

1-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Hull, Cletus (2016) "The Power of the Cross and Healing in Ministry," *Leaven*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol24/iss3/10>

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The Power of the Cross and Healing in Ministry

Cletus Hull

As a Christian youth, the first book I read was David Wilkerson's *The Cross and the Switchblade*. For my senior paper in college, I wrote about "the wisdom of the cross in 1 Corinthians 1.18." The theme of the cross of Jesus has appeared throughout my life and in my academic studies. My preaching and pastoral ministry is guided by this overarching theme. Without the cross, the New Testament contains implausible words with little power. In my research as a pastor-scholar, I have recognized that the central motif of Paul's message centers on Christ crucified (1 Cor 2.2). In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle commenced the correspondence with "the message about the cross" and "the power of God" (1 Cor 1.18 NRSV).

This article considers the power of the cross in a pastor's ministry with regard to healing. My thesis underscores the need for a robust understanding of the cross with the issue of healing, considering both its theology and practicality. The apostle's eschatological doctrine of the cross contains a theology of salvation; subsequently, the preaching of the cross releases the power of God for healing in the church. Therefore, the cross of Christ reveals God's eternal plan for all people, and that power undergirds his sovereign purposes. As a pastor of a congregation, I believe a firm understanding of the cross remains essential for ministry, especially in the area of healing.

A firm belief in the essential meaning of the cross provides the true authority to liberate healing in the life of the church. In this matter of healing, we read concerning the ministry of Jesus (Matt 8.17) that it was "to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.'" Irrefutably, the cross represented Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection; therefore, a pastor must claim the veracity of this scripture in prayer for the sick with a congregation. In his suffering and resurrection, Jesus manifests the power of God in the believer's life.

Relationship Between the Cross and Healing

Jesus's ministry demonstrates his power in the cross. Matthew 8 and 9 records nine healings; however, it is in the middle of all of these miracles that the gospel writer reveals a message about the cross. It is here that the evangelist connects the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 to Jesus being the one to take our infirmities and carry our diseases. This prophetic scripture relates the healing nature of Christ on the cross to our healing ministries.

As the gospels prominently document, healing is a primary feature of Christ's ministry. Francis MacNutt writes, "Just as the early church kept a lively practice of the baptism in the Spirit, they also carried on Jesus' healing and deliverance ministries. For the next three hundred years Christians were proud of their healing mission and enthusiastically prayed for the sick and cast out demons."¹ For centuries, this belief was a misplaced essential of Christ's teaching, and the importance of Jesus's resurrection was missing. MacNutt continues, "By the year 800—more or less—a desire for baptism with the Holy Spirit had disappeared . . .

1. Francis MacNutt, *The Nearly Perfect Crime, How the Church Almost Killed the Ministry of Healing* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2005), 82.

[and] an expectant belief in healing the sick was also dying out. The two are intimately connected: If the power behind the healing prayer is not there, or is diminished, then fewer people will be healed. Healing becomes rare and unusual.”² The same remains true in our post-modern societies that healing requires a recovery of its biblical foundation. Healing is once again a part of the established churches, yet the modern-day Pentecostal/Charismatic movements would do well to balance their views of healing with the suffering of Christ found in the cross. Indeed, as one observes certain abuses with healing in today’s church, a corrective methodology needs to draw a dynamic union between the cross and healing.

The Practicality Between the Cross and Healing

As a pastor, chaplain, and professor for twenty-nine years, I preach with confidence about the power of God to heal. Because salvation and healing are in the cross (Matt 8.17), I believe prayer for healing remains appropriate for pastoral ministry. However, the results of healing prayer must be tempered by a healthy theology of the cross. Charles Farah expresses concern about the balance between healing and the modern-day emphases on faith. Because of disregard within certain Christian circles for the teaching on healing, he believes a correction with classic theology is necessary. In his perceptive book *From the Pinnacle of the Temple*, he presents a common storyline with prayer for healing. He writes:

Major premise: Healing is in the atonement.

Minor premise: Faith is the key to healing.

Conclusion: Therefore, those who are prayed for in faith will be healed.

Right? Not always. It just is not that simple. There is always an X factor in healing, an unknown quantity that God does not chose to reveal. Healing is a divine mystery and humility is our best approach to unraveling the answers.³

Farah’s scenario sets forth a common theme that causes many sincere Christians to fall into doubt and cynicism: we read that most of the healings of Christ appeared instantly and we believe that healing remains for our day as well yet the issue of healing often lacks acknowledgment that suffering is a component of the faith journey. When we pray for healing, an acceptance of the suffering of Christ on the cross must balance the triumphal idea of healing. An understanding of healing without a grasp of suffering fuels a deficient theology. World War II martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls this type of faith *cheap grace*. Bonhoeffer maintains, “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices.”⁴ In addition, as Farah aptly conveys,

Theology always lives within the realm of mystery. No theologian can escape the mysterious ways of God, the capricious ways of the Spirit. Theology is a peculiar science because, when it is most true to itself, it prostrates itself in humility, prayer and adoration. True theology is a theology of prayer, and in the presence of a living God one adores; he never wholly understands.⁵

Thus, sound theology remains vital for practical faith and healing.

We read in the scriptures that Paul left Trophimus sick (2 Tim 4.20), and Epaphroditus almost died (Phil 2.26–27). Did Paul lack faith with his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12.7–9)? Dan McConnell asserts in his critique, *A Different Gospel*, “One cannot help but wonder how Paul’s bodily illness would have been received today among [some Christians].”⁶ A balanced theology of the cross with divine healing would

2. MacNutt, 96.

3. Charles Farah, *From the Pinnacle of the Temple* (Plainfield NJ: Logos, 1979), 76.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1937), 45.

5. Farah, 135.

6. D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel, A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 163–164.

revive trust in solving many problems in these specific situations. It may be that the statement of Paul leaving Trophimus sick at Miletus intended to keep the church from extremes. In the light of the apostle's teaching on holy communion, sin, and sickness (1 Cor 11), John Thomas writes, "Paul not only believed God could use illness as discipline for believers who sinned (as in 1 Cor 11.30), but he could also use it as a means to accomplish his will through the preaching of the gospel."⁷ To such mysteries Paul had one answer, "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13.12). Most notably, those texts concerning the cross reveal the full counsel of God on this topic.

I have ministered for many years as a chaplain in a psychiatric hospital. Most of the patients have emotional and mental diseases that affect their lives and families. They are challenged in numerous areas of their lives. At times a resident has come in desperation and said, "Chaplain, pray for me!" Of course I say that I will, but I also ask, "Will you pray for me?" Do you know that I have never been turned down for a prayer? We pray together and, from the most depressed or schizophrenic person, a wonderful prayer comes from their heart. They solicit, "Lord, I lift up this chaplain wherever he may go in this hospital. Bless him as he meets others." Sometimes I glance up to verify if this is the same person that asked in anguish for prayer. The Bible encourages in James 5.16, "Pray for each other so that you may be healed." Healing begins when we act in faith to assist someone else.

Nevertheless, the power of God in the life of the pastor is indispensable for an anointed ministry. We must remember God always heals—whether instantly, gradually or in the resurrection—but God always heals! Joseph Fitzmyer testifies, "The gospel or the message of the cross is the power of God, because in that message the crucified Jesus is proclaimed as the one who brings God's power to deliver human beings from the evil of sin and moral destruction."⁸

I recall traveling to one of the hospitals in Pittsburgh to pray for a man who did not attend our church but was the husband of a member. He was in his 40s, suffered a heart attack, and was not a believer in the Lord. As we prayed for him, he mentioned that he felt someone touching his chest. I know that I did not physically touch him in that area of his body but he went through the surgery and miraculously recovered. He started attending our church, became a member of the board, and is doing considerable work for the congregation. *That* is what healing is about, effecting new life in people.

When Jesus traveled to the home of Peter and met his mother-in-law, Christ reached toward her as she remained sick with fever. The scriptures say in Matthew 8.15, "He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him." God wants to move your life forward so that you return to giving one hundred percent to the people you care about in your life, family, and church. When Peter's mother-in-law received her healing, Matthew writes that she waited on Jesus. The Authorized Version expresses it as "she arose, and ministered unto them," or as the Message Bible states, "No sooner was she up on her feet than she was fixing dinner for him." She could not serve others when she had a fever. Now the fever has disappeared and she can abundantly bless her son-in-law. Healing involves reentering into the fullness of your life.

Paul wrote in Philippians 3.10, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." The power of God is the only answer for overcoming sin, evil, and Satan in our modern society. The cross is more than a philosophical idea; it is God's intervention into human history. As humans suffer in this lifetime, Christ came and suffered on their behalf, not to take away pain, but to provide salvation. On a surface reading, Christ's suffering on the cross is hardly explainable. In our wisdom his actions appear impractical and unrealistic (1 Cor 1.18). Yet, Christ's suffering becomes not only our atonement but also is the eschatological realization of hope in life.

The value in suffering is recognized in the cross. Some Christians have taught that faithful followers should always be physically healed if they pray hard enough. They have proclaimed, "If you have enough faith you will be healed." Proponents of the *prosperity gospel* claim that authentically turning one's life to

7. John Christopher Thomas, *The Devil, Disease and Deliverance* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 61.

8. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, The Anchor Bible, vol 32 (New Haven: Yale, 2008), 165.

Jesus immediately results in abundant health and financial blessings. The idea remains that believers should never be poor or experience sickness. Paul surrendered his life to Jesus and, although the Lord restored his vision, the apostle nevertheless had a number of years of pain (2 Cor 10–13). Yet it was not for lack of faith (2 Cor 12.7–9) on his part.

All Christians struggle with suffering, as it remains an unpleasant fact of life. The cross was not chasing after suffering, and suffering was not a sign of weak faith. As Paul wrote, “We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame” (Rom 5.3–5 NIV). My church includes an extended time for prayer and praise to the Lord. This testimonial moment in worship has transpired into an integral element of our weekly worship. People publicly share both their requests and thanksgivings to God. Our traditional congregation has openly embraced this period, inviting personal prayer into the liturgy. We have learned that the cross covers all suffering and healing. We obey God’s call to pray for healing, and the Lord pours his healing power in our sanctuary. I agree with Farah as he clarifies, “Whatever our experiences may be, we simply act from obedience. When He heals, we praise Him. When He does not heal, we still give Him thanks. It is His to heal, ours to obey.”⁹ Indeed, some people have come to a deeper faith in Jesus during sickness than in the pleasant and healthy times.

Again Paul writes, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times, I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Cor 12.7 NIV). Paul also utters, “Be . . . patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (Rom 12.12 NIV). Obviously, the apostle experienced both suffering and resurrection in his ministry and life. The power of the cross reveals meaning in both suffering and healing.

Historically Christians were not afraid of the cross; rather, they loved the cross. In fact, Paul writes, “If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer” (2 Cor 1.6 NIV). The cross teaches that one can be inflicted with suffering yet have tremendous faith, and can rejoice because of the complete dependency on God that it has facilitated. It is not a sign of feeble confidence. Actually, it requires faith to face suffering with dignity. The cross reminds us that the true miracle of healing is a conversion of the heart.

The cross is central to all Christian teaching, including healing. Without an understanding of its implications in the life of a believer, one cannot truly follow Jesus as he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9.23 NRSV). John Stott wrote, “The Cross is the pivot as well as the centre of New Testament thought. It is the exclusive mark of the Christian faith, the symbol of Christianity and its cynosure.”¹⁰ God’s wisdom focuses on the cross and therefore all teaching about healing is subject to the cross and its meaning for Christian living. Ultimately, God demonstrates his transformational power for healing in the cross as God’s touch still has its ancient power.

In the congregation I pastor at Trinity United Christian Church (near Pittsburgh), Holy Communion is the high point of the cross in worship. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), including all churches of the Stone–Campbell heritage, remains among the few Protestant denominations that celebrate communion every week. Communion is a horizontal relationship with our brothers and sisters and a vertical relationship with God, which is reflective of the cross of Jesus.

We receive the Holy Communion, believing in the Lord’s presence to heal. We love to take it often for many reasons, not the least of which it is a sacrament, a point of contact, to release our faith to God and forgive our brothers and sisters. Communion is the Lord’s table and his work on the cross sets the table. He welcomes all who desire to know him deeply and share in his life to heal. It is the cross and the blood of Christ cleansing us from all sin (1 John 1.9). That notion is the meaning and reality of the words *this is my body and blood* in relation to the power of the cross.

9. Farah, 48.

10. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 41–42.

Conclusion

The cross continues as the centerpiece for power in healing. In his inspirational classic *The Power of Prayer*, nineteenth-century minister R.A. Torrey identifies the problem and calls for a revival of healing in the church, “Beyond a doubt, one of the great secrets of the unsatisfactory and superficiality and unreality and temporary character of many of our modern, so-called revivals is that much dependence is put upon man’s machinery and so little upon God’s power.”¹¹

A renewal of the power of God and teaching on the cross can reestablish the sovereign work of healing today. As a pastor, I pray for a new measure of the Holy Spirit to empower God’s church. Then, as Torrey expresses, “According to God’s own will and purpose, His power shapes and fashions history.”¹² Most crucial to our concerns, the wisdom that Paul discovered in the cross (1 Cor 1.18) and a humble acknowledgement of the work of the cross can transmit the power of God to heal in our generation.

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11. R.A. Torrey, *The Power of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 190.

12. Ibid.