

Web Summary

*“The Healing Ministry of the Church”*

James 5:7-18

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Centuries of debate have gone on in the church of Christ as to the place and function of healing services. Historically there have been theologians who have argued that healing ministry was limited to the apostolic age and discontinued after that. Some theologians in the so-called modern era have proposed that healing ministry is no longer necessary since we have modern day medicines. Others in the Christian tradition have argued strongly in favor of the continuation of healing services in the church. So what are we to make of this?

It would seem that there is sufficient evidence in the Bible to argue in favor of the continuation of healing services and that the context be the immediate Christian community of which the sick person requesting healing is a part or member.

James chapter 5 points us in this direction. We do well to begin with taking note of the overall context which is a call to patience (James 5:7, 8) or perseverance (James 5:11). The Old Testament (OT) prophets are mentioned as examples of patience. And who was a more patient person than the OT figure Job. Job, who lost everything, health, wealth, family. Job whose very own wife suggested that he “*curse God and die.*” (Job 2:9) Job, who despite all his misery, was still able to say “*I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.*” (Job 19:25) Elijah is mentioned after the healing section (James 5:13:16) He had to put up with, no doubt, the complaints of God’s people during some 3 ½ years of drought.

Indeed we need to be patient in prayer.

This, then, is the context within which to listen to the healing section. Let’s first of all note the command forms in this text: “*Is anyone among you sick? He should call (command) the elders...and pray (command) over him.* A little later “*confess (command) your sins to each other.*” These command forms indicate that prayer for healing is not really considered an option.

Now we need to ask the question: who are the sick referred to here? Are we talking common sicknesses like the flu or cold? James uses a very specific word at 5:15. The word for sick person can be translated as “weary,” “fatigued,” “hopelessly sick,” “wasting away.” In other words someone who is pretty well down and out. Such a person should “*call the elders.*” Those especially designated and authorized by God to give leadership in the church – also prayer leadership.

The prayer for healing is to be accompanied by an “*anointing of oil in the name of the Lord.*” Indeed “*prayer offered in faith will SAVE the sick person.*” This is where it gets tricky. Different translations of the Bible use different language. The basic meaning of the Greek word, however, is “save” as in “salvation.” Not that this excludes healing but there is something more important than being healed from sickness and that is one’s personal salvation.

We also need to take note of another very important biblical word – a word to which we often pay too little attention. That word is “*therefore.*” Yes, “*therefore, confess (command) your sins to each other and pray (command) for each other so that you (plural) may be healed.*” The use of the plural indicates that attention has shifted to the church. The church is in need of healing. Sins need to be confessed to each other. Sin estranges people from each other and that estrangement needs to be removed (it’s called reconciliation).

Notice also that “*the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and (literally) energizing.*” The ultimate in “righteousness” happens when sins are confessed and freely forgiven.

This passage leads us to believe that healing – even salvation itself – will be less than effective in those situations where praying believers are not right with each other – let alone right with God.

Should healing be part of the church’s ministry today? The short answer is yes! It is not a matter of looking for miracles but a matter of obedience.