

HEALING PRAYER

Like many other mainline churches, the Lutheran church focuses primarily on Jesus' teaching and preaching ministries (explanation of God's love), while giving little attention to Jesus' healing ministry (experience of God's love). This is puzzling, since 40% of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and about a third of Luke and John, focus on healing. The book of Acts exhibits a similar abundance of healing miracles. Jesus sent His disciples out to (1) "*preach the Gospel*," (2) "*heal the sick*," (3) "*raise the dead*," and (4) "*cast out demons*" (Matthew 10:1ff.; Luke 9:1ff, 10:1ff). These were "*signs*" of the Kingdom of God. All of these are part of His commission to "*teach them obey all things I commanded you.*"

Until Constantine and the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the primary means of conversion was not preaching, but healing and exorcism (cf. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyprian, Tertullian). Lutherans have emphasized true doctrine or "explanation and proclamation," almost to the exclusion of an experience of God and His powerful Spirit. In practice, healing miracles and casting out of demons is seen as ending with the New Testament (i.e. Cessationist Theology). Yet few would deny that Christ and His Spirit offer the power of God to transform lives.

Jesus treated sickness as the enemy, and we read that Jesus "*cured them all*" (e.g., Mt. 12:16). While suffering may have some redemptive value, the "*cross we are called to take up*" is persecution and rejection for the sake of Christ. Jesus said to His disciples: "*I tell you most solemnly, whoever believes in me will perform the same works I do myself; he will perform even greater works, because I am going to the Father.*" (John 14:12) Do we believe that we can "*do greater works*" than Jesus? "*So remarkable were the miracles worked by God at Paul's hands that handkerchiefs or aprons which had touched him were taken to the sick, and they were cured of their illnesses, and the evil spirits came out of them.*" (Acts 19:11-12). When Peter wanted to describe Jesus' ministry to Cornelius, he said nothing about the content of His preaching, but reported "*...of the way God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good works and healing all who were in the grip of the devil and God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did in the land of the Jews and Jerusalem*" (Acts 10:37-39).

While Scripture tells us that Jesus came to save us, the concept of "*salvation*" in the ancient world was associated with healing. This word is from the Latin "*salvus*," (root word for "*salve*") which means "*to save*" and "*to heal*." New Testament Greek translated "*to save*" as "*sozo*," a word that (like "*salvus*") means to save and to heal.

Yet today's churches seem to have lost that connection between salvation and healing. Lutherans primarily associate salvation with being saved from sin and eternal damnation. Why the disconnect between salvation and healing?



Christian history may provide some clues. For the ancient Christian communities, healing prayer and laying on of hands were commonplace and significant liturgical practices. But large-scale deaths, such as those caused by the Black Plague during the Middle Ages, led Christians to associate "*salvation*" with saving souls for the afterlife.

From the Renaissance on, medicine dominated to the point where Christians started viewing it as a replacement for, rather than a complement to prayer. The Enlightenment tended to separate the physical from the spiritual (dualism). By the mid-20th century, mainline Christians were so committed to rationalism that they often felt a need to give "scientific" explanations for Biblical stories of healing—even if doing so distorted the stories.

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the work of the Spirit, prayer, and healing. This has emerged from a growing understanding of the connection between the mind and the body and a movement toward a more holistic approach to health care. The new LCMS Lutheran Service Book Agenda ("*Visiting The Sick and Distressed*," page 45, James 5:14-16) includes anointing with oil, the laying on of hands, and prayer.

The rapid spread of Christianity in third world countries today is due primarily to the movement of the Spirit through healing and proclamation.

Some closing thoughts on healing prayer:

- We are called to serve as agents of God's grace. In prayer, we ask God to open our spirits, minds, bodies, and relationships so that God's healing power may flow through us to others. Our approach is out of love and compassion. Healing is not about us, but about giving Jesus the glory and serving others with God's power.
- God always is ready to heal our spirit. This may be most difficult healing. Physical and emotional healing may follow. (Luke 5)
- We remember that "*to heal*" means to make whole—and holy. The Old English word, "*hal*," is at the root of "*heal*," "*hale*," "*healthy*," and "*holy*." As John Koenig says in his essay on healing from Practicing Our Faith, "*the central image for us is not cure but wholeness.*"
- Just as some have viewed medicine as a replacement for (rather than a complement to) prayer, others have gone to the opposite extreme, endangering themselves or others by refusing medical intervention. God as Incarnational Presence works not only through prayer, but also through all practices that honor the body, including science and the medical arts.
- Pray confidently and specifically, accept faithfully, and give thanks for God's healing work in and through you.
- "Faith healers" focus is on self. Biblical healing focuses on and gives glory to Jesus alone. It's not about the agent of healing.



RESOURCES FOR HEALING

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- Koenig, Harold G., Michael E. McCullough, David B. Larson. "The Handbook of Religion and Health." New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.
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