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The Christian Church and Healing

E. LLOYD IVANY

I. THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY OF HEALING

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH through the centuries has always been acutely aware of the problem of sickness and suffering. In the New Testament she has recorded that her Lord, Jesus Christ, carried on a ministry of healing; and also that he gave his disciples the specific commission to go forth and heal. Matthew records that when Jesus was instructing the twelve in preparation for sending them forth on a special mission, he "gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity" (Matt. 10:1). He gave them the specific command: "Heal the sick . . . , cleanse lepers, cast out demons . . ." (Matt. 10:8). We have much evidence to support the view that Jesus believed that spiritual influences had a vital effect upon the whole person. Scherzer writes concerning this point:

When man becomes aware of this fact, he begins to study himself and see how spiritual factors influence his life, and how he can use them for his benefit. This is the task of the Church; and it has engaged in that work more or less through the centuries. But the one place where the Church has been most hesitant is in fulfilling the Lord's command to heal the sick. Because of this hesitancy, cults and sects have, to a large extent, taken over spiritual healing.¹

We must admit, I think, that Scherzer is correct here. Nevertheless, it is quite certain that he would not deny that the Church has shown a continued interest in healing through the ages. We have ample evidence of this fact all around us. But the Christian Church has tended to encourage, or at least to permit, a dichotomy between her work and healing (which properly is also a part of her work). It is true that the Church has pioneered in founding hospitals; she has always shown a deep interest in the sick and suffering, and has done very important work in bringing aid to both. While at first there was a close interconnection between the Church and the hospitals founded by her, that close relationship has not always been maintained. Indeed, it would seem that there is very little difference, essentially, between methods of healing in a Church hospital and in a regular secular institution. Even admitting that the physical ills of patients in her hospitals are cared for, the Church, by a mere founding of hospitals, cannot fulfil her sweeping commission to heal the sick. The Church's commission, in effect, is to heal the *whole person*, not merely the body.

1. C. Scherzer, *The Church and Healing* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), p. 250.

To say this is not to suggest that, because the role of the medical practitioner is limited, it is unimportant. Let the Church recognize that the work she has pioneered is of extreme importance, but let her realize also its limitations, and take measures to eliminate them. This will not be an easy task, especially in secular institutions; but the difficulty involved does not provide an adequate reason for failing to attempt it. The medical doctor and nurse in the past have assumed that their rôles were of prime importance, and this for two reasons among many possible ones: (a) the worship of science, and the belief that the application of scientific technique could cope with well-nigh any challenges; (b) the willingness of the Church to stand in the background and permit medical personnel to assume her rôle in the healing process. The Church today, however, has one great advantage which she should exploit to the full. Medical science is coming to the conclusion that medicine, drugs, and surgery cannot heal the "total person."

Just as the doctor and nurse have a real and vastly important ministry to perform, so also has the minister. The doctor and nurse have long since claimed their office; the minister should now set about reclaiming his pastoral office, and seek to give the spiritual healing which he, under God, is capable of providing. But let him not assume that this capacity is come by easily or effortlessly. Like that of scientific workers, his training too must be thorough. It is because of a lack of adequate training, among other reasons, that medical doctors have not been more enthusiastic in recognizing the important role of the minister in the work of healing.

A close co-operation between the medical profession and the Church should be developed, and positive and genuine attempts made to increase mutual respect between them. Let the Church not forget that what Scherzer calls "the healing spirit of Jesus" can be manifested today by consecrated people who have dedicated their lives to the healing ministry in medicine as well as in the ordained ministry. As Christians we believe that God works in and through individuals, irrespective of vocation, to accomplish his healing purposes.

Most "faith healers" are isolationist, or are connected with a small group that has made healing a work of central importance. Such people are dangerous to the Christian Church, for their teaching is often exaggerated, lacking in proportion, and warped. Seward Hiltner writes on this point:

There will certainly be occasions of emergency when "spiritual first aid" should be administered even though active co-operation with other workers is not possible for the moment. The kind of specialist in whom we do not believe is quite different. He is the one for whom working alone is a creed. Such an isolationist will do harm whether his creed grows out of ignorance or conviction. But if it is only out of ignorance, there is hope.²

It is well that the Church has become aware of the danger; and it is better

2. S. Hiltner, *Religion and Health* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), pp. 104.

still that the Church is coming to see that such "faith healers" are prospering because she has failed to face up to her commission to heal in all its ramifications.

II. THE CHURCH'S RESOURCES

True worship within the Christian Church is directed towards the achievement of intimate fellowship with God. Before this is possible in the deepest sense, the Church teaches that man must confess those sins which alienate him from his God, and restore broken relationships between himself and his fellows. He is directed in worship to dwell upon the goodness, holiness, and love of God; and from that experience, he is enabled to enjoy peace and harmony—that wholeness which comes from reconciliation between man and God, between man and man, and within the self. Worship is the medium through which man can achieve wholeness of personality, for in the true act of worship divine grace works in response to man's faith, and releases within his life healing forces so tremendous that they defy description.

When this reconciliation within the self is achieved, a person's whole outlook is gradually changed. He is enabled to detect the difference between a physical malady and a morbid dwelling upon the malady which becomes an obsession and a source of illness in itself. He is delivered from the destructive powers of guilt and from the mistaken view that sickness is the punishment meted out for sins committed. He is also delivered from the tyranny of the belief that he has been the victim of blind chance. The Church has rightly urged the confession of sins; for where there is a sense of sins forgiven, anxiety and repressed hostility cease to exist, and the Christian begins the process towards the achievement of that wholeness or health of soul (spirit, personality) which is the Christian goal.

It is sometimes found that there is a close relationship between sin and sickness; when sin is forgiven, the sickness disappears. Such cases are comparatively rare. More important, however, is the fact that the elimination of alienation (in its full sense) releases the healing powers within the self, and frees from the curse of self-pity and loneliness; and instead, a person is brought into an attitude of hope and trust. Whatever his physical condition, he is aided in an important way to triumph over it; for through this attitude of hope and trust, "the new and mysterious powers of soul which avail for healing"—the expression is Cyril Richardson's—become operative.

Within the Church, various resources are available which are a vital part of her worship: prayer, the sacraments, confession, meditation, and the whole life of the Christian fellowship. It is the Church's task to purify and develop these and make them available to man, so that he may be enabled, under God, to attain to that wholeness which is his true heritage.

III. THE FULFILMENT OF THE CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY

If the Church is faithful to the command of her Lord, she has a responsibility to heal the sick. It is doubtful, however, if the ministry of healing should be a specialty within the Church. Hiltner has dealt with this point, and what he says deserves quotation at length:

Should there be specialists in spiritual healing? The Church has said "No," and there is probably a wisdom in that conclusion which is deeper than the reasons often given for it. To have professional religious workers, such as trained chaplains, who collaborate with other healers is one thing. To have specialists in the sense in which many religious healing groups have them is quite another. In the nature of the case these specialists cannot (and would not if they could) be members of a team. They can be specialists in their sense only by presenting their resources for healing *as opposed to* other resources. Further development should take place in bringing the distinctive resources of religion to bear for purposes of healing; but specialists in the isolationist sense can have no place in the total interest of Christianity in health and healing.³

Within the Church, the pastor has a responsibility towards the sick. He should try to ensure that his Church organization contributes to mental and physical well-being; and further, he should take advantage of all the means at his disposal to minister to the sick. He should make "judicious" use of prayer, and perhaps organize "voluntary, small prayer groups." He should also be available for personal counsel, so that the Church's resources may be brought to the person in need.

Another real possibility is the use of the service of healing. This should not be the type of service in which "God is put on the spot and told to produce," to use Dr. W. E. Mann's apt words; but rather, it should be aimed at "producing a deepening awareness of the availability of spiritual resources for health and healing." The laying on of hands and anointing are traditional Christian methods which might well be utilized. The over-all atmosphere should be one of worship rather than one of seeking favour.

It is important to realize that the commission to heal is not directed at the minister or priest alone. Christ directed the commission to his disciples; and thus every Church member, or more correctly, every true disciple of Jesus Christ, is potentially a healer. Every Christian is called to be a worker, and he can bring spiritual resources to bear in varying degree. Special qualities should be developed, and abilities and gifts for effective and therapeutic visitation of the sick should be cultivated.

We have intimated above that the ministry of healing is inseparable from the life of Jesus. Healing is an essential part of his message. It would seem from the Gospels that sickness and sin are both alien to what he proclaimed as the Kingdom of God. Since there was a close connection between the two, Jesus professed and demonstrated supreme power over both; and the secret of that power lay in his kinship and fellowship with God his Father.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

We have also mentioned some of the reasons for the decline of healing within the Church, one of which was the growing dichotomy between spirit and body. Graham Ikin writes: "When ministers became responsible for the souls of men and doctors for their bodies, the unity of personality, the interaction and integration of life, physically, mentally and spiritually, was ignored. . . . We cannot separate without disaster the minds and bodies God has joined together."⁴ In this connection, it cannot be overemphasized that the Christian ministry is to the *whole man*. It is not nearly so strange as it may at first seem that Christ coupled his command to preach the gospel of the Kingdom with another: "Heal the sick." The healing of the sick was part of the good news, a part of the deliverance which Christ brought. Healing in the fullest sense revealed the reality of the "good news" which the followers of Jesus were commissioned to proclaim. Is the Church coming to realize her commission in this regard? Ikin writes: "We are at last beginning to realize that the faith which Christ insisted upon as necessary to set free his power to heal is a *moral quality* and its absence, tying the hands of God, so to speak, is a moral disaster which needs to be tackled."⁵ This point is a good one. The Church cannot fulfil her commission by ignoring it. The challenge addressed to her is twofold: to remedy her weaknesses of the past, and to endeavour in future to fulfil her commission to proclaim the gospel and heal.

The Church has sometimes been guilty of sponsoring a religion which has contributed to illness rather than to the cure of illness. Our worship has not always been of a mature nature. This is one of the reasons why there has been so little co-operation between the medical profession and the Church.

Unfortunately we have frequently so preached (or parodied) the Gospel as to create the sick the doctors have had to try to cure. It is this which makes it more difficult to get the doctors to appreciate or approve the attempts to recombine these elements and once again preach a gospel that really heals the sick. Doctors are suspicious of religion when it comes into their sphere of action, since they often find a faulty religious attitude is at the root of many of the disorders they have to treat.⁶

While people are immature, they will naturally entertain immature views on religion. A sound religion, or more accurately, a sound approach to religion, will aid them in achieving maturity. Growth towards maturity is usually a long and painful process; and the Church's task is so to help the "babes in the faith" that they will regard religion as a means of achieving maturity, and not as a crutch to lean upon. For more people than is commonly realized, mental, moral, and physical symptoms are frequently only ways of escape from reality. But it is nevertheless among such people that the Church strives to carry on her work, and her responsibility is thus tremendous.

4. A. G. Ikin, "The New Testament and Healing," *Pastoral Psychology* (May, 1956), p. 36.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

We stated above that every Christian is potentially able to heal. Ideally this is true, in the widest sense of "healing." What Ikin says on this point makes clear in part what can be done:

Christ's power to deal with such cases seemed to spring from his conviction of the sonship of man, his knowledge that the mind of man could respond to the power of God, and that in so doing evil would be eliminated. In his own assurance of fellowship, of oneness with the Father, he could reach out to the disorganized centre of personality and restore it to such fellowship with God as we call sanity. Sanctity might then become possible as fellowship with God increased. There is great need for Christians to achieve and maintain such fellowship with God through prayer and life, that they too can reach *through* the evil of disoriented, disintegrated lives and restore sufferers to communion with God. . . . By transcending their own powers they are enabled to bring about genuine spiritual healing.⁷

Since the line of demarcation between functional and organic diseases is continuously being broken down, and since many somatic symptoms have psychic causes, there is hope for an even wider application of Ikin's statement. But before the potential of this is seen, pagan and infantile accompaniments of religion will have to be purged. Only then will the Church be able to make her full contribution to mental, physical, and spiritual health.

In James 5:13-15 we have an interesting section which has a direct bearing on our discussion:

Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. . . . Is any 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 of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Let us note the elements mentioned: personal prayer, the prayers of others, and the service of mature Christians. This service consisted of using the prayer of faith and anointing with oil. It must be stated that oil was used not because of magical qualities, but because of the spiritual attitude it helped bring about in the person who was ill. As in the case of Jesus' own healings during his ministry, there was a "direct rapport" between the Lord and the person healed. Anointing helped to achieve that "rapport."

IV. WORSHIP AS THE CHURCH'S MEANS OF HEALING

Worship involves the reverent outgoing of the spirit towards God in adoration and praise, since he is acknowledged as the Supreme Source of life and love, holiness and goodness, beauty and truth. The true meaning of worship as "worth-ship" thus emerges, for it is seen to be an acknowledgment of God's infinite worthiness to be glorified, praised, and adored. Fundamentally true worship must be devoid of self-seeking, for in worship we approach God in reverence, praise, and awe because he *is* God. He is

7. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

man's Creator and Redeemer, and therefore true worship becomes basically "the spontaneous response of man's adoring reverence" in the presence of his divine majesty. As man becomes conscious of God's presence, he is moved to share in some measure the experience of Isaiah in the Temple one day long ago, and he comes to realize the utter fitness of exclaiming with the Seraphim: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isa. 6:3). True worship must be rooted in what Rudolf Otto has called "the sense of the numinous."

Worship is man's response to God and his experience of God's presence with him. It involves man's experience of communion and fellowship with his God, in private and in community. All his faculties—indeed, his whole personality—are focused on that communion as he seeks to receive the fortification and spiritual sustenance necessary to transcend his present condition. He strives to grow in faith and trust in the God who is able to work in him "exceeding abundantly above all" he can either "ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). All true worship takes place in the atmosphere of faith and belief.

True worship must be irrevocably divorced from all catering to man's weaknesses, and should be aimed rather at helping him overcome those weaknesses, that he may begin the process of growth towards moral and spiritual maturity. Two examples of such weaknesses may be given here. (a) The immature man desires to indulge in a weak emotionalism which contributes to, rather than helping him overcome, his immaturity. This type of experience aids in frustrating the achievement of the goal of true worship: the *wholeness* of man as a personality living in communion, fellowship, and harmony with God and man. (b) Man tries to *use* worship to obtain what he desires from an external Power which he believes is able to give him what he seeks. To indulge in such "worship" is to have a merely utilitarian view of God—namely, the conception of God as a Being who, when a man performs a certain ritual or assumes a certain attitude, will make available his own power for man's use.

There is a vast difference between a friendly and warm atmosphere within the fellowship of the Church and the emotion- and hysteria-charged atmosphere generated by the methods of mass psychology and the repetitive cultivation of false hopes. In this latter situation, concentration is often on the body and only secondarily on man's relationship with God. The emphasis is on what God can do *for*, rather than what God can accomplish *in*, a person. This is a very unhealthy emphasis, and is excluded from true worship. While it is true that emotion plays a very important role in our lives, emotion that has run riot is a dangerous force, and there is no guarantee that, under its domination, a person will act and think in harmony with the will of God.

This does not mean that there is no power available in the Godhead which enables man through faith to achieve wholeness of body, mind, and spirit. But the essential point is that all man's efforts should be subordinated to the achievement of the first requirement: a strong and genuine personal

relationship between himself and his God. This emphasis is not easy to maintain. Even with the best of intentions and a clear sense of mission, it is easy for Christian leaders to compromise and allow elements to creep in which work against the achievement of true worship.

It is extremely difficult to give a comprehensive and adequate definition of worship, and I have deliberately avoided the effort. Yet a brief mention of the various therapeutic means *within* worship is necessary, since a treatment of them as *means* in themselves and in isolation would take them out of the proper realm of religion and put them in the category of magic.

The therapeutic value of confession should first be noted. True confession is something positive and of extreme importance in growth towards spiritual maturity and fellowship. Beginning with a facing before God of all his faults, failures, and sins, and with the help under God of a minister or priest or of some "friend in Christ," and through the assurance of forgiveness granted by God, a person is enabled to transcend and triumph over "those things which are behind, and reach forth unto those things which are before, and press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13f.).

The laying on of hands should also be mentioned. If this means of healing is adopted it should be entered into and performed as part of an act of worship. Unless this is the case, the rite becomes essentially a magical one, in that it is regarded as having therapeutic value in itself, if properly carried out according to the correct cultic formula. I do not mean to exclude the possibility that the laying on of hands and anointing, if regarded merely as rites to be performed in accordance with a well-defined set of instructions, can be effective if the participant has faith, and if his faith is reinforced by his participation in the rites. But it does seem to be the Church's responsibility to ensure that the laying on of hands and unction are not permitted to degenerate into magical rites. Richardson writes:

The Laying on of Hands or Unction through an *experienced* ministrant, acting responsibly, not magically, may be used to invoke a dynamic faith in the patient which then actively responds to the divine: or it may simply work through suggestion, curing symptoms without reaching the root of the trouble in the personality itself. Ministers and "healers" need to discriminate here and learn when to reinforce the patient through the Laying on of Hands or Unction. But it is important to realize that the use of Unction may be disastrous in the case where personality disorders have produced physical symptoms of distress *to avoid facing agony of spirit*. There is a tremendous challenge and opportunity to clergy and all ministers of religion to help sufferers to face the agony of spirit and *through facing it recover wholeness and harmony of physical function*. The process of genuine *cure* here is incredibly painful, and the support of a sympathetic and understanding helper, clerical or medical, is essential to enable them to see it through and regain their own contact with reality and the fellowship with God which this implies.⁸

The sacraments may rightly be used under similar conditions. When divorced from all magical elements, they provide real spiritual assistance

8. C. C. Richardson, "Spiritual Healing in the Light of History," *Pastoral Psychology* (May, 1954), p. 44.

to the ill. Through the faith which they elicit in the participants, real spiritual healing of illness can be accomplished. The assistance of a sympathetic and understanding minister or priest is of great value in this regard.

As the context of all these means of healing, a sympathetic and genuine Christian fellowship is a tremendous source of power. The intercessory prayer of a staunch and devout Christian or a body of Christ's followers, on behalf of the sick, avails much. A community of faith is a powerful community; indeed, through the working of the Holy Spirit, it is a source of power whose full efficacy is beyond man's imagination or comprehension. We would do well to consider Richardson's words carefully:

Spiritual healing is *very real*. We must always provide the occasion for it. By Prayer and Uncion or with the help of the charismatic healer we are in duty bound to set the stage, as it were, through which the Spirit of God may operate. It is God and not we who does the healing; but without our Prayers and Sacraments, the channels of his grace may be wanting. We must not raise false hopes; neither must we quench the Spirit. When right relations with God are established through confession of sins and thanksgiving, who can say if the Spirit will not raise up the sick man? We wait on the Spirit of God, earnestly believing that he works with power. The issue is in his hands, who creates and redeems according to his good pleasure. The miracle may come through our unworthy hands, if we earnestly prepare for it, neither disbelieving nor being over-anxious. For it is not bodily health which is of supreme importance, but right relations with God.⁹

V. CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that tremendous power is available for our use in the ministry of healing. It is promised in the New Testament, and it was manifest in the early Church. Our failure to make use of it is a reflection on our Christianity. We are assured that this power is ours as Christians, and we cannot disclaim responsibility for using it by attributing all power to God. We must seek, as Christians, to appreciate our true role and calling and to understand the spiritual laws by which God has called us to heal. If we seek to shirk our responsibility, we leave the field to those who will exploit this avenue of Christian service to the detriment of the Church.

The Church has a commission to heal the sick; that, I believe, cannot be debated. But it does not follow that the Church should cease to co-operate with the medical profession, or that the Church should set out, with much publicity and fanfare, upon a great healing mission. That this great gift is available to Christians is no matter for pride or boasting, nor is the challenge to use it an occasion for embarrassment. With much searching of heart, and with deep commitment, we should seek to make our full Christian contribution to the ministry of healing. Conscious of our commission and of the power promised us for our use, we must try to prepare ourselves for service within the Church community, so that God's healing power may be made manifest through us, if he so wills.

9. *Ibid.*