diluted the term becomes (though not the action to which it refers). For example, "healing society" and "transforming unjust structures" are two ways of viewing and talking about the same action.

There is a similar difficulty of precision when people (including "health" professionals) seek to define "health". Central to "healing" and "health" is the concept of "wholeness" and the "whole". What we understand that "wholeness" or "whole" to embrace will determine how we approach both "healing" and "health".

"Healing" in the sense of bringing an individual into a greater wholeness of body, and mind can be understood to include "cure". "Cure" of specific conditions includes cures brought about by medical means using the God-given properties and capacities of God's creatures; it also includes cures given after prayer, Word and Sacrament. In some cures, both approaches are associated. In all cures, we see the hand of God.

"Healing" however is not limited to "cure" and may not necessarily include it. For example, people who die reconciled to God and to those who have shared their life's journey, can be said to be "healed"; so too can those who are enabled to triumph in this life over suffering and bodily frailty. The effects of the Church's Healing Ministry extend to these aspects of wholeness in the presence of disorder, alienation and death, as well as physical illness.

"Healing" must also be seen as in the context of the self-healing capacity of Nature. Both medicine and the healing ministry of the Church help release this

capacity. Yet this capacity has limits, for we are mortal creatures. The Church's Ministry of Healing, unlike that of the medical profession, has the horizon of eternity.

- *How do you understand "wholeness" and "whole"? How does that influence your approach to healing ministry?*

B The significance of the term "The Church's Ministry of Healing"

This term refers to that ministry of the Church exercised through prayer, Word and Sacrament which has the intention of seeking God's healing for the people ministered to. The healing sought is healing of body, mind and spirit.

There are alternative terms, which are less satisfactory, for example:

- "Divine Healing" - the problem with this is that it limits God's healing action to explicitly "religious" ministry. But the world is God's world, and the healing properties of created things are given by God. The term sets up an unnecessary tension between healing and medicine.

The root theological difficulty it presents is that it sets "grace" against "nature", getting wrong the relationship between Creation and Redemption.

The root pastoral difficulties it presents are that

- the sick person seeking medical help is not helped to discern God in that help;
- Christians in the medical profession are not helped to see God working through them.

- "Spiritual Healing". Originally this meant that healing is the work of the Holy Spirit, and this is still true! But the word "spiritual" is a slippery one, and can mean "non-material", which is very different. Moreover, in an increasingly pluralist and syncretistic environment, the meanings of "spiritual" are legion.

The root theological difficulties it presents are that it sets "spirit" against "matter", and it also ignores the possibility of spiritual powers not of God.

The root pastoral difficulties it presents are that

- it can lead to a wrong evaluation of medicine;
- it often leads to involvement in non-Christian and even occult practices.

- "Faith healing". The strength of this term comes from the close association of faith with healing in the New Testament.

The root theological difficulties it presents are that

- it is not human faith which heals, but God, who acts sovereignly and freely;
- God heals not as a reward for faith but out of compassion and love.

The root pastoral difficulties it presents are

- it can result in condemnation, even despair, if the sick person is not healed;
- it is wide open to techniques of manipulation and to self-deception.

Note: The relationship between faith and the ministry of healing is one about which there are various views. On the one hand it is clear that expectant faith opens the way to receiving God's gracious action (and its absence can create an obstacle to such action). On the other, faith is not a human work which compels God to act graciously.

Moreover, experience shows that God sometimes heals where there is no faith, and often does not heal physical and mental disorder even where there is manifest faith. This brings up the mystery of the persistence of suffering and evil in God's world. Somehow we have to live in the tension between hope and the continuation of suffering when that happens.

There is also the question of whose faith to consider: that of the minister(s), the person ministered to, or the faith expressed in the intention of the Church.

What is theologically suspect and pastorally injurious is a view of healing which

- affirms that it is always God's will to give healing of body and mind
- requires a sufferer to "claim their healing"
- condemns that sufferer for "lack of faith" when healing does not ensue.

What is theologically central is the faith that Christ is present to meet us at the point of our deepest need (which we may or may not ourselves perceive).

- "The Church's ministry of healing" . This term
 - anchors healing in Christ's Church;
 - does not exclude God's involvement in healing through other means;
 - places healing in the context of all the various other ministries of the Church.

There are no theological difficulties with this term, so long as

- the breadth of God's healing action beyond this ministry (of prayer, Word and Sacrament explicitly for healing) is clearly acknowledged;
- God is seen as the source of the Church's healing ministry and power.

There are, however, pastoral difficulties arising from the actuality of the Church which compromise this ministry. In particular the fact that the Church is itself a community in need of healing and an institution inflicting hurt which needs to be healed, can present problems of credibility.

- *Have you ever had to live 'in the tension between hope and the continuation of suffering'? What was most helpful / least helpful in that situation?*
- *How would explain 'the Church's ministry of healing' to someone who has little contact with the Church?*

C Aspects of a Biblical understanding of healing

- God's relation to His Creation:
God is both transcendent and immanent, the source of that order which is the created world and which nevertheless remains open to God's direct action. When God heals, God is not intervening from "outside" in a closed system of cause and

effect which does not need God; God is simply acting in another mode within the creation God holds in being and cherishes, and which God inhabits.

- Human nature:

The Bible assumes a holistic concept of human nature. A human being is an ensouled body in community. "Healing" of the sickness of the body therefore cannot be isolated from dealing with the sickness of the soul and spirit and community. (A healing ministry which ignores social suffering and injustice and the degradation of the environment should be distrusted.)

- Salvation:

God's gracious action in Christ through the Holy Spirit:

frees us from all that damages the well-being of human beings, including:

- sin (both individual and collective)
- disease
- bondage to the Power of Evil
- death

frees us into "Peace" (shalom in the Old Testament, and eirene in the New Testament). Biblical "Peace" includes being in right relation to God, to creation, to one's fellow human beings, and to oneself. It is wholeness, the essence of well-being, and is experienced within the merciful Covenant of God. It is an aspect of the Kingdom of God, and as such comes in its fullness only at the Last Day when Christ comes finally. Because the Kingdom is both a present and future reality, we can taste of the Shalom of the Kingdom here and now (including its component of physical healing), but its fullness is still to come. We live in the overlap of the Ages, still affected by the imperfection, decay and death of the Old Creation, but touched by the New Creation in the Holy Spirit, and living in its hope. The Church's healing ministry takes its place in this overlap. The Kingdom has begun with the coming of Jesus, but we still pray for its full and final coming. The Church lives as a sign and an instrument of the Kingdom of God.

There is a development in understanding within the Scriptures (both in the Old Testament and between the Testaments) about how sin and disease are related. This is parallel to the development in understanding of how sin and lack of prosperity (or conversely righteousness and prosperity) are related. The simple causal connection between sin and disease or poverty breaks down. The book of Job is a sustained attack on any such simple connection. However, because a human is a unitary being in community, sin (both individual and collective) cannot be totally divorced from disease, and Jesus in His ministry moves easily from one aspect of human disorder to another. He denies that suffering and sickness are necessarily caused by sin; but He does not deny some connection.

- Theodicy:

This is that part of Christian theology which grapples with how the character of God, especially God's love and justice and power, can be reconciled with the state of the world as it is. In the context of the healing ministry, why is it that some people are healed and others are not; why are some prayers for healing answered and others apparently are not? This is part of the broader mystery of

suffering, within which the ministry of intercession continues. This mystery is not something which can be intellectually resolved; it can only be lived into in faith.

Suffering is not sent by God, but mysteriously permitted, sometimes removed, and capable of being used by God for our spiritual good. Christ in His time on earth both healed sufferers and Himself suffered. Both His public ministry and His Passion are important in "framing" the Christian healing ministry. On the one hand we may quite properly pray for healing, making the assumption that it is in the nature of the Living God who is Love to heal. On the other hand we may find that in a life surrendered to God, suffering produces spiritual fruit, especially a deeper understanding of love and a deeper capacity for love.

- **Christology:**

The crucified and risen Jesus is Healer/Saviour, who demonstrated in His public Ministry and in His Dying and Rising that He is Lord over all that we human beings need to be saved from. And it is the whole Christ who saves: each aspect of His earthly life is important, from His taking upon Himself human nature, the empowering of His human nature by the Holy Spirit in baptism at the Jordan River, His public ministry of healing and deliverance and teaching, His Cross and Resurrection, His Ascension. All have their significance for the healing ministry. However, at the heart of it is Christ's Death and Resurrection.

- *How does the Bible help us to deal with suffering in our own lives and the lives of those we love?*

D The Healing Ministry of the Church

- The healing ministry of the Church is where the Dying and Rising of Christ meets us at that part of our total humanity which includes our bodily frailties and our mortality. He does not save us from physical dying, He does not save us from ageing; He does not save us from all possibility of disease, though He may graciously give us a foretaste of the Resurrection fullness to come in what we call "healing".

What the Church's healing ministry essentially heals is persons, making them whole. We can have a disease of the body and yet be whole; we can age and yet be whole; we can die and yet be whole.

The gracious acts of the healing of the body which undoubtedly and gloriously take place are guarantees to us that our disease and ageing and dying can be transformed when we are joined to the Crucified and Risen Christ and do not have the last word.

- The healing ministry is exercised through prayer, Word and Sacrament in the power of the Holy Spirit:

Whenever there is healing in response to this ministry it is the work of the Holy Spirit of Christ, a gift or charisma of that Spirit. Sometimes that charism is given when any individual Christian or group of Christians pray in faith. Sometimes it is given through a Christian gifted with a continuing ministry of healing. Sometimes it is given when the Church faithfully exercises its ordered ministry of Word and

Sacrament. Always the healing flows from the Love of God poured into our hearts. That healing Love is best experienced and released through praying Christians in reconciled and reconciling relationships with one another, in the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Any Sacrament or sacramental action may be the channel of healing, but there are three in particular: the Eucharist, Anointing, and the Laying on of Hands. When sacraments are duly ministered, it is the minister's authority and intention to do what the Church intends which makes the sacraments valid, not any continuing charism "of" the individual minister.

Anointing or Unction is the sacrament of the Church least theologically reflected upon, though it is deeply rooted in the practice of the Church in the New Testament and the Apostolic Age. It may perhaps best be understood as a re-consecration of the baptised Christian in the face of challenge and crisis, whether of suffering at any level of personal being, or of imminent death. It is a joining of the Christian to the death and resurrection of Christ, the Anointed One, anointed as Priest, Prophet and King; it is a summoning up of the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit within. Oil, its "matter", is one symbol of that Spirit. As with all sacraments after Baptism, the proper recipient of Anointing is the baptised Christian, and it should normally be linked with repentance as part of that re-consecration. Its grace may include physical healing, but its horizon is the recipient's eternal life-giving relationship with the living God.

The Laying on of Hands for healing is one of many uses of this universal gesture of blessing. The Church uses it to commission its members for various tasks and convey to them the Holy Spirit for those tasks; it also uses it to convey God's overflowing love, comfort, assurance, and peace both to those who have Christian faith and to those who do not yet have faith. The Laying on of Hands for healing may be used in association with Anointing or independently of it. Its proper recipients extend beyond the Church to any human being in need, though for those without faith there should also be simple prayer for the gift of faith. (Those who have had occult involvement should be delivered from that involvement before any other ministry takes place.)

In all the Church's Ministry of Healing, the Word of the Gospel of Christ must be sensitively proclaimed by one means or another. "To be healthy and to be whole is no substitute for being penitent, forgiven and holy" (Michael Ramsey). The Ministry of Healing is but part of the total mission and ministry of the Church. Finding personal healing of body and mind is not the ultimate good, nor is suffering the ultimate evil. Alienation from God is the ultimate evil from which we need to be delivered. And it is the Reign of God over our lives which is "the pearl of great price".

- *What are some ways in which the gospel of Christ can be proclaimed in and through the Church's Ministry of Healing?*

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in consultation with the Wellington Institute of Theology Council
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