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DIVINE HEALING: IS IT SCRIPTURAL?

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Every once in a while we receive an inquiry of a request for help on this subject, usually from one who has come into contact with some belonging to a cult which gives prominence to “divine healing,” to the removal of physical ills without the aid of a doctor and medicine, in response to faith and prayer. Such inquiring friends are generally more or less perplexed. They have heard nothing on the subject in their own churches and feel they are more or less in the dark on the matter. Those who press this “divine healing” teaching upon them appear to be ill-balanced people and not at all orthodox¹ in doctrine. If they are induced to attend their meetings they are not favorably impressed, and sense that something is wrong. The absence of reverence, the allowing of women to take part in the services before a mixed congregation, the prominence of the spectacular element, and the general spirit of excitement which prevails, makes the normal child of God feel quite out of place in such a gathering. The zeal displayed does not appear to be according to knowledge and the fervid emotionalism strikes him as being “strange fire” (Lev 10:1)—not kindled at the divine altar.

¹ **orthodox** – holding doctrine which conforms to established beliefs.

But what of their teaching on “divine healing?” Is it scriptural or unscriptural? This is a question which it is not easy to answer in a single sentence. Many passages on healing may be cited from God’s Word, but that raises the question of their *interpretation*—in accord with the context and also in harmony with the general analogy of faith; as it also calls for a careful examination of all inferences drawn from and conclusions based upon those passages. Moreover, these modern cults who stress “divine healing” are by no means uniform in their teaching thereon, some being more radical and extreme than others, so that the refutation of one erroneous presentation of this subject would not hold good of a similar error in an entirely different dress. Though familiar with all the principal varieties of them, we do not propose to waste the reader’s time by taking them up *seriatim*² but rather deal with the broad principles which apply to them all.

1. Unscriptural Teaching on This Subject

First it must be said that much of the teaching which has been given out on this subject is decidedly *unscriptural*. For example, the majority of those who emphasize “divine healing” insist that it was in the atonement, that on the cross Christ was as truly our sickness-bearer as our sin-bearer, that He purchased healing for the body as well as salvation for the soul, and that therefore every Christian has the same right to appropriate by faith the cure of bodily disorders as he has forgiveness for his transgressions. In support of this contention appeal is made to Christ who “healed all that were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet: himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses” (Mat 8:16-17). Here is where the expositor is needed if the unlettered and unstable are to be preserved from jumping to an erroneous conclusion, where the mere *sound* of the words is likely to convey a wrong impression unless their sense be carefully ascertained—just as, “the dead know not anything” (Ecc 9:5) is not to be understood absolutely, as though they who have departed this life are in a state of utter unconsciousness.

Had those words “Christ bare our sicknesses” occurred in some passage in the Acts or Epistles where one of the apostles was explaining the purpose and character of Christ’s death, then we should have been obliged to regard them as meaning that the Lord Jesus vicariously³ endured the sicknesses of His people while on the cross, though this would present a very great difficulty, for there is no hint anywhere in the Word that the Redeemer experienced any illness at that time. But instead, Matthew 8:16-17 has reference to what transpired during the days of His public ministry, the meaning of which we take to be as follows. Christ employed not the virtue that was in Him to cure infirmity and sickness as a matter of mere power, but in deep pity and tenderness He entered into the condition of the sufferer. The great Physician was no unfeeling stoic⁴, but took upon His own spirit the sorrows and pains of those to whom He ministered. His miracles of healing cost Him much in the way of sympathy and endurance. Thus He “sighed” (Mar 7:34) when He loosed the tongue of the dumb, “wept” by the grave of Lazarus (Joh 11:35), and was conscious of virtue going out of Him (Mar 5:30) as He cured another. By a compassion, such as we are stranger to, He was afflicted by their afflictions.

That the interpretation we have given above (briefly suggested by the Puritan Thomas. Goodwin, 1600-1680) is the correct meaning of “himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses” appears from several considerations. If those words signified what the “divine healing” cults say they do, then they mean that in His act of healing the sick Christ was then making atonement, which is absurd on the face of it. Again, if the healing of the body were a redemptive right which faith may humbly but boldly claim, then it necessarily follows that the believer *should never die*, for every time he fell ill he could plead before God the sacrifice of His Son and claim healing. In such a case, why did not Paul exhort Timothy to exercise faith in the atonement rather than bid him “use a little wine for his stomach’s sake” (1Ti 5:32), and why did he leave Trophimus in “Miletum sick,” (2Ti 4:20)? A glorified body, as well as soul, is the fruit of Christ’s atonement, but for that the believer has to wait God’s appointed time.

One error leads to another: most of those who teach that Divine healing is in the atonement argue that therefore it must constitute an essential element in and part of the Gospel, and thus their favorite slogan is: “Christ our Saviour, Christ our Sanctifier, Christ our Healer, Christ our Coming King,” and hence “the Fourfold Gospel” is the leading caption of most of them. But such a contention will not bear the light of Holy Writ. In the book of Acts we find the apostles preaching the Gospel of God both to Jews and Gentiles, yet, though in the course of their ministry miracles of healing were performed by them (to authenticate their mission, for none of the New Testament had then been written), yet nowhere did the removal of physical maladies form part of their *message*. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-3

² **seriatim** – one after another in order; point by point.

³ **vicariously** – experiencing something in the place of another.

⁴ **stoic** – one indifferent to grief, pain, suffering, or pleasure.

a brief summary of the Gospel is given, namely, that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day”—mark the *omission* of His dying for our sicknesses! In Romans we are furnished with a systematic and full unfolding of “the gospel of God” (see 1:1), yet healing of bodily ills is never referred to.

If it were true that Christ made atonement for our sicknesses as well as our sins, then it would follow that all bodily disorders are the immediate consequence of some iniquity. We say, immediate consequence, for of course it is readily granted that all the ills which man is heir to are so many effects and results of the great transgression of our first parents. It is only reasonable to conclude that had sin never entered this world suffering in any form had been unknown, for we know that in Heaven the absence of the former ensures the absence of the latter. Thus there is a vital difference between saying that a physical disorder which occasions great discomfort and pain finds its remote cause in the tragedy of Eden, and affirming that it is the direct result of the person’s own wrong doing, as most of the “divine healing” cults insist. Our Lord’s reply to His disciples in John 9:2-3 expressly forbids any such sweeping conclusion. There is much suffering, especially among children, which is due to ignorant and innocent breaking of natural laws rather than to violation of the Moral Law. Moreover, if this contention of “divine healing” were valid, we should be obliged to conclude that every sickness severed the soul from communion with God, which is falsified by the experiences of many of the saintliest persons who ever trod this earth.

Those who hold that Christ made atonement for our sicknesses as well as for our sins are quite consistent in maintaining that deliverance from the former must be obtained in precisely the same way as salvation from the latter: that the sole means must be the exercise of *faith*, without the introduction or addition of any works or doings of our own. Thus the “divine healing” cults teach that the service of a physician or the aid of drugs is as much a setting aside of the finished work of Christ as reliance upon baptism or deeds of charity for the securing of pardon would be. The untenability⁵ of this logical inference⁶ will at once show that while in some cases God was pleased to cure the sick without means, yet in other cases He both appointed and blessed the use of means. For the healing of the bitter waters of Marah, Moses was instructed to cast into them a tree which “the Lord showed him” (Exo 15:25). When God promised to heal Hezekiah who was sick unto death, Isaiah bade the king “take a lump of figs” and we are told “they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered” (2Ki 20:7). So with Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:23.

We are certainly not prepared to hold any brief in defense of the present-day medical fraternity as a whole. The greed for gold, the love of novelty (experimentation), the deterioration of moral character in all walks of life, fails to inspire confidence in any class or clique, and the writer for one would prefer to suffer pain than place himself at the mercy of the average surgeon. Yet this does not mean that we regard all medical practitioners as either charlatans or knaves, still less do we believe with “faith-healing” fanatics that they are the special emissaries of Satan. The Holy Spirit would never have termed Luke “the beloved physician” (Col 4:14) had he been employed in the service of the devil.

2. The Positive Side of This Subject

Having exposed the cardinal errors promulgated⁷ by the “divine healing” cults, we turn now to the positive side of the subject. And there is pressing need to do so, for the pulpit has failed grievously here as in so many other directions. Of old God complained, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6), and history has repeated itself. It was prophesied, “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amo 8:11), and that fearful prediction is now in course of fulfillment. In the vast majority of places rank error rather than the truth is being given out, and even in the few remaining centers of orthodoxy the preacher confines himself to such a narrow compass that his people are scarcely any better indoctrinated at the end of the year than they were at the beginning: there is no longer a bringing forth of “things *new*” as well as “things *old*” (Mat 13:52). How many of our readers, we wonder, ever heard a sermon on their duties and privileges in connection with sickness! Very, very few we fear. Little wonder that so many ill-informed members of evangelical churches fall such easy victims to modern religious fads.

It is no sufficient reply for preachers to say, we have far weightier and more essential themes to expound. True, the salvation of the soul is immeasurably greater than the healing of the body, nevertheless the Scriptures have much to say concerning the body, and it is to our very great loss if we ignore or remain ignorant about the same. Is it of no moment⁸ at all whether the Christian be healthy or sickly? Has our loving heavenly Father left His children

⁵ **untenability** – indefensibility.

⁶ **logical inference** – conclusion arrived at by correct reasoning.

⁷ **promulgated** –made known; published widely.

⁸ **moment** – importance; consequence.

without any instruction concerning the laws of health? And when they fall ill is their situation no better than that of the unbelieving world? Must they too lean upon the arm of flesh when sickness overtakes them, and seek the help of a doctor—often an infidel? The Lord is “a very present help in trouble” (Psa 46:1): does that mean nothing more than that the saint must, in every instance, seek grace from Him to patiently endure his afflictions? God has promised to supply “all the need” of His people (Phi 4:19): does that include nothing better than drugs and medicines, such as the Christ-rejector has access to, when he is ill? These are not questions to be lightly dismissed, but prayerfully pondered in the light of Holy Writ.

If the divine healing cults have gone to one extreme, that of unbalanced fanaticism, have not most of the Lord’s people in this matter gone to the opposite extreme—that of unbelieving stoicism or fatalistic inertia? Is not the attitude of only too many something like this? O well, man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward, so as I cannot expect immunity from physical sufferings, hence I must take what remedies I can for relief, and then make the best of a bad job; or, since this be my appointed lot, I must endeavor to bear it as patiently as I can. Of course when pain is acute they cry unto the Lord and beg Him to ease their anguish, just as Pharaoh did when God’s sore plagues were upon his land. And when Christians pray for recovery, how many of them really do so with the *expectation* of its being granted? How many know where to turn for a pertinent promise and then plead the same prevailingly? Yet some of them feel they are living beneath their privileges as sons and daughters of the Almighty, and when they hear or read what is advanced by the “faith healing” people wonder how much of it is true and how much false.

3. The Subject of Health

Now it seems to us that we should begin with the subject of *health*, for prevention is better than cure. O what a priceless boon is a sound body and good health: a boon which is denied to some from birth, and which few really appreciate till it be taken from them. It has long impressed the writer what a remarkable thing it is that any of us enjoy any health at all, seeing that we have six thousand years of sinful heredity behind us! It is due alone to the goodness and kindness of God that the great majority enter this world with more or less sound bodies and reach youth in the bloom of health. But sin and folly then take heavy toll and the constitutions of millions are wrecked before middle life is reached. Nor is it always brought about by wicked intemperance and dissipation. Often it is the outcome of ignorance, through failure to heed some of the most elementary laws of hygiene. Alas the majority of people will learn in no other school than that of hard and bitter experience and consequently most of them only discover how to live when the times comes for them to die. True we cannot put old heads on young shoulders, yet if the inexperienced are too proud to heed the counsels of the mature then they must reap the consequences.

Now surely, other things being equal, the Christian ought to enjoy better health than the non-Christian. Why so? Why, because if his walk be regulated by God’s Word he will at least be preserved from those diseases which are the fruit of certain transgressions. The English word “holiness” means wholeness, soundness. The more we are kept from sinning the more shall we escape its consequences. “Godliness is profitable unto all things (body as well as the soul), having promise of the life that *now is*, and of that which is to come” (1Ti 4:8). One of the basic laws of health is the Sabbath statute. “The Sabbath was made for man” (Mar 2:27), for his good, because he needed it. It was made for man that he might be a *man*, something more than a beast of burden or a human treadmill. His body needs it as truly as does his soul. This has been unmistakably demonstrated in this country. When France collapsed and the British Isles faced the most desperate crisis of their long history, the government foolishly ordered that those in the coal mines and munitions factories must work seven days a week, but they soon learned that the workmen produced *less* than they did in six days—they could not stand up to the additional strain.

By resting from manual toil on the Sabbath man is enabled to recuperate his strength for the labors of the week lying ahead, yet that cannot be accomplished by attending one meeting after another on that day, nor by exhausting one’s strength through lengthy walks to and from the services—moving the tent nearer the altar is the remedy—still less by profaning the Sabbath in carnal recreation. Another divine precept which promotes health is, “he that believeth shall not make haste” (Isa 28:16). Side by side with the speeding tempo of modern life we behold the multiplying nervous disorders, and those who are murdered or maimed on the highway. For many years we have avoided motor cars, buses and trains whenever the distance to be covered was not too great to walk, not using them more than two or three times in a twelve-month. Rushing around, hurrying and scurrying hither and thither, is not only injurious but a violation of the divine rule: “He that hasteth with his feet sinneth” (Pro 19:2)—which means exactly what it says.

“Take therefore no anxious thought for the morrow” (Mat 6:34). How good health is promoted by obedience to this precept scarcely needs pointing out. It is carking (care and worry) which disturbs the mind, affects circulation, impairs digestion, and prevents restful sleep. If the Christian would cast all his care on the Lord (1Pe 5:7) what

freedom from anxiety would be his. “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8:10)—physically as well as spiritually. What a touch to a wearied body and tired mind it is to delight ourselves in the Lord: “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine” (Pro 4:22). Do we really believe this? “Fear the Lord and depart from evil: it shall be health to thy navel and marrow to thy bones” (Pro. 3:7-8).

Godly living is conducive to healthiness of mind and body, and other things being equal, that *will be one* of its byproducts. By other things being equal we mean: as in the case of one who is not suffering for the sins of his father; who did not ruin his constitution by debauchery before conversion; and who exercises ordinary common sense in attending to the elementary rules of hygiene. One who is “temperate in all things” (1Co 9:25) will escape many or all of those ills which is the price which has to be paid for intemperance. Scripture does not require us to be either spartans⁹ or epicurians¹⁰ but to “let our *moderation* be known unto all” (Phi 4:5). God “giveth richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17), yet not to abuse. “Every creature of God is good and nothing to be refused” (1Ti 4:4) providing it is used aright, but His choicest creatures prove harmful if used to excess. God has provided great variety in nature, and each one has to learn for himself what best suits him and *deny himself* of that which disagrees.

4. The Duties and Privileges of Christians in Illness

What are the duties and privileges of the Christian when he falls ill? First, endeavor to ascertain the *occasion* and *cause* of his sickness. As intimated in the previous chapters, many physical ailments are due to inattention unto the most simple and obvious rules of hygiene. Much illness is brought about by our own carelessness and folly. Those guilty of gluttony are inviting trouble. But there are various forms of gluttony are inviting trouble, as well as degrees thereof. There is an intemperance of quality as well as of quantity. They who disdain plain and wholesome food, and who concentrate principally on fancy things and a rich diet must not be surprised if their systems become upset; in such cases a two or three days’ complete fast, followed by a return to a simpler and saner mode of living, is the best remedy. Those with weak chests should not needlessly expose themselves to the night air. Wet shoes are to be removed as soon as possible if colds are to be avoided. If we ignore the dictates of common prudence then we may easily discover what has injured and how to correct it.

But suppose upon careful reflection we are unable to trace our present ill health to any physical neglect or folly, then what are we to do? Seek to ascertain the *moral cause* thereof. “Let us search and try our ways” (Lam 3:40), making an honest endeavor to find out what it is which has grieved the Spirit. If conscience be allowed to do her work the probability is we shall soon be made aware that there is an Achan in our camp, and Achan which must be dealt with unsparingly if we are to enjoy the smile of the Lord again. If we have set up some idol it must be thrown down; if we have indulged some lust it must be mortified; if we have entered forbidden path it must be forsaken; or if we have wilfully departed from some path of duty it must be returned unto. “I said I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Psa 32:5).

But suppose after an honest and careful review of my ways conscience does not convict me of any particular sin, then what must I do? Prayerfully seek the help of the Holy Spirit. Get down before the Lord and cry “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psa 139:23-24). Though there may be nothing in my outward conduct for which the Lord is chastising me, yet it is likely there is something *within* against which He is intimating His displeasure and for which He requires me to humble myself. A spirit of selfishness, the allowing of pride, the workings of self-will, the stirrings of rebellion when divine providence crosses me, the exercise of self-righteousness, may be the plague-spot of my soul which needs purging. In the rush and pressure of every-day life the “little foxes which spoil the vines” (Song 2:15) are apt to be neglected, and if we are careless then we must not be surprised if we are placed on our backs for a season, that there may be time for reflection and opportunity for close dealings between the soul and God, that the hidden things of darkness may be brought out into the light and faithfully dealt with.

5. 2 Chronicles 7:14 Considered

“If my people which are called by my name shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and *will heal* their land” (2Ch 7:14). This passage bears directly on our present subject and contains important and definite instruction for us. First, it shows that God sends physical judgments upon His people because of their transgressions. Second, it makes

⁹ **spartans** – those who deny themselves all pleasures.

¹⁰ **epicureans** – those who indulge themselves in all pleasures.

known what they are to do when the Divine rod falls upon them. Third, it contains a pertinent and precious promise for faith to lay hold of. Against this it may be objected that such a passage is not applicable to us; that God's dealings with His people in this Christian era are on very different principles than those which actuated Him under the Mosaic economy; that He dealt with them according to the Law, whereas He deals with us according to the riches of His grace. Such a contention is entirely unscriptural. God's governmental dealings are the same in all dispensations: maintaining the requirements of holiness and exercising mercy toward the penitent have ever characterized God's ways. Had the Old Testament regime been one of stern and unrelieved justice, there had been no healing promised upon repentance, for Law as such knows no pity and shows no mercy. Let it be carefully noted that the teaching of the New Testament is precisely the same on this subject as in the Old Testament. "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation (judgment) to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. *For this cause* many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (1Co 11:29-30). The Corinthians had been guilty of profaning the Lord's table, turning the holy supper into a carnal feast. God would not tolerate such irreverence and impiety in this dispensation any more than He would under the Mosaic, and evidenced His sore displeasure by visiting them with a *temporal judgment*, smiting them in their bodies. Thus this passage is strictly analogous to that in 2 Chronicles 7. But more, as there so here, the remedy is also graciously made known: "For if we would judge ourselves we should not be judged" (v.31). If the Corinthians would unsparingly condemn themselves for their unseemly conduct and mourn over it before God, His judgment would be removed and the many weak and sickly ones recovered and not be made to "sleep" (die). If we sit in judgment on ourselves we shall not be judged by the Lord. "But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world" (v. 31); God is chastening us here that we may escape eternal woe hereafter.

Let us return then to 2 Chronicles 7:14. There we find the Lord's people being dealt with for their sins. A temporal judgment bears heavily upon them: how is deliverance therefrom to be obtained? First, they must "humble themselves." And what is meant by that? The same as in 1 Corinthians 11:31, "judge ourselves." A word in Leviticus 26:41 will supply the needed help: "if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled and they then *accept of the punishment* of their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant." To humble ourselves beneath the rod of God is to cease asking, what have I done to deserve this? To stop resisting the rod, and meekly bowing thereto, acknowledging that my wicked conduct *deserves* it. David humbled himself when he owned "I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me" (Psa 119:75). To judge ourselves is to take sides with God against ourselves: not until we do so does the rod begin to obtain its designed effect. The "peaceable fruit of righteousness" is only obtained under divine chastisement "unto them which are *exercised* thereby" (Heb 12:11)—exercised in their conscience. We must "*hear* the rod" (Mic 6:9) if we are to profit therefrom, and when we have heard its rebuking message, *endorse* the righteousness of it.

"If my people which are called by my name shall humble themselves": that is the first thing, and it is vain to proceed further until it be properly attended to, for pride is more hateful to God than anything else. "And pray" is the next thing. Until we have truly humbled ourselves before God there can be no real *prayer*, but having taken our place in the dust and condemned ourselves, then we may make known our requests unto Him. And what is it, under such circumstances, that we most need to pray for? Surely for a deeper sense of His holiness and of our vileness, for a contrite and broken heart, for faith in His mercy, for cleansing and restoration to fellowship. Such requests issue not from the Pharisee, but they *are* the breathings of humility. "And seek my face": is that but a repetition of the previous clause? No, it goes further: it expresses increased definiteness, diligence and fervor. The omniscient One cannot be imposed upon by mere lip service: He requires the heart. There has to be more than a bare asking, namely, a seeking, and such a seeking that we actually draw near and have a face-to-face meeting with Him we have displeased. God will not gloss over our sins, neither must we.

"And turn from their wicked ways." It was their departure from the paths of righteousness and entering into forbidden territory which brought down upon them the displeasure and rod of the Holy One, and therefore if they are to be delivered from His judgment they must of necessity forsake their sins. "Turn from their wicked ways" with loathing and abhorrence, with no secret reserve but with firm purpose of heart to abandon them and go back to them no more (Psa 85:8). Repentance is something more than sorrowing over the past: it includes the resolution there shall be no repetition in the future. Idols must be destroyed and not put away in a cupboard from which they may be taken out again. "Then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will *heal* their land." Here is the gracious promise. But mark well its opening "Then": only when its preceding conditions have been fully met: we have no warrant to look for its fulfillment until its qualifying terms are observed by us. Note too its scope: hearing from God is granted, forgiveness is assured, and healing is available for faith to claim.

“Then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” (2Ch 7:14). We have no time to waste on any who would raise the quibble that this verse refers to the healing of land and not of our *bodies*. But some who perceive that the principles of this verse *are* pertinent to cases of personal affliction will ask, are we then to understand that where God has visited His people with temporal judgment and they have complied with the conditions He has here specified, He will in every instance remove that judgment; that He will bestow immediate and complete healing? Ah! The terms of that question go beyond the terms of that promise: 2 Chronicles 7:14 neither says that He would heal their land immediately nor completely. Nor must we when pondering the subject of divine healing confine ourselves to this particular verse. For instance, we read that the men of Jericho sought unto Elisha on behalf of their ground, saying “the water is naught and the ground barren.” And we are told the prophet said “Bring me a new cruse and put salt therein. And they brought it to him. And he went forth unto the springs of the waters and cast the salt in them and said, Thus saith the Lord, I have *healed* these waters; there shall not be from hence any more death or barren land” (2Ki 2:21).

God could have healed those waters *without* any salt, as He could have made sweet the bitter waters at Marah without bidding Moses to cast a certain tree into them (Ex 15:23-25). Sometimes the Lord is pleased to use means, and at other times to dispense with them: for He exercises His sovereignty here as elsewhere. Perhaps some will say that this makes the subject more complex and hence more perplexing. Doubtless, and God may have so designed it. The natural man wants everything to be made smooth and easy for him. But God’s way is to stain human pride, to make us feel our insufficiency, to drive us to our knees. God would have our hearts to be *exercised* before Him, and instead of assuming we must now act in the same way as we did before in a similar situation, look to Him for instruction and directions. “My soul wait thou only upon God, for my expectation is from him” (Psa 62:5).

God is sovereign and does not act uniformly, and we are both responsible agents and utterly dependent upon Him, and therefore must act neither irrationally nor presumptuously. God is sovereign: He did not always afflict Israel’s land with drought or pestilence when they displeased Him, nor does He afflict the Christian’s body each time he backslides or forsakes the highway of holiness. And when God did cause His judgment to fall upon Israel’s land, He did not always remove His stroke as soon as confession of sin was made and reformation of conduct was affected; nor will He in every instance removed sickness when the afflicted one acknowledges his fault and does his “first words.” And, as already pointed out, when God was pleased to heal Israel’s land sometimes it was by blessing the means of His own appointing, and at other times it was without the use of any means at all. Thus it is when He heals our bodies. To one blind man Christ gave sight instantly, but to another He put His hands on his eyes a second time before he was fully restored (Mar 8:22-25).

Does someone say, all of this seems very confusing and gets me nowhere. No doubt it is so to the carnal mind. It is for the tried child of God we write and not for those who wish to be spared all exercise of heart, like patients going to a doctor for a prescription so that nothing is required of them but to hand it to the chemist for him to make up. As intimated at the beginning of the preceding paper, the first duty of the ailing Christian is to inquire into the occasion or cause of his sickness: whether it be due to imprudence or intemperance, whether God be chastening him for some breach of His Law or whether there be some other reason for it, for afflictions are sometimes sent upon the saints for their refining and pruning rather than for correction, that they may yield some of the choicest of all the spiritual fruits. Thus the believer who desires light on his situation must wait upon the Lord and say “show me wherefore Thou contendest with me” (Job 10:2).

If the Lord has shown that the sickness is a mark of His displeasure because we have followed some wicked way, then our course is clear, namely, to conduct ourselves according to the requirements of 2 Chronicles 7:14. Having done so, then what? Appropriate its promise, yet meekly and not presumptuously. Having righted the wrong before God, having obtained His ear, now plead His Word. Say: Lord, I have sought to humble myself, pray, and seek Thy face, and renounce my wicked ways, and Thou assurest me Thou wilt forgive and heal me: do as Thou hast said. But Lord, I am a poor ignorant creature and knowest not Thy mind: what wouldest Thou have me to do? Is it Thy pleasure to lay Thy restoring hand upon me this very moment? If so, enable me to trust in Thee with all my heart; or wouldest Thou have me to use some means? If so, graciously direct my mind and hand to them and cause me to count upon Thy making them efficacious unto me, so that I may trust Thee and not them, that the glory may be all Thine own.

6. The Pertinency of Matthew 9:29

“According to your *faith* be it unto you” (Mat 9:29) is most pertinent unto our present inquiry. God is pledged to honor faith wherever He finds it: never does He fail those who trust Him fully; no, not when they count upon Him working a miracle, as many can testify. But what is the faith here spoken of? It is one which rests upon the

sure Word of God. It is one which is made up of two chief elements: expectation and submission. There are some who suppose those two things are subversive of each other, that the attitude of not my will but Thine be done makes real expectation impossible. But that is wrong, through a mistaken conception of what spiritual expectation consists of. Let it first be said that where there is not first genuine resignation there can be no true expectation. Spiritual submission is spreading my case before the Lord and asking Him to deal with it as He sees best, and if I count upon His wisdom and goodness, that is the exercise of faith; and if I have confidence that He will do so, that is the expectation of faith—the expectation not that He will grant what my carnal nature desires, but that He will give what is most for His glory and my highest good; anything other than that is not faith but presumption.

Some bodily infirmities are produced by the devil, probably more than are commonly suspected. Job's boils were caused by him, and we read of a daughter of Abraham "whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years" (Luk 13:16). Certainly it is neither an honor to the Lord nor a credit to His child for one of them to be overcome by the Enemy. Nor need he be, for it is written "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jam 4:7), to which should be added "Whom resist steadfastly in the faith" (1Pe 5:9). Many years ago it was arranged that we should speak in a certain city church, and a few hours before the service we were suddenly attacked by a heavy cold and developed a high temperature. The friends with whom we were staying urged us to cancel the engagement and phone another preacher to deputize, for it was pouring with rain and a long walk was before us. But we realized that Satan was hindering and committed ourselves into the hands of our Master, counting upon Him to protect us from any harm. He did so, and the next morning we were quite normal. On another occasion we lost our voice and could speak in only a hoarse whisper, but we trusted the Lord to undertake, and preached for an hour and a half without any inconvenience and could easily be heard in the remotest corners of the large building; yet as soon as we left the pulpit we could not speak at all. No, He never fails those who trust Him.

The subject is many-sided and much has to be left unsaid. It is clear to us that many Christians are living below their privileges in this matter. Jehovah-Rophi ("the Lord that healeth thee": Exo 15:26) is as truly one of His titles as Jehovah-Tsidkneu ("the Lord our righteousness": Jer 23:5), yet how few count upon Him as such, having more confidence in human physicians and their medicines. Fewer still seem to know anything about trusting the Lord for the body (1Co 6:13). It is written "the prayer of faith shall save the sick" (Jam 5:15), yet the exercise of faith is not subject to a mere effort of the will. It is our duty to pray "Lord, increase our faith," yet that prayer will not be answered unless we use what we already have (Luk 8:18). Broadly speaking, when sickness prevents the discharge of duty, it is our privilege to count upon the Lord to remove the hindrance.

Here let it be said, we are far from affirming that all who resort to material remedies are missing the Lord's best, though in many instances that is probably the case; nor that God is always ready to heal if we trust Him. Rather is it His will that some should glorify Him "in the fires" (Isa 24:15). God sent an angel to deliver Peter from prison, but suffered Stephen to be stoned to death. Some plants thrive best in burning heat, whereas ferns flourish in the shade. Certain graces, like zeal and intrepidity, are exercised on the battlefield, whereas meekness and patience are developed under suffering. God does not intend that many should do such a work as George Muller (1805-1898) did and therefore He gives not faith for it, and those who imitate him fail. The privilege and duty of each Christian is defined in "Commit thy way unto the Lord: trust also in him, and he shall bring to pass" (Isa 37:5). Bring *what* to pass? His way, the best way, though it may be the very opposite of what you wish. Commit thy case unto Him, trustfully, and leave Him to decide what will be most for His glory. If sickness persists, beg God to sanctify it to you.

7. Appendix on James 5:14-16

A number of friends who appreciated our recent articles on this subject have written to us expressing the desire for a few words on James 5:14-16. We respond to their wish with a certain amount of diffidence, for we are not sure in our own mind either as to its interpretation or application. This is a passage which has long been an occasion of controversy and debate, and those who took part therein found—as is often the case—that it was easier to refute the arguments of their opponents than to establish their own position. When we are uncertain about the meaning of Scripture we usually remain silent thereon, but in this instance we will give the leading views which have been expressed, and state how we feel toward them.

First, Romanists insist that this anointing with oil is a standing ordinance in the church and James 5:14-15 is the principal passage appealed to by them in support of their dogma and practice of "extreme unction." But here as everywhere the papists go contrary to the Scriptures, for instead of anointing the sick as a healing ordinance, they only administer it to those at the point of death. We have no hesitation in denouncing their perversion as a mere hypocritical pageantry. The "unction" they use must be olive oil mixed with balsam, consecrated by a bishop, who must

nine times bow the knee, saying thrice “Ave sanctum oleum” (Hail, holy oil), and thrice “Ave sanctum chrisma” (Hail, holy chrism), and thrice more, “Ave, sanctum Balsamum” (Hail, holy balsam). The members anointed are the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and for the extremities, the reins and feet: in women, the navel. The design thereof is the expulsion of the relics of sin and to equip the soul for its conflicts with the powers of evil in the moment of death. One has but to mention these things to reveal their absurdity.

Second, the position generally taken by the Reformers and Puritans, was, that this anointing the sick with oil was not designed as a sacrament, they being but two in number: baptism and the Lord’s supper. They pointed out that so far from this being a standing rite, the apostles themselves seldom used oil in the healing of the sick: they wrought cures by a touch (Act 3:7), by their shadow (Act 5:15), by handkerchiefs (Act 19:12), by laying on of hands (Act 28:8), by word of mouth (Act 9:34). Nor does it appear that they were permitted to employ this gift indiscriminately, no not even among brethren in Christ dear to them, or why should Paul leave Trophimus at Miletum sick (2Ti 4:20) or sorrow so much over the illness of Epaphroditus (Phi 2:27)? In this too, God exercised His sovereignty. But what is more to the point, this supernatural endowment was only of brief duration: “But that grace of healing has disappeared, like all other miraculous powers, which the Lord was pleased to exhibit for a time, that He might render the power of the Gospel, which was then new, the object of admiration forever” (Calvin [1509-64]).

A list of the “charismata” or supernatural gifts which obtained during the apostolic period is found in 1 Corinthians 12, “to another faith, by the same Spirit; to another the gift of healing, by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another divers kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues” (vv.9-10). They were designed chiefly for the authenticating of Christianity and to confirm it in heathen countries. Their purpose, then, was only a temporary one, and as soon as the canon of Scripture was closed they were withdrawn. As 1 Corinthians 13 plainly intimates “whether there be prophecies (inspired messages from God) they shall fail (to be given any more); whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be (supernatural) knowledge, it shall vanish away” (v. 8). It was the view of Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Thomas Manton (1620-1677), John Owen (1616-1683), and in fact nearly all of the Puritan divines, that James 5:14-15, refers to the exercise of one of those supernatural gifts which the church enjoyed only in the first century.

Among the leading arguments advanced in support of this contention are the following. First, the “anointing with oil” clearly appears to look back to Mark 6:13 where we are told of the twelve, they “anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them.” Second, the positive promise of healing, v. 15, seems to be an unconditional and general one, as though no exceptions, no cases of failure, were to be looked for. Third, “healing” was certainly one of the miraculous gifts specified in 1 Corinthians 12. Moreover, it hardly seems likely that the faith here mentioned is an ordinary one: though whether it differed in kind or only in degree is not easy to determine. There was the faith of miracles—either to work them or the expectation of them on the part of those who were the beneficiaries, as is clear from Matthew 21:24; Mark 11:24; 1 Corinthians 3:2. The anointing with oil after the praying over the sick is regarded as a seal or pledge of the *certainty* of healing or recovery.

On the other side, we find such a -taught man and so able an expositor as Thomas. Goodwin insisting on the contrary. He pointed out, first, that James 5:14 is quite different from Mark 6:13, for here the anointing with oil is joined with prayer, whereas prayer is not mentioned there, but only the miraculous gift. Second, the ones to be sent for were not specified as men endowed with the gift of healing, but the elders, and there is nothing to show that all of them possessed that gift. The elders were standing officers who were to continue. Third, the ones to be healed are the sick or infirm, but extraordinary healing would have extended further—to the blind, the deaf and dumb, and would have reached to unbelievers instead of being restricted to church members: see 1 Corinthians 14:22. Fourth, the means commanded: oil and prayer on all such occasions, whereas the extraordinary gift of healing was not so confined, but was frequently effected without any means at all, by mere word of mouth.

Third, rather more than a century ago, a certain Edward Irving (1792-1834), founder of the “Catholic Apostolic Church,” propounded the theory that the supernatural gifts which existed in the early Church had been lost through the unbelief and carnality of its members, and that if there was a return to primitive order and purity, they would again be available. Accordingly he appointed “apostles,” and “prophets” and “evangelists.” They claimed to speak in tongues, prophesy, interpret and work miracles. There is little doubt in our mind that this movement was inspired by Satan, and probably a certain amount of abnormal phenomena attended it, though much of it was explainable as issuing from a state of high nervous tension and hysteria. Irving’s theory, with some modifications and some additions has been popularized and promulgated by the more recent so-called Pentecostal movement, where a species of unintelligible jabbering and auto-suggestion cum mesmerism¹¹ is styled “speaking in tongues,” and “faith healing.”

¹¹ auto-suggestion cum mesmerism – self-hypnotism.

Many of their devotees and dupes attempt to carry out James 5:14-15, but with very meager and unsatisfactory results.

Fourth, there is the grotesque idea of the Dispensationalists. These is a class of men who pose as being exceptionally enlightened, and under the guise of “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2Ti 2:15) arbitrarily partition the Scriptures, affirming “this is not for us,” “that does not pertain to this present era of grace,” “that relates to the Tribulation period,” “this will be fulfilled in the Millennium.” Because the opening verse of James reads, “To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greetings,” these robbers of God’s children declare this epistle is entirely Jewish; as well might they reason that the first epistle of Paul is designed only for Papists because it is addressed “To all that be in Rome” (Rom 1:1). The epistle of James belongs to all the “beloved brethren,” to all born-again souls (1:16,18). It is surely striking that the very passage we are here considering (5:14-16) comes right between a reference to Job (a Gentile) who endured patiently his affliction and found the Lord to be “pitiful and of tender mercy” (v. 11) and to Elijah who is described as “a man subject to like passions as we are” yet mighty in prayer (v. 17)—as though the Spirit was anticipating and refuting this mad notion.

Now where such widely-different interpretations are given of a passage, it usually follows that the true one lies somewhere between two extremes, and such we believe is the case here. We are very loathe to regard our passage as being an obsolete one, that it refers to something which pertained only to the apostolic age and relates not at all to us. When referring to the Papish travesty of this anointing with oil, Thomas Goodwin said, “The Reformed churches seeing that such a sacrament could not be and this must needs be a perversion of it, did justly reject it, only in rejecting it (as in some other things) they went *too far*, even denying it to have that use of restoring the sick as a seal of the promise, and an indefinite means to convey that blessing which God in mercy hath appointed it to be.” We are strongly inclined to agree with this eminent Puritan that the churches which grew out of the Reformation went too far when they set aside this passage as containing divine directions to be followed by Gospel churches throughout this Christian era. Such a sweeping conclusion needs qualifying.

The knotty point to be settled is, how far and at which points is this qualification to be made? Personally we believe the general principle and promise of the passage holds good for all generations—seasons of great spiritual declension and deadness only excepted. In normal times it is the privilege of the saint—when seriously ill, or suffering great pain, and not on every light occasion to send for the elders (pastors, ministers) of the local Gospel church to which he belongs, for they who preach God’s Word to him should surely be the fittest to spread his case before Him: see Job 42:8. They are to pray over him, commending him to the mercy of God and seeking recovery for him if that be according to the divine will: whether or not the anointing with oil should accompany the praying is a detail on which we are not prepared to dogmatize; but where the sick one desire it, his request should be complied with. The kind of oil is not specified, though most likely olive oil was used in the first century.

It should be pointed out that those promises of God which relate to temporal and eternal mercies are quite different from those pertaining to spiritual and eternal things, the former being general and indefinite and not unconditional and absolute as are many of the latter, and therefore as God reserves to Himself the freedom to make them good when, as, and to whom He pleases, we must ask in full submission to His sovereign pleasure. To illustrate: if I am starting out on a journey I ask God to preserve me from all harm and danger if that be His holy will (Rom 1:10), but I make no such proviso when I request Him to deliver me from those who assault my soul (2Ti 4:18). Thus the prayer of faith here is not a definite expectation that God *will heal*, but a peaceful assurance that He will do that which is most for His glory and the sick one’s good. That the promise of James 5:15 *is* an indefinite and not an absolute one is clear from this consideration: if it were not so, he could continually claim the promise and so never die—the “and *if* he have committed sins” further confirms the indefiniteness of what is here in view.

Some are likely to object against what has been pointed out in the last paragraph and say, but faith must have a foundation to rest upon, and it has none other than the Word of God: if then there be here no definite promise to lay hold of and plead before God, the prayer of *faith* is impossible, for there is no assurance the sick one will be healed. That may sound very plausible and pious, yet it is wrong. There is a faith of reliance and submission as well as a faith of expectation. There is no higher, no stronger, no grander faith than one which has such confidence in the wisdom and goodness of God as leads me to present my case to Him and say “Do as seemeth *Thee* good.” It is always a help when we can plead a promise, but God is greater than all His promises and where some specific need or emergency be not covered by some express promise, faith may count upon the mercy and power of God Himself—this is what Abraham did: Hebrews 11:19!

Personally we greatly fear that there are very few elders now left on earth whom it would be any good to send for in an emergency: only those living close to God and blessed with strong faith would be of any use. This is a day of “small things,” nevertheless the Lord remains unchanged and ready to show Himself strong on behalf of those

who walk uprightly. Though there be no spiritual elders available, yet *God* is accessible; seek unto Him, and if He grants you the prayer of faith then healing is certain either by natural means or by supernatural intervention. “The Lord is undoubtedly present with His people to assist them in all ages, and when necessary He heals their diseases as much as He did in ancient times; but He does not display those miraculous powers or dispense miracles by the hands of apostles, because that gift was only of temporary duration” (Calvin).

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (v. 16). Here the scope of our passage is widened: in verse 13 the afflicted or tried one is to pray for himself, in verse 14 the ministers are to pray for the one seriously sick; now fellow-Christians are to pray for each other. But first they are bidden to confess their faults one to another, which does not mean revealing the secrets of their hearts or acquainting their brethren with that which is suited only for the ear of God: but cases where they have tempted or injured one another or consented to the same evil act—tattling, for example. A mutual acknowledgement of those faults which cause coldness and estrangement, exciting one another to repentance for the same, promotes the spirit of prayer and fellowship. The healing here is also wider, referring primarily to that of the soul (Psa 41:4) and breaches (Heb 12:13), being the term used in 1 Peter 2:24, yet also includes removal of physical chastisements.

8. Observations in Conclusion

A few brief observations on our passage in conclusion.

1. Personal prayer (v.13) is enjoined before ministerial (v.14) and social (v. 16): individual responsibility cannot be shelved.
2. God is not indifferent to the sickness of His people (v. 14), but cares for their bodies as well as their souls.
3. Are not ministers too free in visiting the sick and praying over them, instead of waiting until they are sent for (v. 14)?
4. If none but elders (ministers) were to anoint with oil, surely they alone are eligible to administer baptism and the Lord’s supper!
5. All sickness is not occasioned by *sin* or the “if” of verse 15 would be meaningless.
6. Yet God does sometimes visit with physical chastisements as the “if” denotes.
7. The mutual confession of verse 16 refutes the Papish error of “auricular¹² confession,” for the priest does not confess his sins to those revealing to him the secrets of their souls!



¹² **auricular** – spoken directly into the ear.