

Healing in the Atonement

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DIVINE HEALING

INTRODUCTION

Healing is a controversial subject within the Christian church today. While there are some who believe that it is a foundational truth which should be preached and taught right along with salvation and sanctification¹, there are others who believe that while it *might* be available today, it is a peripheral issue and should be treated as such.² There are even those who believe that healing was for the apostolic era only and is no longer available today.³

However, even among those who accept healing as being available to us today, there are major areas of disagreement. A major area of disagreement is the issue of healing and the atonement. Some believe that physical healing is just as much a part of the atonement as redemption. Others believe that God heals directly irrespective of the atonement. There are still others who believe that healing is available *through* the atonement but not *in* the atonement.

Because healing and the atonement is central to our Alliance understanding of healing⁴, the major portion of this paper will be dedicated to examining this issue in some depth. Other areas to be examined include The Role of Faith in Healing and The Practice of Healing.

A. Healing and the Atonement

The atonement is a key doctrine in Christianity. I would define atonement as both the act and the result of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross through which we are reconciled to God and, upon exercising genuine faith and repentance, receive forgiveness of our sins. Among evangelical Christians there is little disagreement about this definition. Where there is much more disagreement is what role the atonement plays, if any, in the healing of our bodies.

Is it always God's will to heal the sick? Some argue that everything necessary for the healing of our bodies was achieved by Christ on the cross and God's already done everything He'll ever do to make it possible for you to experience physical healing. They believe if you're not healed, it's not because God doesn't will it, but because you don't believe it. Healing has been secured for us in the atonement and is ours to either ignore or lay hold of in faith.

¹. The most obvious example is our own denomination, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, which believes that Christ is not only Saviour, Sanctifier, and Coming King, but Healer also.

². For example "The Lutheran Church and the Charismatic Movement: Guidelines for Congregations and Pastors" (St.Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1977), 7.

³. For example Arno Clemens Gaebelein, *The Healing Question* (Barakaldo Books, 1925, 2020), 70-85.

⁴. Article Eight of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Statement of Faith states that, "Provision is made in the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ for the healing of the mortal body...". This position is also stated very clearly by our founder in his book *The Gospel of Healing* (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1986), 16-19.

The question is not whether our bodies are healed because of the atonement of Christ, but when. We experience fellowship with God now because of Christ's atoning death, but we await the completion of that relationship when He returns. We profit immensely now from the Spirit's work in our hearts, but who would dare suggest what the Holy Spirit is doing today is all He'll ever do? There is a glorious harvest reserved in heaven for us and the Spirit's present ministry is merely a glance of what is to come.

Sam Storms says,

Are [the] healings, performed by Jesus, the result of the atonement? Yes. To whatever degree we experience healing in this life, it is the fruit of Christ's atoning death. But it doesn't necessarily follow that where there is atonement there is immediate healing. This passage in Matthew [8:16-17, see below] affirms that whatever healing occurs is a result of Christ's redemptive work. But it doesn't necessarily mean that healing will always occur *now* as a result of that work.⁵ (Emphasis Added)

He also writes,

Paul tells us in Romans 8:18-25 that the consummation of our adoption as God's children, which he defines as the redemption of our bodies, is something we eagerly and anxiously await; it is a future experience for which we in the present 'groan' (Rom. 8:23) in holy expectation. To insist that this physical blessing is future is not to detract from the efficacy or value of Christ's atoning work, nor to deny that God often heals (at times partially, at times wholly) now. It is simply to recognize, as Scripture does, that God's timing is often different from ours.⁶

Wayne Grudem agrees with Storms that we may not receive the physical healing we long for on this side of heaven,⁷

All Christians would probably agree that in the atonement Christ has purchased for us not only complete freedom from sin but also complete freedom from physical weakness and infirmity in his work of redemption...And all Christians would also no doubt agree that our full and complete possession of all the benefits that Christ earned for us will not come until Christ returns: it is only "at his coming" (1 Cor. 15:23) that we receive our perfect resurrection bodies. So it is with physical healing and redemption from the physical sickness that came as a result of the curse in Genesis 3: our complete possession of redemption from physical illness will not be ours until Christ returns and we receive resurrection bodies.⁸

I believe healing is in the atonement, but would agree with Grudem and Storms that this in no way suggests that every person who prays for healing (or who is prayed for) will instantaneously

⁵ Sam Storms, *Tough Topics* (Kindle Edition) (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), Loc.6007.

⁶ <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/by-his-stripes-we-are-healed#:~:text=Perhaps%20it%20would%20be%20more%20accurate%20to%20say,death%20we%20are%20guaranteed%20healing%20in%20this%20life.>

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1063

⁸ "When people say that complete healing is 'in the atonement,' the statement is true in an ultimate sense, but it really does not tell us anything about when we will receive "complete healing" (or any part of it)." (Grudem, *ibid.*)

receive it fully and completely. Our role as believers is to pray and leave the results in the hands of our sovereign God.

1. Scriptural Foundations of Healing and the Atonement

The two passages of Scripture most commonly cited by those supporting healing in the atonement are Isaiah 53:4-5 and Matthew 8:16-17. It may be helpful to explore these passages in detail.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53"4-5)⁹

The Hebrew word translated "borne" is "*nasa*" which means to bear, carry, hold up, and lift up.¹⁰ In other words, Christ bore or carried our sorrows and infirmities. He took them upon Himself. Our "infirmities" (Hebrew, "*choliy*") are our maladies, diseases, calamities, or sicknesses.¹¹ Our "griefs" (Hebrew, "*mak'ob*") are our afflictions or pains.¹² Another word that needs to be defined is the word "healed" itself. When Isaiah says we are "healed" by His stripes it means that we have been mended, cured, made whole, or repaired.¹³ A paraphrase of these verses might be "He took our diseases and our pains upon Himself and has cured us and made us whole".

Matthew recognizes Jesus as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy.

That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases. (Matthew 8:16-17)

The Greek word for "infirmities" (*astheneia*) also, as in the Hebrew, carries with it the concept of sickness or poor health. Definitions range from "feebleness of health"¹⁴ to "bodily weakness".¹⁵

⁹ Unless otherwise noted all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

¹⁰ . James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 80.

¹¹ . Ibid, p.39 .

¹² . Ibid, p.66.

¹³ . Ibid, p.110.

¹⁴ . Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 80.

¹⁵ . William F. Arndt, et al, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 114.

2. Questions About Healing and the Atonement

If healing is in the atonement, then why aren't people healed as readily as they are forgiven? This is probably the most commonly asked question regarding healing and the atonement. It is certainly not an easy question to answer, particularly to those who are not experiencing God's healing power in the midst of their sickness. However, I will not take the approach of some who answer this question simply by denying that healing is provided for in the atonement.¹⁶

Why are some people healed instantaneously while others in deep physical need can pray for many years and never get healed? The short answer is, we don't know why God chooses to heal some, but not others—at least not for each individual case. This is the most truthful answer we can provide.

Scripture does reveal that there are things in our lives that may act as obstacles, not because God only heals perfect people, but because there are actions and attitudes that hinder our relationship with Him. One reason we may not receive healing is because of unconfessed sin in our life (Psalms 32:1-3; 66:18). While this truth has been taken to ridiculous and destructive extremes by some, it is nonetheless true that when we have clear sin in our life and fail to get right with God, He may not hear our prayers. Please hear what I am and am not saying here. I *am* saying it is clear in Scripture that unresolved sin in one's life acts as a roadblock in our walk with God. I am *not* saying God would never heal a person if there was sin in their life (after all, who could be healed then?). I know of non-Christians who have been healed. Richard Siple, a former Alliance pastor in Regina, says, "Christians who are coming to God to be healed should confess their faults and put every [known] sin out of their lives."¹⁷

Some people are not healed because they do not want to be healed (John 5:6). Sometimes sickness may be a way of escaping painful reality in some area of life or a way of getting attention. As difficult as it may be to live with ongoing illness it is often preferred to facing the fear of an unknown future and being healed might mean having to face up to these things.

Other reasons people are not healed are: God is using the sickness for His good (Gal.4:13); wickedness in the person's heart (Ps.66:18); selfishness (Prov. 21:13); and, quite simply, there are mysteries of God that we will not understand until we meet Him "face to face" (1 Cor.13:12).

¹⁶ . J. Sidlow Baxter, for example, says that "Forgiveness of sins and cleansing from guilt are offered through the cross freely and certainly and at the present moment to all who sincerely believe, whereas healing for all our infirmities and sicknesses is **not** offered freely and certainly at present to all who believe" (emphasis his). Quoted in John Wimber, *Power Healing* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986), 166.

¹⁷ Richard M. Siple, *Understanding Divine Healing* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 88.

It is important to recognize that while forgiveness is freely bestowed on those who believe, it does not mean that they will then walk in spiritual perfection. We are not completely set free from the power of sin on our life even after salvation, nor are we completely set free from the power of sickness or pain. In either case - spiritually or physically - we will not be completely whole until the day the Kingdom is fulfilled.

Another question often raised is, if healing is in the atonement, then why was healing experienced **before** Christ's death on the cross? Millard Erickson talks of the "chronological difficulties of accepting that Isaiah 53:4 is speaking of the atonement." He says,

"There is a problem if we believe that the atonement is in view in the prophecy....it is hard to explain why Matthew quotes this verse in a context where he is describing acts of healing which occurred some time before Christ's death."¹⁸

Arno Gaebelein, focusing on the word "fulfilled" in Matthew 8:17, says, "the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in the day when our Lord Jesus Christ healed the great multitude. It was fulfilled about three years before the Lord died on the cross."¹⁹

There is no doubt that healing did occur before Christ's death on the cross. Both the Old and New Testaments confirm this. However, this does not lead to the conclusion that healing is not in the atonement. The atonement and its blessings are in a sense "retroactive" to the beginning of time; otherwise, it would have to be said that those who died before the atonement are dead in their sins and have no hope of salvation. For the Old Testament saints, as well as for us today, atonement is ultimately by the blood of Jesus Christ. In Revelation, John refers to Christ as "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." (13:8) If forgiveness is possible before the death of Christ, though still through the "retroactive" work of the atonement, then it can be reasonably inferred that healing is also.

The last question to be addressed will be, is healing **in** the atonement or **through** the atonement? J. Sidlow Baxter who, as mentioned earlier, does not support the notion of healing **in** the atonement, does believe that the atonement is the **basis** of healing. He says that "divine healing for sickness comes to us **through** the atonement, just as all the other blessings of salvation do."²⁰ (emphasis his) While the late John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard movement, says Baxter is "not splitting hairs when he differentiates between healing **in** the atonement as opposed to healing **through** the atonement"²¹ (emphasis Wimber's), I do not

¹⁸ . Millard J. Erickson *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2013), 840.

¹⁹ . Gaebelein, 73.

²⁰ . Quoted in Wimber, p.167.

²¹ . Ibid.

agree. It would appear that Baxter, Wimber, and others who "soften" or minimize the connection between healing and the atonement are really doing so to explain why some people are not healed. Having said this however, the important issue is not whether one believes healing is "in" or "through" the atonement, but that one recognizes the central role of the atonement in healing. The issue of in or through is often a matter of semantics.

3. Practical Applications of Healing and the Atonement

When discussing the issue of healing and the atonement with others one is often confronted with questions or comments like, "What difference does it make if healing is in the atonement or is simply a supernatural act of God apart from the atonement?" or "Let's just pray for people and not worry about **how** they are healed." These are fair and legitimate questions and assessments. If theological and biblical study cannot relate to our daily lives as Christians in a practical way, then there is not much sense doing it.

There are some very practical applications to the doctrine of healing in the atonement. These can be summed up in two words -- **faith** and **expectation**. If one believes that healing occurs only if God chooses to supernaturally intervene in the course of nature, one is left hoping or wondering if they will be one of the "lucky" ones. However, by recognizing that healing is in the atonement one can have a sense of expectation that healing can occur and a faith that God will act because the provision for healing was made 2,000 years ago on Calvary. At the same time one recognizes that for reasons man is incapable of understanding, healing is not guaranteed. We must still leave that in God's hands.

4. Closing Thoughts Concerning Healing and the Atonement

It is simply not possible to totally separate healing from the atonement. While not wanting to totally reject the concept of healing being **through** the atonement, it is more accurate, not to mention more Biblical, to say it is **in** the atonement. This does not mean that there are answers to all the questions that may arise. While one wants to openly consider such questions, it is simply not possible to answer each and every one of them. There are many truths in Scripture which go beyond the ability of man to comprehend or explain. This does not make them any less true.

B. THE ROLE OF FAITH IN HEALING

The "word-faith" (or prosperity) movement has made an idol of faith to the degree that they appear to make God a servant of our faith. "...God — whom faith teachers claim is himself bound by the laws of the 'faith-force — must obey our words."²² They believe "...that sickness usually (or always) is the result of sin and/or a lack of faith on the part of the person who is ill."²³ Needless to say this has created guilt and condemnation on many who are not healed, but this abuse of God's

²² <https://www.apologeticsindex.org/4914-word-faith-movement>

²³ *Ibid.*

truth by man does not make it any less true. Countless thousands of people have been blamed for their own lack of healing because they, in the opinion of some, do not have "enough" faith.

What role does faith play in healing? Is faith necessary for healing to take place? Whose faith? Does one need "enough" faith in order to see God work? There are churches today which emphasize that because healing was accomplished at the cross it is ours for the taking - *if* we have enough faith to believe it and receive it.

Kenneth Hagin, for example, says, "...Healing belongs to us. God has provided it for us. But we have to possess it. Unless we possess the provision [faith], we will not enjoy its benefits."²⁴ Gloria Copeland goes so far as to say that if one has *any* doubt at all that God will heal one *cannot* receive healing.²⁵ (Emphasis Mine) However, I believe (very strongly as a matter of fact) that this position cannot be supported by the Scriptures. One-third of all healing recorded in the Bible make no reference whatsoever to faith.

It would appear that many proponents of the "faith movement" are actually, as previously mentioned, encouraging having faith in faith itself rather than in our Heavenly Father who is both able and willing to heal. Rev. Keith Bailey states,

The popular concept of 'faith' healing is really humanistic. It implies that the mental act of believing effects a cure." He also reminds us that "The proper exercise of faith must consider the possible limitations to healing...To claim what is not set forth in propositional form by Scripture is not faith but presumption."²⁶

What is clear in the Scriptures in which reference is made to faith is that the faith mentioned may not even be that of the person in need of healing. In many instances it was the faith of others that moved Jesus. This was certainly the case with the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant (Matthew 8: 5-13) and the men who lowered their paralysed friend through a hole in the roof (Mark 2:1-12). However, in many cases, Jesus healed out of His own conviction that God was prepared to minister to the physical needs of His people (e.g. Mark 3:1-5; Luke 4:38-39; 7:12-15; 13:10-13; John 5:1-9; 9:1-7; 11:1-44).

²⁴ . Kenneth E. Hagin, *Healing Belongs to Us* (Tulsa: Faith Library Publications, 1979), p.31.

²⁵ . Gloria Copeland, *God's Will For Your Healing* (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1972), p.3.

²⁶ . Keith M. Bailey, *Divine Healing: The Children's Bread* (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, Inc., 1977), p.187.

God does respond to faith (Matt 9:22), but the amount of faith a person has does not have anything to do with whether or not the person is healed, at least not for Christians. No particular level of faith assures healing. If a person is a Christian, they have faith, and that is enough. By contrast, if a person has no faith that seems to be an issue (Matt 13:58). But even then, one can still pray, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

It would appear from the above that faith *does* play an important role in the healing process. However, a "faith in faith" that places guilt and condemnation on those who are not healed, is not only counter-productive, it is totally contrary to the Word of God and the character of Christ.

C. THE PRACTICE OF HEALING

I want to be very careful to avoid making healing a purely theoretical or theological exercise. The Church is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18) and as such is obligated to carry on His mission to a hurting world. Part of this mission was without doubt divine healing. The church must do more than *talk* about a commitment to the ministry of divine healing, it must *demonstrate* this commitment through regularly praying for the sick.

Many people (and churches) are reluctant to pray for the sick because they are seeking a specific or single method of healing. However, even a cursory reading of the Gospels and Acts, reveals no such method. As can be seen in the Gospels, people experienced healing when Jesus touched them (Matthew 8:3; Luke 4:40), when they touched Him (Matthew 9:20-22), when He simply spoke words of healing (Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 10:51-52; Luke 4:38-39), and even through what might be described as more "unconventional" methods (Mark 7:32-35; 8:22-26). In Acts, healing was experienced through methods ranging from the laying on of hands (3:1-10; 9:17) to being touched by Peter's shadow (5:14-16) to touching a handkerchief that had been touched by Paul (19:11-12). To all of this could be added the anointing of oil as found in James 5. It is safe to say that there does not seem to be *one* exclusive method of healing. The church must simply pray for the sick, irrespective of method, and leave the results to God.

It is my opinion that all leaders – if not all members – of the church should be encouraged, and trained if necessary, to pray for one another to be healed. Some have chosen to take James 5:13-20 absolutely literally and have limited healing prayer to the elders of the church only. It is my opinion that this approach fails to consider Scripture as a whole (e.g. the priesthood of ***all*** believers - 1 Peter 1:9-10) or even James 5:16 itself ("...confess your sins to each other and ***pray for each other*** so that you may be healed.") (emphasis added).

While there is no doubt that the elders can and should be called to pray for those they have been called to shepherd, this ministry is not limited to elders. The church will become the "caring community" Christ intended it to be when it becomes a "praying community" where all members are encouraged to "pray for each other".

CONCLUSION

Healing for the body has been provided for in the atonement. Therefore it behooves us as the body of Christ to pray for the sick. Prayer for healing was a normal occurrence in the life of the early church and needs to become so in the contemporary church. God does not provide us with all the answers regarding divine healing, He simply asks us to step out in faith and pray.

Healing for the body has been provided for in the atonement so we can (must) pray expectantly for healing, but leave room for God's greater purposes, which are higher and greater than our understanding. Let us do so in obedience to Him.

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