

Biblical Healing

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PREFACE TO 2003 EDITION

This book discusses God's provision for healing as taught in the Scripture. The first chapter establishes that the atoning work of Christ includes provision for healing both the mind and the body of the believer. It also explains how God's sovereignty relates to how healing is dispensed. The second chapter deals with the nature and use of divine authority, and explains the authority that God has conferred upon us through Jesus Christ to minister healing. These two chapters form the theological basis for petitioning and ministering healing, and the subsequent chapters apply and extend it in specific ways.

In this new edition, I have made many major alterations throughout the text to improve content and style, but I have not made all the desired changes and additions, and therefore I expect to issue another edition in the future or write a new book that will include them. For example, although I have examined many scholarly and popular works on biblical healing, I have abstained from interacting with most of them in this book.

Moreover, if there is room for greater precision in language and accuracy in thought, then I hope to also make the relevant improvements in a future revision or in a new book on a related subject.

1. HEALING AND ATONEMENT

To the question of whether God heals the sick today, we answer that because God is omnipotent, we know that he can heal anyone – he is even able to raise the dead. And since God is sovereign, he does as he pleases, and no one can say to him, "What are you doing?" (Job 9:12). No one can challenge his decision or his justice. Therefore, he may heal some but not others, and in each case he needs to have sufficient reasons only to satisfy himself for his decision, whether or not he discloses these reasons to us.

Nevertheless, whether God grants or withholds healing, he does so in a way that is consistent with his attributes and his decrees as he has revealed them in Scripture. Therefore, it would be beneficial for us to study the biblical foundation for healing. This chapter is a brief study on healing and its relationship to the atoning work of Christ.

Physical death itself started because of Adam's transgression: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). At least some instances of sickness occur as a result of specific sins. For example, after healing a man who "had been an invalid for thirty-eight years" (John 5:5), Jesus says to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5:14).

However, not every instance of sickness is a result of a specific sin. In John 9, Jesus and his disciples come across a man who is blind from birth, and the disciples ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (v. 2). Jesus answers, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" (v. 3). Thus not every instance of sickness can be traced back to a particular sin, although every instance of sickness (and healing) can be attributed to the decree of God. Since we often have limited and possibly inaccurate information about a person, we should usually avoid assuming that we know the reasons for his sickness. There are a number of possible reasons for a person to be sick, and it may not be that he has sinned. In this instance, Jesus explains, "This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (v. 3). Nevertheless, if an instance of sickness is the result of a sin that one has committed, James 5:15 says that there is forgiveness and healing for such a person: "The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven."

Although God is the ultimate cause of all things, and he must indeed exercise immediate control over all things for their existence and operation, Scripture indicates that Satan is at least sometimes the secondary cause of sickness. Acts 10:38 says, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."

However, it is God who controls all secondary causes for everything that occurs. For example, although Herod and Pilate were the ones who had Jesus crucified, they were

only secondary causes. The primary and ultimate cause was God, who had determined that Jesus was to be crucified, and who had also determined the secondary causes by which this would happen: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:27-28). The crucifixion was ultimately not Herod's idea or Pilate's idea, but it was God's idea. And it was also God's idea that Herod and Pilate did what they did.

Although God is sovereign and determines all things that occur, he also uses means to accomplish all that he pleases. Just as God is free to send a "lying spirit" to "entice Ahab king of Israel into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there" (2 Chronicles 18:19-22), he is free to send any agent to accomplish his decree – even sending Satan to inflict Job and cause sickness. This should come as no surprise to Christians, who believe that all things belong to God, and that all things are under his control: "To him belong strength and victory; both deceived and deceiver are his" (Job 12:16).

Because Scripture sometimes call Satan the secondary cause of sickness, and because Scripture teaches that God sometimes brings healing to people, those who teach on the healing grace of God often deny that God will or can make people sick. However, Scripture teaches that God can do anything he wishes, whether it is to inflict or to heal, and whether it is to kill or to make alive. It would not do to attribute all sicknesses to causes other than God, such as sin and the devil, because even sin and the devil are under God's absolute and constant control.

For example, in Exodus 15:26, God says to Israel, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you."

Then, in Deuteronomy 28:58-61, he says

If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name – the LORD your God – the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses. He will bring upon you all the diseases of Egypt that you dreaded, and they will cling to you. The LORD will also bring on you every kind of sickness and disaster not recorded in this Book of the Law, until you are destroyed.

These two passages indicate that God was the one who sent the plagues against Egypt, and he was the one who made them sick. This same God could send sickness against Israel, or he could send them healing.

Applying God's sovereignty to the area of sickness and healing like this may stimulate questions about "the problem of evil" in your mind – how can God be good and loving if

he can and *does* inflict sickness on people? Since I have conclusively responded to this issue elsewhere, I will not repeat my answer here; rather, I suggest that you read what I have already written.¹ In any case, saying that it would be immoral for God to make people sick is absurd, since God is the one who determines what is moral and what is immoral.

For now, we will assume what I have established elsewhere, that God's exhaustive and absolute sovereignty does not in any way contradict his goodness, that his sovereignty does not generate any so-called "problem of evil." Rather, we may insist that God's absolute sovereignty over both sickness and healing is the only biblical basis upon which we may construct the doctrine of healing.

There is no need to fear that the doctrine of divine sovereignty will diminish the doctrine of healing. In fact, it is in the context of praising God's generosity that Hannah affirms his control over both death and life, and both poverty and wealth: "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts" (1 Samuel 2:6-7). Does God bring death? Of course he does, but he also brings life. Does God send poverty? Of course he does, but he also sends wealth. Does God make people sick? Of course he does, but he also makes people well. He does all these things according to his pleasure and his plan, and all that he does is by definition wise, just, and good.

By sickness, we may refer to a biological malfunction or condition that is abnormal relative to the way God created the human body to be. However, it is difficult to be very precise, since after the fall of man, everything about him is abnormal, and even what is perceived to be a healthy body is not in the perfect condition in which God had created it for Adam. This suggests that our complete healing would be granted after this life, when God will complete the salvation that he has started in us.

Therefore, although biblical healing refers to the restoration of the body by the power of God, it does not imply the perfection of the physical body, or the perfect health of the physical body. Rather, it is God's act upon the human body to correct an immediately obvious or threatening physical malfunction or condition, which can range from a cold to a cancer. But perfection is not in view, since no human body is in perfect condition in this life. In this sense, all physical healing in this life is relative and incomplete, just as the power of the Holy Spirit to develop holiness in us is relative and incomplete for now, although complete sanctification is indeed promised to us, to be fulfilled after this life.

Whatever type of sickness a person has, God can and does perform the corresponding act of healing to restore the body. For example, if the physical sickness is the result of a chemical imbalance, then a healing would be an act of God that restores the chemical balance of the individual. Another type of physical healing would be the restoration of damaged or missing body parts. Whether it is instant or gradual, God can and does restore damaged or missing body parts (such as an amputated limb) by his power.

¹ See Vincent Cheung, "The Problem of Evil," in *The Light of Our Minds*, and the relevant sections of *Systematic Theology* and *Ultimate Questions*.

Some sicknesses are psychosomatic, so that the destructive mental and emotional state of the individual has caused a malfunction in the body. This acknowledges a relationship between one's thinking and one's physical health. The Bible does not deny this connection, but it does not endorse many of the popular ideas regarding it. In such cases, God power may act directly to remove the physical condition, and renew the person's thinking by means of his word. But he may also instantly change the person's thinking, if he so wills. Of course, whatever God does to heal the immediate condition, the one who has been healed should continue to maintain right thinking by studying and reflecting on the words of Scripture.

There were instances in which the apparent conditions or damages in the people remained unchanged, but the bodily functions that were impaired by the conditions were restored. For example, there was one instance in which a bone was broken so that the person was prevented from using his arm. After prayer, he was able to use his arm again; however, according to the X-rays the bone was still broken. God can and does heal when he pleases and as he pleases, for our good and for his glory.

Before we discuss the relationship between healing and the atonement, it helps to first establish the nature of Christ's atoning work.

"Atonement" has to do with substitutionary sacrifices for sins. For example, in Leviticus 17:11, God says to Israel, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." Under the Old Covenant, the blood of the animals would make "atonement" for the sins of the people. Instead of requiring the deaths of the people who had sinned, God accepted the deaths of the animals as their substitutes. The animals died in the stead of the sinners.

The sins of the people were considered by God as having been "transferred" to the animals:

If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD. He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. He is to slaughter the young bull before the LORD, and then Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. (Leviticus 1:3-5)

After imparting their sins to an animal, it was then killed, dying in the stead of those who had broken the covenant with God by their sins (Leviticus 16:15-19).

But then the Bible says, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). This is only reasonable, since how can the sins committed by man

be paid for through the blood of lower creatures? God had accepted these sacrifices in anticipation of a perfect sacrifice, which would completely and permanently pay for and remove the sins of God's people. As Hebrews 10:1-10 explains:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, O God.'" First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

It is through the "sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ" that "we have been made holy...once for all." The blood of animals was insufficient to redeem sinners, but the blood of Christ was sufficient to completely and permanently atone for the sins of those God intended to save. Scripture goes on to explain:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Hebrews 10:11-14)

Therefore, the nature of Christ's atoning work is one of substitution, in which he died so that we may live, and in which "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God identified his elect with Christ, so that in his death, it is as if we have died, and that in his resurrection, we have been raised together with him (Colossians 2:12-14). Then, God applies Christ's atoning work to his chosen ones in their lifetimes by regenerating them and giving them the gift of faith (John 3:7-8; Ephesians 2:8-9).

According to Scripture, deliverance from everlasting condemnation is not the only benefit provided to us by the atonement. Our present interest is to affirm that the atonement also provides deliverance from physical sickness. Matthew 8:16-17 says, "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.'" Verse 17 is Matthew's application of Isaiah's prophecy about the atonement to the healing miracles of Christ. Since verse 16 mentions the "demon-possessed," verse 17 applies to both those who are afflicted by physical sicknesses and those who are afflicted by demonic powers.

There are those who, upon affirming that healing is provided in the atonement, draw the conclusion that perfect and complete healing is therefore the right and privilege of every believer to be claimed and received on demand in this life. Those who object to this conclusion sometimes choose the unfortunate response of denying that healing is provided in the atonement. But this response is both inaccurate and unnecessary.

First, it is inaccurate to deny that healing is provided in the atonement because it simply contradicts what the Bible teaches. D. A. Carson, who does not share the position that all believers may receive perfect and complete healing in this life on demand, nevertheless writes as follows:

It is also argued that because "there is healing in the atonement," as the slogan puts it, every believer has the right to avail himself or herself to the healing benefit secured by the cross. Sadly, noncharismatics have sometimes responded to this by *denying* that there is healing in the atonement – a position that can be defended only by the most strained exegesis.²

Second, it is unnecessary to deny that healing is provided in the atonement because to affirm that healing is provided in the atonement does not necessarily compel one to also affirm that perfect and complete healing is available to every believer in this life on demand. As Carson continues to say:

Of course there is healing in the atonement. In exactly the same sense, the resurrection body is also in the atonement – even though neither charismatic nor noncharismatic argues that any Christian has the right to demand a resurrection body *right now*. The issue is not "what is in the atonement," for surely all Christians would want to say that every blessing that comes to us, now and in the hereafter, ultimately flows from the redemptive work of Christ. The issue, rather, is what blessings we have a right to expect as universally given endowments *right now*, what blessings we may

² D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*; Baker Books, 2000 (original: 1987); p. 175-176.

expect *only* hereafter, and what blessings we may partially or occasionally enjoy now and in fullness only in the hereafter.³

Likewise, Wayne Grudem writes:

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.⁴

In a footnote, Grudem adds, "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)."⁵ According to Carson, to infer from the fact that healing is in the atonement to the conclusion that perfect and complete healing is now available to all believers on demand seems to be "another form of the overrealized eschatology so rampant in the church in Corinth."⁶ They are absolutely correct.

Now, both Carson and Grudem use the promise of the resurrection body as an example illustrating that that something is provided in the atonement does not automatically tell us at what time it will be completely fulfilled in us and how much of it we may receive in this life. Perhaps an example from sanctification is even better. Surely the atonement provides perfect and complete freedom from sin! Yet all believers still commit sins in this life. Sanctification is a process that God sovereignly controls in us, although he will effect it through our much striving and struggle, which he also controls: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13). Although we have already attained perfect and complete forensic righteousness through faith in Christ, we will attain sinlessness in thought and conduct only after this life.

Those who deny that healing is in the atonement may take one of several positions regarding healing.

³ Ibid., p. 176.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1994; p. 1063.

⁵ Ibid., p. 1063.

⁶ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*; p. 176.

Some people believe that God now "heals" mainly or even solely through medical science, but this is an arbitrary assertion without any scriptural support. In any case, it can be very misleading to say that "God heals through medicine," since this seems to confuse his ordinary providence with his special providence, the latter of which refers to God's control over his creation apart from ordinary means, and it is in this sense that we are now speaking of healing.

For example, God "feeds" us every day; he is the one who gives us our daily bread. However, this is different from how Jesus fed the large crowd of people by multiplying food. Also, it is God who "gives" wine through ordinary means, but that is different from how Jesus turned water into wine when the initial amount of wine has been exhausted in John 2. Likewise, God may "heal" through medicine in a sense, but this is not what we are considering at this point. The topic is the miraculous power of God to bring physical healing apart from medical science.

Others may affirm that since God is sovereign, he may heal if he wishes, although many people in this group believe that it is rare for God to heal apart from medical science today, and that the miraculous gifts manifested through the early disciples have ceased after the first or second century. Of course, the belief that it is rare for God to heal apart from medical science today is without any scriptural warrant, but it is often a strongly held presupposition that filters away all testimonies to the contrary. As for cessationism, or the belief that the miraculous gifts ceased after the first or second century, we will not devote the space to present the exegetical issues here – for now, we will just say that cessationism comes from a very forced and unconvincing interpretation of Scripture.

Rejecting both triumphalism on the one hand⁷ and cessationism on the other, my position on biblical healing is as follows:

God still heals people today in accordance with his absolute sovereignty. This means that he heals whom he wishes and when he wishes. He often grants faith to Christians to pray for their own healing or other people's healing, and these prayers form the occasions upon which he is often pleased to perform healing on the sick. Thus the process of healing is sovereignly controlled by him at every point.

In addition, God still endows some individuals with the gifts of healing. Those thus endowed will often have more frequent, complete, and spectacular answers to their prayers for healing. People endowed with such gifts may find themselves more effective

⁷ Triumphalism can refer to "the doctrine, attitude, or belief that one religious creed is superior to all others" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*), but here I mean something different. In fact, I would insist on the kind of triumphalism described by this dictionary definition, since it is stupid and immoral to affirm a specific creed unless you believe it is superior to all others. Rather, I am using the term in a more technical sense, so that triumphalism refers to the denial that many redemptive blessings are not yet completely fulfilled. It insists on having what God has reserved for the future. One writer notes that Paul had to steer the early church away from "a false triumphalism that denied the continuing reality of evil as it telescoped the future into the present," that our affirmation of present blessings must be "tempered by a realistic assessment of ongoing struggle in anticipation of a future reign, now begun but not yet fully and finally achieved" (*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*; InterVarsity Press, 1993; p. 988).

in ministering to those with specific types of sicknesses, so that one may find greater success when praying for those with cancer, while another may be more effective when praying for cripples. But whether or not you have been given the gifts of healing, or whatever gifts of healing you have, you can still pray for people with all types of sicknesses, just as any Christian may pray to God about any need.

This view is compatible with the understanding that healing is in the atonement, so that Christ's atoning work is the basis upon which God heals his people, and he dispenses this benefit provided by the atonement as he pleases. Again, that perfect health is included as a benefit of the atonement does not mean all believers (or any of them) can have perfect health right now. But God is certainly free to give us a small foretaste of it in this life by healing us, strengthening us, and immunizing us from disease.

To have *perfect* health means that there is *nothing* wrong or deficient with the body, and there is no room for the body to improve anymore. Those who insist that perfect health is available to us on demand right now through the atonement fail to realize that they are not really speaking of *perfect* health, but still just degrees of health (a degree that subjectively satisfies them as being "healthy" or "without disease"), although it is *perfect* health that is provided in the atonement.

Therefore, even those who teach "complete" healing through the atonement unknowingly acknowledge that although perfect health is provided in the atonement, it is nevertheless never attained in this life – not because of our lack of faith, but because God chooses not to grant it right now:

But the question that confronts us with respect to the gift of healing is whether God may from time to time grant us a foretaste or a down payment of the physical healing which he will grant us fully in the future. The healing miracles of Jesus certainly demonstrate that at times God is willing to grant a partial foretaste of the perfect health that will be ours for eternity. And the ministry of healing seen in the lives of the apostles and others in the early church also indicates that this was part of the ministry of the new covenant age. As such, it fits the larger pattern of blessings in the new covenant, many or all of which give partial foretastes of the blessings that will be ours when Christ returns. We "already" possess some of the blessings of the kingdom, but those blessings are "not yet" fully ours.⁸

Perhaps except for some blessings that are without degrees, and that are either granted or withheld, such as justification and adoption, all the blessings of the atonement are not fully granted in this life. Therefore, when we say that healing is not fully granted in this life, we are not trying to diminish this blessing, but it is a matter of sound doctrine.

⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*; p. 1063-1064.

Some may be concerned that affirming that healing is sovereignly dispensed by God instead of affirming that complete and universal healing is available right now will mean that we will experience fewer instances of healing or that it will weaken our ministry of healing. We may make at least two observations in response.

First, if we are indeed correct in saying that healing is sovereignly dispensed by God – that he decides to heal some and not to heal others – then, we will not experience more instances of healing even if we believe otherwise. If God decides not to heal a person, we will never be able to force him to heal the person, no matter what our "faith" says. Your belief does not change the nature of the atonement or how God will dispense the blessings in the atonement. God's will determines reality – your belief does not.

In any case, your belief is supposed to be in accord with God's will as revealed in the Scripture, so you should not believe something because it will supposedly better produce the results that you want, but you should believe something because the Scripture teaches it. That is, you should not believe something about God because you want him to be that way, but you should believe something about God because Scripture tells you that he is that way.

Second, it appears that the ministries of those who believe that it is God's will to completely heal everyone right now because healing is in the atonement do not get more people healed than those who believe that healing is sovereignly dispensed by God. In fact, by some accounts it seems that those who affirm God's sovereignty often have greater success at ministering healing. In addition, the theology of those who affirm God's sovereignty in healing are able to account for cases in which the sick are not healed, whereas those who affirm complete and universal healing also encounter many or even more of such cases in which people are not healed, but their theology cannot account for them, so that they tend to give many unbiblical and unconvincing explanations.

Moreover, the position being expounded here – a non-cessationist approach to healing that gives full place to God's sovereignty – appears to be the only one that is consistent with both the biblical data directly relevant to healing and the biblical data regarding the central Christian doctrines, especially in the areas of theology proper, soteriology, and eschatology. On the other hand, the other positions on healing contradict not only the biblical data on healing, but also the central Christian doctrines.⁹

Now we will turn to the relationship between healing and faith – the Bible draws a close connection between the two. For example, in Matthew 9:22, Jesus says to a woman, "Your faith has healed you." Several verses later, Jesus says to two blind men, "According to your faith will it be done to you," and their sight was restored (v. 29-30). Likewise, in Luke 17:19, he says to a leper, "Your faith has made you well."

In Acts 14, a cripple was healed under the preaching of Paul because the cripple had faith to be healed:

⁹ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. (v. 8-10)

Then, James 5:15 tells us, "The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." It is impossible to deny a strong relationship between healing and faith. The question is how this fits into what we have already established about divine healing, the atonement, and God's sovereignty.

Those who affirm that it is God's will to heal all who have faith because healing is in the atonement will often say that healing is no longer up to God, since he has provided it in the atonement, so that it is now up to us – if we have faith, we will be healed. Although we have already established that even when a blessing is included in the atonement, it is God who sovereignly dispenses it as he pleases, we may nevertheless directly address this matter of faith.

In response to the position that says, "Healing is up to us – if we have faith, we will be healed," we may ask, "But is *faith* up to us? Where does faith come from?" It is not enough to answer, "Faith comes from hearing the word of God" (see Romans 10:17), because not everyone who hears the word of God will receive faith, but many are rather hardened by the word of God. Thus Romans 10:17 only tells us *the means* by which faith comes, but it does not tell us whether or not it is up to us to have faith, and specifically, whether it is up to us to have faith for healing.

Scripture, in fact, teaches that even faith is sovereignly given by God. It is God who chooses to give faith to a given person, on a certain occasion, for a specific purpose. Hearing the word of God may provide the occasion upon which God may sovereignly choose to grant faith, but he does not have to grant it just because the person is hearing the word of God.

You may say, "Doesn't the Bible say that God's word will not return to him empty, but that it will accomplish what he desires and will achieve the purpose for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:11)?" Of course that is true; however, the verse says that God's word will accomplish all that God wills, and we have already established that he does not always decide to heal. The word of God will produce what God desires – faith in those whom he wants to heal, and no faith in those whom he does not want to heal.

The Bible says that faith itself is given by God as a gift, and not taken or manufactured by man at his own will: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). In other words, hearing the word of God does not guarantee faith, but it is indeed the usual means by which God grants faith as he wills. Jesus is "the author

and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2), so that he has complete control over its origin and progress.

Accordingly, Romans 12:3 mentions "the measure of faith God has given you." It is God who has given you the faith that you have, and he has given you a specific measure. He does not give everyone the same measure of faith, and he does not grant everyone faith for the same things. This is why the verse tells us to be aware of the measure of faith given to us, and to function in accordance with it. The biblical view of faith is such that "no one can boast"; therefore, if your view of faith attributes the strength of your faith to your own effort or diligence, it is no longer a sovereign gift, and you would have room to boast, and this shows that your view of faith is unbiblical.

Acts 3:16 specifically discusses faith for healing, and it teaches that faith is something given by God. We should first read verses 1-8:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer – at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

After this, Peter explains the healing miracle to the people, saying, "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and *the faith that comes through him* that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see" (Acts 3:16). Of course we receive and minister healing by faith, but it is a faith that comes from God!

According to Harold S. Chadwick, "Dr. Charles S. Price had one of the most miraculous ministries ever seen. So miraculous, in fact, that some of the miracles truly staggered the imagination and stumbled the faith of many because they were so astounding."¹⁰ Of course, this does not guarantee the soundness of his theology, for indeed one can find fault with many of his statements. Nevertheless, we may be quite sure that Charles Price is not making excuses when he makes the following statements:

Beloved, we have been wrong in our attitude and practice. When the sunlight of God's grace and truth floods our hearts and minds,

¹⁰ Charles S. Price, *The Real Faith for Healing*; Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1997 (original: 1940); "Foreword" by Harold S. Chadwick, p. vii.

there will be an end to our struggling, and these hearts of ours will be wrapped in His garment of peace. In that hour we'll realize that *we can receive faith only as He gives it*. No longer will we struggle to believe....We have made it difficult, when He wanted to make it easy. My heart has cried as I have seen needy souls struggling so hard to exercise what they thought was faith – when in my heart I knew it did not come that way.¹¹

Real faith is not our ability to "count it done," but is the deep consciousness divinely imparted to the heart that it is done. It is the faith that only Christ can give.¹²

I want you to see the difference between human effort to believe, and the faith that is the gift of God. How much better and more scriptural it is to wait until Jesus of Nazareth passes by and speaks the word of faith to the needy heart, than to mistake our "belief" in healing for the faith that He alone can give....We could have commanded, exhorted, and entreated – and she could have struggled to rise, as others have done, in the power of will instead of in faith. But no, there's a better way. It's God's way. It's the Bible way.¹³

For a long time we've been looking for faith on the wrong trail, so let us now get on the right trail that will lead us to *real faith*. The thing above all else I want you to see is that you cannot generate faith, you cannot work it up, and you cannot manufacture it. *God Himself must impart it*. You cannot obtain faith by struggling or by affirming that something is, nor can you turn your hope and desire into faith by your own power. You can get faith only from the Lord...¹⁴

I believe it is easier to go to Christ, and to ask Him for the imparting of His faith, than it is to try to work up and generate your own. It's true that in several instances, the Master mentioned the faith of the people who came to Him and were healed, and on occasions He complimented them because they had faith. My question is not whether or not they had it, but where did they get it?¹⁵

Whatever faith was given during the evening was withdrawn from me until I was praying for someone, who in the providence and

¹¹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹² Ibid., p. 14.

¹³ Ibid., p. 16-17.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

will of God, was ready to receive the blessing He alone can impart....Now no Christian is entirely devoid of faith. Enough faith is implanted in the heart to maintain your salvation, obey the Lord, and do the things that are pleasing in His sight – but you are continually dependent upon Him for its perpetuity.¹⁶

There's an ocean of difference between the disabled person who struggles and tries to walk, and the one who looks and prays for the faith by which he will walk.¹⁷

We may prefer greater precision with several of the above statements, but Price is essentially correct – we do receive and minister healing by faith, but in each instance, faith itself comes from the grace of God instead of the will of man.

Does not this mean that we are totally at God's mercy when it comes to healing, that we are healed at his discretion instead of by our decision? Paul seems to think so when he talks about Epaphroditus, and apparently considers healing a matter of God's mercy, so that he sovereignly decides in each instance whether or not to heal: "Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow" (Philippians 2:27).

Although many may consider it a terrible thing to be at God's mercy, Christians will rejoice that our God reigns over all things, even over sickness and health, and over faith and healing. Knowing that God is sovereign in the realm of healing should not discourage us; rather, it should incite us to pray to him for healing miracles: "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:30).

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

2. HEALING AND AUTHORITY

Matthew 8:5-13 records an incident that illustrates the place of spiritual authority in healing the sick:

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

As a centurion, the man understands something about authority. He understands that he has the right to issue commands to his soldiers and his servants, and since he has the authority to give those commands, these soldiers and servants must obey him.

The centurion understands the nature and the operation of authority in military and social settings. But then he has a remarkable insight about Jesus – namely, that Jesus has authority over sickness. Whereas the government could give this centurion authority over soldiers, no human government could give him authority over sickness. But the centurion realizes that Jesus has this special authority. He also realizes that this divine authority could function through commands, and thus all he needs is for Jesus to issue the command: "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed."

To this, Jesus responds, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith....Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." The centurion exhibits the pattern of great faith – he acknowledges and relies on the authority of Christ. Consistent with what we have discussed in the previous chapter, this is the basis for receiving healing – God is sovereign over all, including sickness and health.

Our understanding of the nature and operation of authority also forms the basis for ministering healing. That is, Christ is able to delegate his authority to others, so that they may minister healing in his name. For example, Matthew 10:1, 5-8 says:

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give."

In another passage, Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples with a similar commission: After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, "The kingdom of God is near you" (Luke 10:1, 9). They then return in verse 17 to report their success, saying, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name" (Luke 10:17).

Demons and diseases obeyed these disciples of Jesus because the disciples were ministering in his name. The disciples did not have any authority over demons and diseases in themselves, for ultimately only God possesses such authority; nevertheless, the disciples were effective in ministry because they were sent by Christ, having received authority from him to preach and to heal.

After the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus, the early disciples continued to exercise the spiritual authority given to them. For example, soon after Pentecost, "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer – at three in the afternoon" (Acts 3:1). There they met a man who was "crippled from birth" (Acts 3:2), and who was "being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts" (Acts 3:2). The passage continues:

When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. (Acts 3:3-10)

When the surrounding people express their astonishment at this miracle of healing, Peter says, "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?...By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see" (v. 12, 16).

We do not have the power of heal in ourselves, and it is not because of our special holiness that God will heal us or give us the ministry of healing. It is through faith in the name of Jesus that healing comes, and even this faith is not of ourselves, but it is a faith that comes through him. Therefore, whenever a miracle of healing occurs, we can indeed give God all the credit for it, since it is only through the sovereign action of God in our minds that we will have faith, and it is only through the sovereign action of God in our bodies that we will be healed.

After this, the religious leaders of the day seized the apostles and demanded, "By what power or what name did you do this?" (Acts 4:7). In other words, they were asking, "Who gave you this power? By whose authority did you do this?" The apostles replied, "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed" (Acts 4:9-10).

So there is a relationship between spiritual authority and biblical healing. Human beings do not have the authority within themselves to perform miracles of healing – such authority belongs only to God. However, God the Son has delegated a measure of authority to his disciples to minister healing in his name. On the other hand, it is futile for those who do not have delegated authority from God to minister healing, and when the situation involves demonic power, it can be dangerous to operate without genuine spiritual authority:

Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. [One day] the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. (Acts 19:13-16)

Biblical evidence affirms that present-day Christians also have authority to minister healing. For example, we have the following commission from Jesus to all believers:

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but

whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." (Mark 16:15-18)

Another passage that extends the authority to heal beyond the early disciples is James 5:14-15, which says, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven."

The elders are to "pray over" the sick person "in the name of the Lord." Nowadays, many church elders do not realize or acknowledge that one of their responsibilities is to pray for the sick people in their churches, with the expectation that God will heal them according to his will and decree. If they will begin to obey the Scripture, a new surge of divine healing power will flow among their congregations.

We will have more to say about methods of ministering healing, but for now, we are concerned only with showing that all Christians have the authority to minister healing to the sick, and that it is in fact one of the official responsibilities of church elders to pray for the sick people in their congregations.

This authority belongs only to Christians. Its operation does not rest on the mere mention of the name of Christ, but on the identity of the one who speaks it, since not all who speak the name of Christ are in fact authorized by Christ. The passage from Acts 19, already cited above, illustrates this. It appears that these Jews had witnessed the authority that Paul had over sickness and demons in the name of Jesus, and they tried to use the name without having an actual relationship with the one whose name they were using. Since they never had faith in Christ, and were never Christians, they had no authority to use the name of Christ to perform miracles of healing. The demons were not afraid to attack them.

Now, Christ authorized the apostles to heal in person. Although it may be true that the apostles had unique spiritual authority that no subsequent believers can rival, Christians must realize that it is unnecessary for Christ to individually authorize each believer to perform miracles of healing, because he has already done so through the Scripture. And since the Scripture is the word of God, it is just as authoritative as God speaking – there is no difference. Therefore, all who have faith in Christ may exercise the authority to heal in his name.

Even during the earthly ministry of Christ, there was a man who used the name of Jesus without his direct authorization, but nevertheless with his approval: "'Master,' said John, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is

not one of us.' 'Do not stop him,' Jesus said, 'for whoever is not against you is for you'" (Luke 9:49-50).

The apostles complained to Jesus that the man had not been his immediate disciple, but he was expelling demons through his name. The Bible does not say whether he was successful or not, but from Christ's response, it seems that he was probably successful. It appears that this man operated in the name of Christ from a different basis than the Jews in Acts 19. He did not use the name as an impersonal or magical mantra, but he appears to have operated as one who believed in the message and ministry of Christ. If Jesus gave his approval for this man to continue doing good in his name, how much more should we be doing the same things as Christians, having been commissioned and authorized to preach and to heal in his name?

Matthew 7:21-23 is sometimes cited against those who perform miracles of healing in the name of Jesus:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

However, this passage should not be used against genuine Christians who minister healing to the sick in the name of Jesus. Some believe that this passage refers to New Age practitioners who frequently invoke the name of Jesus, although their beliefs are hostile to Christianity. In any case, the context of this passage shows that Jesus is referring to false prophets, and not Christians at all. Verses 15-20 are as follows:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

In addition, note that Jesus says to these people, "I never knew you," so that they are not Christians at all, but are impostors. Therefore, it is a mistake to use this passage against genuine Christians who minister healing in the name of Christ. In fact, Jesus says in Mark 9:39, "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me." That said, more than a few "healing evangelists" of our day might indeed come under Christ's condemnation because of their false doctrines and outrageous practices.

3. HEALING AND MINISTRY

Since we have established the theological foundation for the healing ministry in the previous chapters, we may now consider several biblically approved methods of healing by means of which God may release his healing power among us. In addition, I will make some elementary remarks about ministry protocols and authority structures related to the healing ministry.

The ministry of healing often involves the laying on of hands. That is, the one who ministers healing places his hands on the sick person, and this is often accompanied by a prayer or a command for healing.

Jesus often laid hands on the sick during his earthly ministry: "When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them" (Luke 4:40). The early disciples also followed his example:

There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. (Acts 28:7-9)

Following the examples of Jesus and the apostles, many contemporary healing ministers have adopted the laying on of hands as an integral part of what they do when ministering to the sick. This is to obey and apply the words of Jesus, spoken before his ascension: "And these signs will accompany those who believe...they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well" (Mark 16:17-18). Thus to minister healing to the sick, all you have to do is to place your hands on the sick person and ask God to heal him.

Sometimes when you lay hands on the sick, you may feel a surge of power in or through your hands. Although it may greatly excite you to feel what you perceive to be God's healing power, Scripture gives no encouragement for you to measure by your feelings the intensity of God's power present in a given situation. Having the special sensation in your hands does not guarantee that the sick person you are praying for will be healed, and when you have no extraordinary sensations in your hands, it does not mean that God's power is weak or absent at the time.

The laying on of hands is a biblical and a popular method, and many have adopted it as their usual procedure; nevertheless, physical contact is not necessary when ministering healing. God may heal on the occasion of a statement or command directed to the sick person or the sickness, as evidenced by the ministries of Jesus and the apostles.

Consider the example of Jesus and the centurion cited in the previous chapter. No physical contact was necessary – the sick person was in another location altogether:

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed."...Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour. (Matthew 8:5-8, 13)

On another occasion, Jesus healed a man with a "shriveled hand." He was standing close to the man, but did not touch him:

Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. (Mark 3:3-5)

The apostles often performed miracles of healing in a similar way, issuing commands for healing in the name of Jesus:

Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. (Acts 3:6-7)

She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her. (Acts 16:18)

The fact that Jesus has authorized us to heal means that we have the "license" to minister healing to the sick, but since we do not have the unique spiritual authority of Christ and the apostles, is it ever right for us to authoritatively command healing to take place as they did?

In principle, there is nothing wrong with commanding healing to take place in the name of Jesus. However, this does not mean that we may indiscriminately command healing to take place and that all to whom we minister this way will be healed. This is where many have become confused, so an explanation is in order.

First, although it appears that faith and healing does not have a strictly proportionate relationship, there is indeed a strong relationship between the two. With this in mind, we will read Matthew 17:14-20:

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him." "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Jesus has said similar things elsewhere:

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done." (Matthew 21:21)

"I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him." (Mark 11:23)

He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." (Luke 17:6)

Now, Jesus says, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, then you can command even a mountain to move, and it will move." Applying this to healing, it would be fair to say that if you have faith "as small as a mustard seed," then any sickness or demon will be removed at your command.

When the disciples came to Jesus and asked why they had failed in casting out the demon from the young boy, Jesus answered, "Because you have so little faith." But then he said that even a faith "as small as a mustard seed" could move mountains! The necessary implication is that in this instance, the disciples did not have faith even as small as a "mustard seed." In other words, Jesus was saying that almost any amount of genuine faith

could move mountains, so the fact that the disciples failed meant that they did not have the necessary faith, however little, to expel the demon.

This explains why you can successfully command healing to take place in a person with cancer, and then fail to do the same in the very next person who has nothing more than a cold. Some people assume and teach that once you have achieved a certain level of faith for healing, then this faith is always present to be applied to any given individual. But if that is true, then once you have successfully commanded healing to take place in a person with a severe sickness, from then on you should never fail to successfully command healing to take place in anyone. However, if you even fail once, then no matter what kind of successes you have achieved before, in that particular instance when you fail, you do not have faith even as big as a "mustard seed." Again, Jesus insisted that if you have even a "mustard seed" faith, you would be able to move mountains; therefore, it necessarily follows that if you fail to remove a sickness by a command, you do not even have faith the size of a "mustard seed."

How is this possible? We have already established the answer in the first chapter. That is, God is not only sovereign over sickness and health, but he is also sovereign over faith itself. Your command for healing is effective only when God has given you the faith at that moment to make that command; otherwise, your statement is without power. Of course, anybody can say the words at any time, but for a command to be effective, at that moment you must have "the faith that comes through him" (Acts 3:16). Faith is a gift of God, given by the sovereign grace of God; it cannot be manufactured by your will or diligence. "Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord'" (1 Corinthians 1:31). You cannot boast about the healing miracles that occur under your ministry, because even your faith for healing comes from the sovereign will of God.

What does this say about the use of commands in our healing ministry? Ken Blue makes the following comments:

In reading the New Testament, I was initially disturbed to see that Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons very differently from the way we do it today. Every healing ministry I am familiar with depends largely on prayer. Jesus healed primarily by command. Unlike his followers today, he did not petition for healing; he pronounced it....On occasion I have observed people pronounce healing in Jesus' name with dramatic success, but I know of no one today who consistently and effectively follows Jesus' pattern....The early church did do the works of Christ, but as we shall see it did them differently than he.

At times, a command in the name of Jesus was sufficient for healing (Acts 3:6), but beginning in the Book of Acts, we find prayer to be the church's general method of healing. Peter prayed for Tabitha in Acts 9:40. Paul prayed before healing the father of Publius in Acts 28:8.

James also notes that if someone is sick they are to call for the elders of the church. Those elders are to pray in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will heal the sick person (Jas 5:14-15). From its earliest days until now, prayer has been essential to the healing ministry of the church. Thus in developing healing models within the evangelical mainstream, we should expect prayer in Jesus' name to be central.¹⁸

Even if they are inconclusive, Acts 9:40 and Acts 28:8 at least appear to show that the apostles did not have as much freedom and authority as Jesus himself in the healing ministry. Peter prayed before he told Tabitha to rise, and Paul prayed before he laid his hands on the father of Publius. Of course, Jesus himself had general times of prayer, but these two examples had the apostles praying immediately before the healing miracles took place, and it is safe to assume that their prayers had to do with the situations they were facing right then. This does not resemble the general pattern of how Jesus ministered healing, but rather how Elijah and Elisha ministered healing:

Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. (1 Kings 17:17-22)

When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy's body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. (2 Kings 4:32-35)

It seems that the only thing Jesus did that even came close to the above was when he raised Lazarus from the dead:

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you

¹⁸ Ken Blue, *Authority to Heal*; InterVarsity Press, 1987; p. 121-122.

always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:41-43)

However, Jesus himself said that his prayer, which was not even a petition, was unnecessary. This implies that he could have commanded Lazarus to rise from the dead without the prayer, but he only prayed to benefit those around him.

Earlier in this chapter we cited Matthew 17:14-20, in which Scripture records the disciples' failure to cast out an evil spirit. Mark 9:14-29 is the parallel passage, but it includes something else that Jesus said:

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out *only by prayer*." (v. 25-29)

Verse 29 highlights a difference between the authority and ministry of Christ and the authority and ministry of his disciples. Whereas Christ tells them that they would have needed to pray in order to expel the evil spirit, Christ himself did not pray; rather, as Matthew Henry observes, "Christ can do that with a word's speaking."¹⁹

I am pointing out the distinction between the authority of Christ and the authority of his disciples not to belittle the potential of our healing ministries, or to make excuses for our failures. In fact, I believe that God may cure cancers and even raise the dead when we pray for him to act. What Christ authoritatively performed, we may ask him to do the same today (John 14:14), and he may sometimes do these acts by having us make authoritative commands in his name.

Rather, it is appropriate and biblical to make the above distinction so as to exalt the superior ministry and the unique authority of Christ by pointing out the truth – that Jesus Christ alone is Lord over sickness and health. If the Lord of sickness and health is pleased to grant us a special surge of faith and power to command healing to take place in

¹⁹ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. 5*; Hendrickson Publishers, 1991; p. 413. Some ministers think that Christ is exhorting his disciples to have a normal and regular prayer life, and if they have been faithful in daily prayer, they would have been able to cast out the evil spirit. But the verse says no such thing.; rather, it appears that Christ intends to say, in effect, "You can cast out this kind of evil spirits only by prayer to God (instead of by commanding it to leave)." On the other hand, Christ himself exhibits a superior authority and ministry by casting out the spirit with a simple command.

a person – or in a hundred people – then so be it. We will make the command, and it will be done.

Otherwise, we may always rely on our priestly access to the throne of grace, and make petitions for miracles of healing: "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:30). Contrary to those who advocate that we should minister healing only or mainly by commanding healing to take place, there is nothing wrong or weak about putting our hands on the sick person, and say, "Father, you are sovereign over both sickness and health. I ask you to show this person mercy, and heal him for your glory." This biblical approach removes the pressure and the pride from those who minister healing, keeping in mind that Jesus Christ is the author of healing and the author of faith.

When the apostle James leaves instructions about the healing ministry to those who were not apostles but church elders, he writes, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15). The apostle makes it a universal rule that church elders should continue the healing ministry of Christ primarily by making petitions to God for healing in the name of Christ.

When we minister to the sick, we are asking Christ to do the same things that he did when he was on the earth (John 14:14), so that Peter rightly says to a paralytic in Acts 9:34, "*Jesus Christ* heals you." James says that when we minister to the sick, we are asking *the Lord* to raise him up. Again, this does not exclude the place of commanding healing to take place, but it seems to make prayers of petition central to the healing ministry of the continuing church.

To show that this approach to healing had always been the biblical approach before Christ and the apostles, and that such an approach is not at all weak in releasing the healing power of God, we may examine several examples of prayers for healing in the Old Testament.

In Genesis 20:17, Abraham prayed to God on behalf of Abimelech: "Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again." Isaac prayed for his wife, Rebekah, and God healed her of barrenness: "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant." (Genesis 25:21). Hannah was also barren, but she prayed and God opened her womb (1 Samuel 1).

In 2 Kings 20:6, King Hezekiah was ill, and the prophet Isaiah came to tell him that he was going to die. But Hezekiah prayed, and God sent Isaiah back to announce that God would add fifteen years to the king's life:

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death.
The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is

what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, "Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: "Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you...I will add fifteen years to your life....'" (2 Kings 20:1-6)

The Bible records an interesting incident in 1 Kings 13, where God exacted instant judgment on a king so that his arm "shriveled up," and then God restored it when the prophet whom he has sent prayed for the king:

When King Jeroboam heard what the man of God cried out against the altar at Bethel, he stretched out his hand from the altar and said, "Seize him!" But the hand he stretched out toward the man shriveled up, so that he could not pull it back. Also, the altar was split apart and its ashes poured out according to the sign given by the man of God by the word of the LORD. Then the king said to the man of God, "Intercede with the LORD your God and pray for me that my hand may be restored." So the man of God interceded with the LORD, and the king's hand was restored and became as it was before. (1 Kings 13:4-6)

None of the above were small miracles, and they are mostly unrivaled by contemporary healing ministers who insist that commanding healing to take place should be the predominant approach. On the other hand, the Bible appears to support our conclusion that God has given us authority to minister healing to the sick, and having such authority means that, among other things, we may lay hands on the sick and pray for God to heal them.

How then should we pray? Certainly it is right to ask God for healing, and we should go to him with the simple request that he give physical healing in time of need....But when we pray for healing we should remember that we must pray for God to be glorified in the situation, whether he chooses to heal or not. And we also ought to pray out of the same compassion of heart that Jesus felt for those whom he healed. When we pray this way, God will sometimes – and perhaps often – grant answers to our prayers.²⁰

One of the weakest areas in many healing ministries is the "ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2, 4). Of course, many healing ministers are very weak when it comes to general

²⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*; p. 1066.

theological knowledge, but many of them are deficient even when it comes to the theology of healing. Therefore, besides misunderstanding every aspect of biblical healing, they often fail to emphasize the ministry of the word as a means of bringing healing to the congregation. This is indeed tragic, since all Christians should honor the doctrinal ministries above all the other ministries.

The ministry of the word is effective to deliver all the benefits of salvation. The apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:21, "Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." In another place, he says, "At his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me" (Titus 1:3). God has provided salvation through Christ, but we know about it through the doctrinal ministries that he has ordained. Thus Paul reasons in Romans 10:14, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

Although every Christian is a "priest" in the sense that he can approach God without going through another Christian (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6), it is nevertheless true that God has especially chosen a number of Christians to be "ministers of the word" in a sense inapplicable to most Christians (Luke 1:2; Ephesians 4:11-16). Through these ministers, God grants to Christians insights into his redemptive plan and benefits that result from Christ's atoning work. God is often pleased to communicate scriptural information and manifest his power by means of the preaching of these ministers.

Several instances recorded in the New Testament illustrate that the power of God is sometimes manifested in the context of the ministry of the word:

Luke 5:17 says that while Jesus was "teaching...the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick." In Acts 8, many people were healed as Philip preached to them: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said" (v. 4-6).

In Acts 14, a man who had been "crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked," was healed as he was listening to Paul preach and as he responded to Paul's instructions: "In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, 'Stand up on your feet!' At that, the man jumped up and began to walk" (v. 8-10).

Finally, in Acts 20, a young man was raised from the dead during Paul's long preaching session:

Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was

picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted. (Acts 20:9-12)

God sometimes strongly manifests his power following a minister's preaching. It is often preferable to pray for the sick after you have preached the word; however, the message you preach does not have to be specifically about healing. At times, God's power goes to work even as the minister is speaking, as the following passages illustrate:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44-46)

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. (Mark 1:21-26)

Although the evil spirit in the above example did not leave the man until Jesus commanded it to do so, the ministry of the word, which was done with "authority," forced it to disclose its presence within the man.

Some people have told me that they were healed as I was preaching. Those people were surprised that they were healed even without prayer, and I would not have known that they were healed if they had not told me. God is sovereign, and he is free to heal anyone at any time in any way that he wishes. Sometimes he is pleased to heal people while the minister preaches. Accordingly, as I ministered for the sick, some people were healed while I was praying for them, but other people were healed while I was interviewing them about their sicknesses, even before I started to pray.

As Peter insisted in Acts 3:12, it was not by my power or because of my holiness that these people were healed, since sometimes I did not even know about their healing until they told me after the fact; rather, it is by God's power, according to his will, and for his glory. If he wants to heal, no man can stop him; if he refuses to heal, no man can make him. Nevertheless, the principle of persistent prayer applies, and it is God's preceptive or directive will for us to ask him for healing, whether or not he will grant it according to his secret or decretive will (Deuteronomy 29:29).

We do as he commands; he does as he pleases. Many of those who affirm divine healing speak as if this is not true, but James writes:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16)

If God does not will it, you cannot even live through "today or tomorrow," let alone receive healing. It is better not to "boast and brag" about how you will live or what you will achieve, but to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." Contrary to the teaching of many ministers, it is not finally up to you.

Paul's commands Timothy, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). Of course, this applies to divine healing as it does to other biblical topics. In addition, Proverbs 4:20-22 says, "My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body."

If we will persist in preaching the word of God, not only on the subject of healing but on the whole range of biblical topics, it may be that a harvest of healing miracles will break out in our churches:

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29)

If God would grant it, it is possible to drive sickness out of our churches by reading and teaching the words of Scripture, accompanied by prayer for healing and the laying on of hands. Nevertheless, although we may sow, and we may water, it is God who sovereignly causes the harvest: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

If God has called you to preach, you must face this responsibility with a sense of awe and fear, keeping in mind the admonition of the apostle James: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). Although Jesus constantly warns about the danger of

misleading others, he also reminds us of the great blessing that comes to the one who faithfully teaches God's word: "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). If God has given you a doctrinal ministry, you should know that he has given you a tremendous responsibility and a tremendous authority. The mantle of the ministry of the word extends to direct and enhance every area of the life of the believer and the church.

In his discussion on spiritual gifts, the apostle Paul likens Christians collectively as the "body of Christ." He explains as follows:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ....Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"...Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:12, 14-21, 27)

Since this passage comes between an extensive discourse on the nature and use of spiritual gifts, we are to understand it in such a context. With this in mind, the passage offers us an important insight concerning the nature of spiritual gifts – that is, God has sovereignly endowed each believer with spiritual gifts, and sovereignly placed him in the church to perform certain specialized functions.

The eye is designed to see by its very structure and equipment. Its inherent function is to see; the task of processing light is its natural ability. Although most organs function with greater efficiency with the appropriate conditioning, they do not require any extraordinary effort or training for them to be able to perform their designated function. Since the eye has been constructed to see, all it has to do is to be itself.

On the other hand, the eye is not designed to perform other functions such as processing sounds. Although it is a most intriguing and sophisticated piece of equipment, the eye cannot function as a hearing device for a person no matter how much it tries. Nevertheless, sometimes it is possible for a body part to do something that it is not

specifically designed to do. For example, a person may use his hands to walk, but he may not go very fast or very long doing that.

Finally, the organs do not assume their respective roles by their own decisions, but they are what they are because they were made that way.

Thus we may infer several things about spiritual gifts, whether we are talking about healing, teaching, evangelism, administration, or other functions:

1. If God has given you a spiritual gift to perform a certain task, you should be able to do it quite well. Although having the relevant instruction and training will enhance your abilities in this area, you will often experience no special strain or effort compared to others who try to do the same thing, but who are not especially gifted in doing it.
2. Although it is possible for you to perform a task that you are not gifted to do, you will often be less successful and efficient at it compared to one who is gifted to do it.
3. It is not your decision what kind of function you should have in the church. God is the one who chooses what spiritual gifts you will have and what roles you should assume in the church.

Ministering to the sick with God's power comes easily to the one who has the gift of healing.²¹ But this does not mean that only those with this gift can minister to the sick. In one place, Paul mentions the gifts of service, encouragement, giving, and mercy (Romans 12:7-8), but he is certainly not saying that only those gifted in these areas may serve, encourage, give, or show mercy! One with the gift of giving will be divinely enabled to amass financial resources and give with special generosity and wisdom; nevertheless, all Christians should be generous to donate their resources to the gospel and to the needy. When it comes to healing, all Christians have access to God through prayer, and may petition for anything permitted by Scripture. However, it remains that those whom God has given this gift will have greater success when praying for the sick. He employs his God-given authority to pray and heal more effectively than the average Christian, and the Holy Spirit actively heals in a more powerful manner through him.

Since the gift of healing is sovereignly given by the Holy Spirit and remains under his sovereign control (1 Corinthians 12:11; Hebrews 2:4), the healing power of God may sometimes manifest in ways unplanned and unexpected by the healing minister. In addition, the Holy Spirit may sometimes manifest his healing power beyond the boundaries of our immediate awareness, so that while the healing minister may be intently ministering to a particular person, other people in the audience may be receiving healing without his knowledge.

²¹ Literally, the "gifts of healings."

Although it is possible for Christians to minister healing apart from an official church setting, with the encouragement and authorization of a church, some of those who have the gift of healing may develop their healing ministries into a powerful and permanent aspect of the church's life. This leads to the question of how the church should regulate its healing ministers, and how the church's authority structure relates to them. The following intends to give some relevant scriptural guidelines.

All Christian ministers must possess a high level of doctrinal knowledge and purity. Any overseer in the church must be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2; also 2 Timothy 2:24). Paul says concerning the church elder: "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). Most ministers today already fail at this point – they do not affirm sound doctrine, they do not teach others accurate theology, and they do not refute false teachings by biblical apologetics. They do not qualify to have doctrinal and administrative authority in the church. On the other hand, 1 Timothy 5:17 says, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching," which implies that the doctrinal ministers in the church are to have preeminence over the others.

Francis Pieper articulates this point well in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

Luther often calls the public ministry the highest office in the Church. In what sense the ministry is the highest office he takes pains to explain. In the Church everything should be done in accord with the Word of God; in other words, everything should be ruled by God's Word as norm. If, now, the office of the Word in a Christian congregation is committed to a man, his office is to teach how all other offices in the congregation are to be administered. Luther writes: "If the office of the Word is conferred on a man, there are conferred on him all offices which are administered in the Church through the Word, such as the power to baptize, to bless...to bind and to loose, to pray, to examine, or judge. For the office of preaching...is the highest among them all; for it is the true Apostolic office, laying the foundation of all other offices, on which it is proper to build all the others, namely, the offices of...prophet, of governors, of those who have the gift of healing." Again: "To whom ever the office of preaching is committed, to him the highest office in Christendom is committed: he may then also baptize...or, if he prefers not to, he may tend only to the preaching and leave the baptizing and other auxiliary functions to others, as Christ did, and Paul, and all the apostles..."²²

Edmund Clowney apparently agrees with the above when he says:

²² Francis Pieper , *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 3; Concordia Publishing House, 1953; p. 461-462.

There is however a significant difference in the degree of the gifts given by Christ, as well as in the degree of faithfulness with which the gifts have been exercised. Every Israelite had the gift of physical strength from God in some measure. But not every Israelite had that degree of strength given to Samson. With strength in that degree went a calling to service that others could not render.

So with the ministry of God's Word. God does call workmen in the Word with deepened insights to perceive the outlines of sound words and with anointed lips to declare them. There are men made "mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24). A stewardship of the gospel is committed to such men. They have no choice: woe is them if they preach not the gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:16-17; Colossians 1:25).

As they are obliged to preach, so others are obliged to hear. Their message must be received as the word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13); those who by faith receive their witness will rejoice in the day of Christ's return, while those that obey not the gospel will know the judgment of God's vengeance (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10).

The congregation must respect the authority of ministers of the Word as those "over them in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 5:12) to be esteemed highly in love for their work's sake. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." (Hebrews 13:17)²³

Christ holds the highest authority in the church, but he had delegated his authority to the apostles, who then produced documents consisting of God's infallible word. Thus the Bible is now the immediate authority that dictates our thought and conduct. God rules the church by the Bible. It follows that those who hold the doctrinal office today have the highest authority in church government. Therefore, the ministry of healing must submit to the ministry of the word, and be defined and directed by it.

Of course, the elders of a church will often be those who also have the gift of healing, since James tells the believers to call on their elders when they need healing prayer: "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him..." (James 5:14). However, there may be some who have the gift of healing, but who nevertheless do not have the qualifications to be elders or deacons in the church. In these cases, if the elders decide to allow these people to have official healing ministries within the church, these people should only do so within the church under the authority and instruction of

²³ Edmund Clowney, *Called to the Ministry*; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964; p. 50-51.

the elders. Again, Christians may usually minister healing to anyone, but I am speaking of an official ministry within the church that is recognized and approved by the elders. In any case, one who has a doctrinal ministry in the church should always have authority over one who has only a healing ministry.

If the individuals ministering healing in a church are numerous enough to form a "healing team" that can be called upon whenever someone needs prayer for healing, then there should be a supervisor over the group. Since the supervisor would carry authority to give doctrinal and administrative directions relevant to the group's operation, a church elder with a doctrinal ministry should take on such a role.

Those members in the healing team who are less than exceptional in doctrinal knowledge must be forbidden to teach classes on healing, even if he has the gift of healing. Many who have the gift of healing are deceived into thinking that their opinions on the subject of healing are usually correct, but this is far from the truth. In fact, many who have this gift, but who have not diligently studied the subject, often teach from flawed interpretations of their own experiences, and they often make very foolish remarks when they try to teach from Scripture. That said, the supervisor should strive to educate and train his team members, so that eventually they will be familiar with the central biblical doctrines, and be able to teach on the subject of healing.

Just as many who have the gift of healing are deceived into thinking that what they say about healing or even other unrelated subjects would be usually correct, many Christians often assume that those who have successful healing ministries are also authorities when it comes to the theology of healing, other theological topics, or the application of biblical truths. This is not true. In fact, statistically we may find the reverse to be true, so that most people who have successful healing ministries are shamefully incompetent when it comes to almost all aspects of biblical teachings.

Of course, such ignorance is not caused by the gift of healing, but their neglect of theological studies. What I am saying is that one who has some success in praying for the sick may not have very much biblical knowledge about any topic at all, including healing itself. This is a deplorable condition that the church must correct by putting the doctrinal ministries above the healing ministries, even though immature believers, or unbelievers for that matter, may find the healing ministries more entertaining and less threatening.

Now, since the healing ministry often involves close interactions between individuals, it is wise to set down some general guidelines to ensure effectiveness and accountability. These are not necessarily rules that are directly commanded in the Bible, but they may be preferable or even necessary when applying biblical principles to our particular circumstances, and the wisest practices for practical purposes. For example, since the laying on of hands involves physical contact between the minister and the sick person, wisdom dictates that we observe several sensible rules.

When you pray for sick people, avoid touching their private or sensitive parts, especially when you are praying for those of the opposite gender. Bringing your hands closer to the

afflicted body parts may give you a sense of applying God's power more directly against the problem, but in reality this often makes little difference. God's power is not subject to distance, and he can heal the sick person even if you do not touch him at all.

In addition, you should generally avoid laying hands on a person of the opposite gender when in private. In fact, wisdom dictates that you altogether avoid being in the same room with another person of the opposite gender, whether for prayer or counseling, unless there is a third person present, or unless the meeting is recorded on videotape with the other person's consent. When ministering to children, there should be at least one other adult witness present, and the meeting should be recorded on videotape with permission from the children's parents. If the person refuses to have a third person present as witness, and if the person refuses to be videotaped, then it is best not to meet in private with this person at all. Of course, all video recordings of private ministry sessions should be viewed by only the people involved, law officials, or to be used as evidence in court.

Unless it is evident that you will be touching people, as would probably be the case in public gatherings where the laying on of hands is known to be a standard practice, you probably should request permission to lay hands on the sick person before doing so. It should be sufficient to simply ask, "May I put my hand on your shoulder and pray for your healing?" In church gatherings where the laying on of hands is a common practice, it is often unnecessary to explicitly ask for permission, since the people would be aware of the possibility. However, if you think there might be people in the group who are unfamiliar with the healing ministry and the laying on of hands, then you should give a brief explanation of what you will do, and what the people requesting prayer may experience, including the laying on of hands.

When several people are praying for one sick person, the group should avoid gathering into a too tightly formed circle, so that the person does not feel crowded or uncomfortable. Rather, it is probably best for just one person – two or three at the most – to lay hands on the sick person. This has the additional advantage of letting others observe the process, and to see that no inappropriate or indecent physical contact occurs. If the condition is observable, this also gives those outside the circle the opportunity to witness a healing miracle.

When laying hands on the sick in the presence of an audience, it is best to do so in a way that most or all of the audience sees where you are touching the sick person. Your actions should be visible and your words should be audible to the audience. If the sick person's spouse is present, allow him or her to accompany the sick and observe the entire process. Respect the wishes of the spouse as well as the sick person when it comes to physical contact.

If for whatever reason it is not possible to observe the above principles, then it is better not to touch the sick person at all; rather, just pray for him without any physical contact, and it will be sufficient.

All this may seem extreme to some people, but these principles should be meticulously observed to avoid misunderstandings, false accusations, and even legal problems. Some healing ministries that do not sufficiently emphasize similar guidelines suffer unnecessary and otherwise undeserved dishonor. On the other hand, if we will install these practical procedures where relevant and appropriate, there would be fewer church scandals, whether sexual, financial, or other kinds.

Besides allowing the audience to see where you are touching the people when laying your hands on them, you must also ensure that other aspects of the healing ministry are done without ambiguity. Many church gatherings are so emotional, loud, and disorganized that one may come away thinking that many have been healed when in reality very few or even none of the sick people were healed.

When a sick person requests prayer from you, ask him to state the problem. Ask him whether he has been to the doctor, and if so, what the doctor has said about the condition. Ask what the doctor says it would take for the person to be healed.²⁴ Ask if the person would be able to tell the difference if he is immediately healed, since this may not be possible with some conditions. After prayer, ask the person if he notices any difference, and if so, what they are. Ask if the person thinks that he is healed. In all of this, it is usually preferable to allow others to observe and hear the exchange.

You should never give the impression that a person has been healed when in reality he is not healed, or if you are uncertain that he is healed. On the other hand, if a person has been healed through prayer, you must see to it that God gets the credit for it. Nevertheless, if a person does not appear to be healed after prayer, this does not necessarily mean that your prayer is unanswered, since God may choose to heal him later. As with all aspects of Christian ministry, we should strive for as much clarity and honesty as possible when praying for the sick.

After praying for a sick person, you should never suggest to him that he should stop taking the medication prescribed by his doctor. Besides having the sick person's safety in mind, this also serves to avoid legal problems. In connection to this, do not give your own diagnosis on the person's condition.

In general, we are to practice the healing ministry in a way that does not bring dishonor to God and the Christian faith. The above principles may be adapted to suit specific situations, and churches may wish to formulate additional protocols according to their needs.

²⁴ We ask to hear the doctor's opinion to show that someone other than the sick person himself certifies that the condition indeed exists. Consistent with such a purpose, it would be even better if the sick person is able to produce the relevant medical documents about his condition. If the condition happens to be incurable by medical science, this also prepares the audience to observe God healing a person that doctors cannot cure. However, we must keep in mind that the opinions of the doctors are always inconclusive and often irrelevant, since doctors very often make mistakes. Of course, we can always pray for a sick person and God can heal him without ever knowing what a doctor has said about it.

4. HEALING AND MEDICINE

Christians today are very dependent on medical science,²⁵ often to the extent that they seldom seek God for healing anymore. Some reserve prayer for healing for only the most extreme cases, and others do not even think to pray for healing even then. We must condemn this tendency to exclude God from the area of health.

This chapter constructs a biblical view of God and medicine, and their roles when it comes to our health and healing. I will come to the conclusion that although Scripture seems to permit the use of medicine, it does not explicitly encourage its use. Also, Scripture warns against looking to medicine as a substitute for seeking God for healing and sustenance.

We will begin with a biblical passage that seems to condemn an excessive reliance on medical science:

In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the LORD, but only from the physicians. Then in the forty-first year of his reign Asa died and rested with his fathers. (2 Chronicles 16:12-13)

At the minimum, we may infer from this passage that Scripture disapproves of one who does not "seek help from the Lord" when he needs healing, but instead seeks help "only from the physicians."

In the NIV, this passage does not condemn medical science itself, but it emphasizes the error of neglecting to seek God for healing. However, this is sufficient to indict many Christians of wrongdoing, because they indeed seek help only from the physicians for healing, without seeking God in earnest study and prayer. Moreover, we will see below that it is possible that this passage in fact demands an even lower view of medicine than what we can infer from the NIV.

Many Christians attempt to justify their total dependence on medicine and their lack of dependence on God by several fallacious arguments, so we will deal with some of them here.

One of them states that most of the physicians at the time were idol worshipers, who would use spiritually illegitimate methods to heal. Thus for Asa to seek the physicians

²⁵ By "medicine" or "medical science," I am referring to the use of any natural substance and practice for physical healing. This includes substances and practices under the category of alternative or natural medicine. We are including every substance and practice for healing that comes under the ordinary providence of God, and that does not come under the special providence of God.

was a sign of spiritual apostasy, not because they were physicians, but because they were idol worshipers. Therefore, it is argued that our passage should not prevent us from going to modern physicians.

This explanation is seriously flawed. Although we may rightly consider Catholics, Buddhists, and many others as idol worshipers, even if we grant that many doctors nowadays are not idol worshipers in the traditional sense, many of them are atheists and evolutionists. Which is worse? At least we can say for sure that many doctors today firmly adhere to anti-Christian beliefs. If going to the physicians was wrong in the past because they were idol worshipers, then going to the physicians today may be even worse. Therefore, the argument fails to justify reliance on modern physicians, since it fails to distinguish them from the ones in the past in their essential spiritual condition.

Another popular argument against identifying medical science in the past with that of the present is that medical science in the past was very primitive. The physicians in the past often did more harm than good because they lacked the superior theories and technologies that we have today. However, although it may be true that modern medical science is more advanced, the argument still fails to justify the degree of dependence that Christians exhibit toward it today. Our passage says that Asa's problem was that he did not seek God, and not whether medical science was advanced enough in his day.

In addition, medical science today still falls far short of the ideal. For example, by some accounts thousands of patients are made worse or even killed every year because their cases have been misdiagnosed. Although many of these cases have been documented, the general public is not sufficiently aware of the limitations and incompetence that plague the medical field. This in itself may not be an argument against seeking help from medical science, but it should at least serve as a reminder that medical science is subject to the same inherent and insoluble problems that pervade all the empirical sciences.

Some people advocate the use of alternative or natural medicine. They agree that modern medical science is unreliable in that many cases are misdiagnosed, so that the wrong treatments and medications are administered. In fact, even when the conditions are correctly diagnosed, those who advocate alternative or natural medicine realize that doctors often fail to cure the patients, that they often fail to administer the proper treatments, that the treatments administered often result in negative side effects, and that doctors often make dangerous and sometimes fatal errors when performing surgeries.

However, although I agree with their assessment of modern medical science, it remains that these people fail to justify the use of alternative or natural medicine, or medical science in general, since they still fail to answer our passage about King Asa. Also, it is likely that the medicine used in Asa's day would be more like our alternative or natural medicine than what is used in modern medical science.

Then, some people claim that our passage does not prevent us from visiting the physicians in times of illness, but it warns against depending on them to the extent of excluding God from the healing process. In other words, God is against us depending

only on the physicians, but if our primary dependence remains on God, then we may seek medical help in peace, knowing that we are in God's hands and that he will rightly direct the physicians.

This argument initially appears to be possible in the light of our biblical passage, which says that Asa "did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians." Thus J. Barton Payne writes in his commentary on 2 Chronicles, "The king's sin lay in having recourse to [the physicians] 'only' and not seeking 'help from the Lord.'"²⁶ It seems that Asa's error was in seeking help *only* from the doctors.

However, the word "only" appears to have been added in the NIV and several other modern translations, perhaps to fit the translators' idea of what the verse means. The more literal translation of the NASB renders the passage as, "And in the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa became diseased in his feet. His disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but the physicians" (2 Chronicles 16:12). The KJV translates this verse as, "And Asa in the thirty and ninth year of his reign was diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great: yet in his disease he sought not to the LORD, but to the physicians." Any interpretation that softens the implications of this passage goes beyond what the text actually says.

In addition, if our primary dependence is really on God, then should we not focus on study and prayer more than going to the doctors? Of course, many people would claim that they are seeking God for healing *through* going to the doctors. However, our passage appears to distinguish between seeking God and seeking the doctors, so that Asa "did not seek the Lord, but the physicians." Even if we can infer it from some other biblical passage, this passage about Asa does not allow for the possibility that one may seek God for healing through the physicians.

There are a number of biblical passages that people use in their attempts to justify the use of medicine. We will first take James 5:14-15 as a representative case, since examining the arguments for and against the use of medicine based on this passage will be useful when studying several other passages. The passage is as follows:

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

Donald Burdick says that we should consider "this application of oil as medicinal rather than sacramental." After all, "it is a well-documented fact that oil was one of the most common medicines of biblical times...It is evident, then, that James is prescribing prayer and medicine."²⁷ We shall see that this interpretation is amateurish and irresponsible.

²⁶ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Corporation, 1988; p. 491.

²⁷ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Corporation, 1981; p. 204.

In the first place, not every biblical scholar believes that the apostle James is recommending medicine. For example, E. Gibson writes, "if...the oil was used as an actual remedy, (1) why was it to be administered by the elders? and (2) why is the healing immediately afterward attributed to 'the prayer of faith'? These questions would seem to suggest that oil was enjoined by St. James rather as an outward symbol than as an actual remedy."²⁸ In addition, Alexander Strauch writes, "James certainly is not naïve enough to believe that oil is curative for all diseases. We can assume that if oil were needed for medicinal purposes, it would have been applied long before the elders' visit....The elders' task is to pray for healing, and according to verse 15, it is the prayer of faith – not the oil – that restores the sick....The oil, therefore, must have had a symbolic significance."²⁹

Now, if the oil alone is sufficient to heal, then it would be unnecessary to pray for healing in conjunction with anointing the sick. But the passage makes prayer the decisive factor: "The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well" (James 5:15). However, if prayer is the decisive factor, then the oil is not a necessary factor; that is, the oil itself is not the means or even one of the means in healing. James says that it is the *prayer* that makes the sick person well, and that it is *the Lord* who will raise him up. There is no implication that the oil has any part in making the person well.

Scripture records instances in which God healed the most extreme cases and even raised the dead in answer to prayer.³⁰ In many of these cases, no physical substances such as oil were used. This means that prayer alone is a sufficient means to receive healing from God, which in turn means that no substance possessing medicinal value is needed when one desires to receive healing from him.

Even if oil possesses certain healing properties, how many kinds of diseases can it cure? James does not place a limitation on what kinds of sicknesses the elders may pray over using this method. Those who say that James has the medicinal value of oil in mind must also be prepared to say that oil is a "cure-all"; otherwise, their interpretation fails to make sense of the passage.

Now, even if oil possesses some healing properties, most people would agree that today's medicines are much more effective than an external application of oil to the body. Those who assert that the process described here even partly depends on the medicinal value of oil must also be prepared to assert that James, if he were alive today, would suggest better types of medicine. But there is no indication from the passage that we are to interpret it this way.

Those who interpret this passage to signify a biblical approval for the use of medicine has no warrant to change or equate "oil" with "medicine"; therefore, if they base their attempts to merge prayer and medicine on this passage, they must continue to use only oil as medicine, and nothing else.

²⁸ *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. 21, "The General Epistle of James"; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers; p. 71.

²⁹ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*; Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995; p. 258.

³⁰ Since I have already listed some of them in a previous chapter, I will not list them again here.

In other words, if James has in mind the medicinal value of oil instead of its symbolic meaning, those who understand the passage this way have no reason to continue using oil when they pray for the sick since we now possess much more effective medicines. However, the passage itself does not say that you can use anything else in place of oil, but that you must use oil itself. On the other hand, if James is considering the symbolic meaning of oil, then we may continue to use it when praying for the sick.

Therefore, the most proper interpretation of this passage is that the oil used in anointing the sick is merely symbolic, and we are not to think that there is any medicinal value in the oil itself. There is no justification for believing that James has in mind any medicinal value that oil may possess when he teaches us to anoint with oil and pray for the sick. The passage simply does not teach the use of medicine, but only that God will heal when we pray in faith, and it establishes a way by which we may carry out this instruction. The conclusion is that even if Scripture permits the use of medicine, this particular passage does not say it. Even if it does not discourage the use of medicine, it certainly does not encourage it, since it prescribes prayer as the solution to sickness.

Another passage some people use to justify the use of medicine is 2 Kings 20:1-7. It reads as follows:

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, "Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: "Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the LORD. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.'" Then Isaiah said, "Prepare a poultice of figs." They did so and applied it to the boil, and he recovered.

The argument is that God healed King Hezekiah through the figs, or at least in conjunction with them; therefore, it is appropriate for us to use medicine as a way to receive healing from God.

This interpretation suffers similar criticisms as the claim that James 5:14-15 encourages the use of medicine. If the figs themselves were sufficient, the king's physicians would have applied them to him long ago. If the figs themselves were not sufficient, and the

claim is that the figs worked in conjunction with the healing power of God, then this implies that either God's power alone was insufficient, or that God deliberately withheld his power to make room for the use of the figs. But there is no justification for making either of these inferences from the passage itself. If God's power alone was sufficient to heal, then it means that the figs were unnecessary to effect healing. Therefore, the figs at best carried some symbolic meaning.

One other example sometimes used to support the use of medicine comes from the ministry of Jesus:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth....Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. (John 9:1, 6-7)

Fewer scholars assert that this is an instance where natural remedies are applied in conjunction with God's power. We know that natural remedies are not under consideration here because if that is how some blind eyes are cured, we would be able to do the same. If the mixture of saliva and mud can give sight to the blind, even non-Christians should be able to perform this cure. It is best not to distort the obvious meaning of the passage; that is, Jesus healed a blind man through supernatural power, and any natural substance involved carried no medicinal value.

Mark 2:17 is an extremely popular verse used to support the use of medicine: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Mark 2:17). From this, many say that Jesus explicitly endorses medical science. In fact, some people say that the verse is prescriptive, so that if you are sick, you *should* go to a doctor.

Before replying to this, we should also read the previous verses to grasp the context in which verse 17 appears:

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:15-17)

We immediately realize that this passage addresses spiritual matters, and as such it cannot be used to conclusively derive the biblical view concerning physical sickness and medical science. Jesus is only providing an analogy that people would understand – sin to the soul is in a sense as sickness is to the body.

Those who interpret verse 17 as establishing the prescribed norm for sick people to follow see the verse as saying, in effect, "Just as those who are physically sick need medical doctors, I, as one who has the power to cure spiritual sicknesses, have come to reach those who are in sin." However, this interpretation cannot represent what Jesus considers as the norm, and it cannot represent his prescription for sick people. This is because Jesus himself healed multitudes of people by miraculous power, and he never referred them to medical doctors. If in verse 17 he is making a statement concerning whom the sick should seek (instead of making a mere analogy), why did he not practice what he preached by attending only to the spiritual needs of people, and refer those who are physically ill to the doctors? Those who insist that Jesus affirms the need for medical doctors in this passage must also accuse him of being a hypocrite if they were to remain consistent.

In addition, Jesus commissioned the apostles to heal the sick, and to continue the healing ministry after his ascension. We have no record of them referring anyone to the doctors. If we are to understand that verse 17 affirms medical science as the normal solution to sickness, then neither Jesus nor the apostles followed through with it.

On the other hand, in the place where Scripture explicitly tells a sick person what to do, James instructs him to call on the elders for prayer (James 5:14-15). This point from James 5 also refutes the idea that Jesus and the apostles were exceptions, that since they had the ability to heal the sick, they had no need to refer sick people to the doctors. Rather, since Scripture commands church elders to pray for the sick, the healing ministry did not end with the apostles.

In light of the above reasons, there is no justification for saying that Mark 2:17 acknowledges the need for doctors and medicines. In fact, when the Bible directly refers to doctors, it does not always portray them in a positive light: "And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse" (Mark 5:25-26). Today, many people still undergo tremendous suffering under the "care" of doctors, and many spend all that they have, but they grow worse instead of better. It is most foolish to believe that modern medical science should be our main solution to sickness.

Another popular argument used in support of medical science points out that Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, was a physician. We know this because Paul refers to Luke as "the doctor" in Colossians 4:14. Thus the argument is that Luke was a physician who became Paul's companion and even wrote Scripture, and this somehow validates the medical profession. However, it could be that Paul mentions Luke's profession only as a way to identify him, so that we are not supposed to derive any conclusions about God's attitude toward medical science based on it. Although Luke is a distinguished biblical character, in Scripture his accomplishments are never directly connected to his profession as a doctor.

Everyone had a profession before or even during his involvement in ministry. Peter was a fisherman who became an apostle and wrote Scripture, but that does not validate his previous profession as a fisherman. Matthew was a tax collector who became an apostle and wrote Scripture, but his profession was openly despised. Since tax collectors in those days were often dishonest and oppressive, even the Bible identifies them with sinners (Matthew 18:17). It would be strange to say that Matthew's apostleship and spiritual accomplishments somehow redeemed the profession of being a tax collector. Paul himself was a Pharisee who persecuted Christians, and who later became an apostle and wrote much of the New Testament. Therefore, the mere fact that Luke was a physician does not contribute to our discussion at all.

Now we will turn to examine several passages that in fact lend some support to the use of natural means for health; however, they still do not support medical science nearly as much as most people make of them. At this point, we have established that the Bible does not have the high view of medicine that many people claim, and that their arguments fail to establish biblical support for a tight integration between prayer and medicine. The next several passages will slightly redeem the use of natural means for health and healing, which will in turn lead us to the conclusion about the biblical view of medicine as stated at the beginning of this chapter.

One passage that seems to affirm the benefit of physical exercise is 1 Timothy 4:8: "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." Physical training is inferior to godliness since whatever benefits it may yield do not permeate "both the present life and the life to come." So from the outset, we understand that godliness is superior. What we are interested in is the value the verse attributes to physical training.

Now, the NIV renders the verse in a way that makes physical training more positive than the verse intends to say, for where it translates the verse, "physical training is of some value," a more literal translation is "bodily discipline is only of little profit" (NASB). The different translations generate two different meanings. Whereas one means, "Physical exercise has some benefits, but godliness has even more," the more literal version means, "Physical exercise is not very useful, but godliness is of great benefit."

Ralph Earle writes concerning this verse:

The Greek *pros oligon* could be translated "for a little time" – that is, for this life. "For all things" would then suggest "for all time," or forever. Literally, the passage says that bodily gymnastics are beneficial... "for a little." This certainly does not mean that physical exercise is of no value. But spiritual exercise is far more important, for it has value for eternity – "holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."³¹

³¹ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Corporation, 1978; p. 373.

The verse is saying that physical fitness is inferior to spiritual fitness because while the benefits of the former are limited to this life, the benefits of the latter will be for both this life and the next. But just how inferior is physical exercise? If I were to say, "Tommy has but a little strength, but Johnny is very strong," you would not think that Tommy is very strong at all.

Therefore, the main purpose of this verse is not to support physical exercise, but to assert the superiority of spiritual fitness over physical fitness. Many individuals do not need any encouragement to see physical fitness as important; rather, they need to have a lower view of physical fitness relative to spiritual fitness. Thus the proper use of this verse is in fact to urge people to place *less* focus on physical fitness, so that they may pay more attention to their spiritual health. It is strange that this verse is sometimes used to give validity to physical exercise when it is really saying that we should give more emphasis to the spiritual.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of our discussion, the verse does not declare that physical training is completely without value. Paul could have written, "Physical training is completely useless, but godliness is beneficial for all times," but he did not do so. The verse certainly does not teach that physical exercise is harmful or even sinful. Therefore, doing a certain amount physical exercise is permitted as a preference, or even a wise preference, but it would be a mistake to say that this verse prescribes or requires physical exercise.

Philippians 2:25-30 is another relevant passage, from which we may infer something about the use of natural means for health:

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Paul says that Epaphroditus had fallen ill because he had overworked. This implies that the problem was avoidable, and that if he had allowed himself sufficient rest, he could have avoided becoming sick, or at least not to the point of death.

Homer Kent agrees, saying:

Epaphroditus's close call with death is to be explained in relation to his sickness (v.27), and was not the result of persecution or of

adverse judicial proceedings. Furthermore, the ailment was directly due to his Christian labors on behalf of Paul. Perhaps it resulted from the rigors of travel and was compounded by his efforts to continue ministering to Paul in spite of being sick. It was not merely an unavoidable circumstance but was a risking of his life in the interests of his ministry.³²

The implication is that we may make certain decisions concerning the use of our bodies that may influence our health. For example, getting the proper amount of rest may help in avoiding health problems. This is the extent to which we may carry the implication of this verse for our discussion. The passage itself does not encourage proper rest or healthy habits, but simply gives the reason for the illness.

In a letter to Timothy, Paul writes, "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23). This is perhaps the verse that comes closest to a support for the use of natural means in health, but it remains for us to see how much support it gives to the use of medicine, if any.

The verse indicates that adjusting one's diet for health reasons is acceptable, but it would be a mistake to magnify this verse to overshadow all the biblical passages that encourage us depend on God for our health and to seek healing from him through prayer. The norm of Scripture appears to be that we should depend on God for health and healing through faith and prayer, although we should not test God by knowingly adopting health-endangering habits or practices.

If Scripture says to use natural means as one way to maintain our health on this earth – as this verse appears to tell us – then we should do that. The question is how much encouragement this verse is actually giving us to use natural means, and how much support it is giving to the use of medicine. Now, even if we grant that this verse permits the use of medicine, it is still only one verse, as we have established that the previous passages examined in reality do not support the use of medicine, even if they do not prohibit it.

Those who say that this verse constitutes the norm in Scripture and that the Bible gives eager approval to the use of medicine denies the clear meaning of the biblical text. Wine is not the same as medicine, it is only an adjustment to the diet. Ralph Earle writes:

The word for wine (*oinos*) is sometimes used in LXX for...unfermented grape juice...Furthermore, it is generally agreed that the wine of Jesus' day was usually rather weak and, especially among the Jews, often diluted with water. Moreover, safe drinking water was not always readily available in those eastern countries.³³

³² Ibid., p. 136.

³³ Ibid., p. 381.

Cleon Rogers agrees, and says, "The command to abstain from drinking water exclusively may have been due to the fact that contaminated water contributed to Timothy's indigestion."³⁴ So Paul's statement amounts to an instruction for Timothy to adjust his diet to suit his specific situation.

If I were to advise a friend who has a specific health issue, "Stop eating only meat, but eat some vegetables," it would be a huge stretch to say that this constitutes explicit approval for the use of medicine! Thus any support that this verse gives to medicine, if at all, remains very weak and indirect, and certainly inconclusive. However, the verse seems sufficient to establish that it is fine to adjust one's diet for health reasons.

Then, another argument often used in support of the use of medicine is that natural substances are inherently neutral (or even good), and it all depends on how one uses them. As Wayne Grudem writes:

God has...created substances in the earth that can be made into medicine with healing properties. Medicines thus should be considered part of the whole creation that God considered "very good" (Gen. 1:31). We should willingly use medicine with thankfulness to the Lord, for "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof" (Ps. 24:1).³⁵

Grudem's argument is based on what may be an invalid inference from Scripture. Just because God's creation is "good" does not mean that whatever we do with created things are necessarily good also. If we argue that we may use medicine because all created substances are either neutral or good, then we will have no justification to be selective about it – a poisonous mushroom is just as "good" as one that has healing properties.³⁶

Even if we grant that created substances may indeed be inherently neutral, assuming that one has the relevant knowledge about his options, no decision or action can be neutral. Choosing one thing amounts to not choosing the other, and choosing two at the same time amounts to choosing not to commit oneself wholly to either. Many substances may be "neutral" for some uses, but when a Christian uses them to cure sicknesses, the action cannot be neutral. Choosing medicine alone amounts to not choosing prayer, and choosing both medicine and prayer amounts to not choosing only medicine or only prayer.

Therefore, the argument claiming that created substances are neutral or good cannot settle the issue, but we must appeal to the foregoing discussion on the relevant biblical passages. So far, none of the passages examined provide explicit support for the use of

³⁴ Cleon L. Rogers, *The New Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998; p. 497.

³⁵ *Systematic Theology*, p. 1064.

³⁶ Paul's concern in 1 Timothy 4:3-4 is different. There he is arguing that no substance is *ceremonially* forbidden by God. Here we are discussing whether there is any explicit biblical justification for using medicine.

medicine, although at least one passage suggests that it is acceptable for one to adjust his diet for health reasons.

The Bible appears to permit but does not explicitly endorse the use of medicine. Although it gives no explicit support for the use of medicine, it does not follow that we must abandon its use altogether; however, it means that we must hold to a much lower view of medicine than many people are accustomed to in order to be consistent with the necessary implications of the relevant biblical passages.

One implication of our discussion has to do with how we should talk about instances when someone has recovered from sickness through the use of medicine.

Jesus says, "[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). So all rain comes from God, but under normal circumstances, we would not refer to rain as a blessing effected by God's miraculous power or special providence. Rather, rain is a blessing that comes from his general or ordinary providence. However, we would acknowledge rain as a miracle if it occurs under special circumstances: "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops" (James 5:17-18).

In the same way, although healing through medicine may be ultimately attributed to God, this is only true in the same sense that the food on your table ultimately comes from him. Of course we should be thankful for all natural provisions, including food and medicine, but we should never confuse them with miracles, or acts of special providence. Since healing through medicine is not really healing in the biblical sense, when we discuss our recoveries from sickness with other people, we should take care to clearly distinguish between recoveries with the help of natural means and recoveries through the miraculous power of God.

One who is cured with the help of natural means should be grateful to God, just as he should be grateful for his every meal and every breath, but he should be careful to distinguish between ordinary providence and special providence, so that he does not put medicine and miracles on the same level.

Let me make it clear that the purpose of this chapter is not to induce a sense of guilt or inferiority in those who are using medicine, and I am certainly not suggesting that they stop taking their medication. However, it is my intention to refute those who think that the Bible explicitly and enthusiastically support the use of medicine – there is no such support in the Bible. In connection with this, it is also my intention to encourage greater dependence on the power of God for health and healing.

To some people, it may seem more convenient to just rely on their doctors whenever they become ill; however, medical science in fact does not work nearly as well as they think. More importantly, as Christians we should exhibit faith in God in every area of our lives,

including the area of health, and thus it follows that we should always look to God for healing, whether or not we use natural means to help our recovery.