

# **Health and Healing in the New Testament**

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## **Introduction**

Illness and healing are among humankind's most fundamental concerns. Sacred texts, beliefs and practices regarding health are naturally prominent in world religions, and Christianity is no exception. The New Testament (hereafter NT) represents a diverse collection of twenty-seven works written and circulated during Christianity's first several centuries. The stories, themes and attitudes regarding health found in the NT reflect ideas and concerns germane not only to the first and second-century Christians who recorded them, but to Christians throughout the intervening centuries up to the present. This essay provides descriptions and summaries of these NT accounts of healing, with all biblical citations taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. It is only a brief overview and does not offer theological opinions or interpretations. Hopefully, it will encourage the reader to do further reflection about his or her understanding of health and healing in the context of one's own spiritual beliefs and community life.

Several categories of NT writings are rich sources for Christian beliefs, interpretations and practices regarding illness, health and healing, especially the Gospels and Epistles. (Acts is thematically a continuation of the Gospels and Revelation does not discuss healing). The Gospels contain the stories of Jesus' healing ministry, including the commissioning of the apostles to continue the ministry that is described in Acts. The Epistles contain fewer discussions and references to healing or healing miracles, but expand on issues such as the nature and purpose of adversity and suffering. This paper will not attempt to be exhaustive, but rather give an overview of the main stories and themes regarding sickness and healing in the NT.

Before examining these NT texts, however, it is useful to look at the overarching worldview that shaped these particular beliefs. The NT writings are framed by the writings comprising the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (hereafter OT), as well as by ancient near eastern cultural beliefs and Hellenistic ideas that circulated during the inter-testamental period. For example, the association between sin and sickness has roots both in Hebrew religion and other ancient near eastern religions. Ideas about demons such

as those presented in the synoptic Gospels were found in nearly all ancient religions, although demons in Jewish religion were not associated with the Satan figure that became so prominent in Christian beliefs. Exorcism was practiced in various ancient near eastern religions by means of specialized techniques and practices, although somewhat different from Jesus' healing by word or touch. All of these points will be discussed in greater depth below.

Although the theological lenses through which sickness and healing have been regarded in Christianity have varied across time and among denominations, there are two general views of spiritual causes of illness that consistently run through Christian thought and belief. The first is the idea that sickness and affliction can be caused by forces or spirits opposed to God. The cause of illness, according to this view, is Satan, demons, unclean spirits or other malevolent powers that sicken a hapless individual--often an innocent victim. Healing in these cases involves seeking the intervention of divine powers to face down and defeat the spirits or demons. This is the view that predominates in the Gospels. The second view is that trials, including sickness, are caused by God. God may effect sickness for different purposes--as punishment for sin or as impetus for spiritual growth and development. Sickness and other trials in this view are means by which God teaches people or tempers their lives and experiences in order that they may become examples of faith and righteousness for others. Healing in this type of case involves the individual's accepting that he or she has in some way deserved the illness or that there is some divine reason for it. The person seeks to understand God's purpose in bringing on the condition, and strives to grow spiritually and/or alter the nature of his or her life. This perspective is more prevalent in the Epistles and is the fundamental orientation around which most Christians have come to regard illness and health. Although these two perspectives seem to be oppositional, we will see that the NT contains many examples of both perspectives.

### **Overview: OT beliefs regarding health and healing**

Although this study primarily covers healing in the NT, a brief overview of the OT will help establish the context for Jesus' healing ministry and the elaboration of early Christian thought represented in the Epistles. The predominant (though not the only) viewpoint of the OT relates to the basic terms of the covenant between Yahweh and

God's people: "If you obey the commandments of the LORD<sup>2</sup> your God...then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you..." (Deuteronomy 30:16). This covenant is directly expressed in terms of affliction and healing in Deuteronomy 32:3: "I kill and make alive; I wound and heal..." Indeed, the examples of God bringing affliction or sickness, or healing and health, upon the Hebrews or their enemies are almost too numerous to count.<sup>3</sup> Job 5:17-18 states, "How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he smites, but his hands heal." In Leviticus 26:16 and 25, Yahweh specifies the particular punishments, including diseases and physical afflictions that God will bring down upon the people if they break the covenant. Psalms that discuss the wretchedness of sickness and plead for deliverance include Psalms 6, 22, 38, 39, 88 and 102.

Concomitant to the many examples in the OT of sin or disobedience as causes of sickness and affliction, there are some verses in which forgiveness of sin is linked to healing. Psalms 103:2-4 is a reminder of Yahweh's beneficence: "The LORD...who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy." Psalms 107:17-20 illustrates both: "Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquity endured affliction . . . then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; he sent out his word and healed them and delivered them from destruction." Psalms 91 talks about Yahweh's protection from pestilence and destruction. Numerous examples of Yahweh's direct or indirect interventions for the health of the Hebrews (and even some non-Jews) are found in the Deuteronomistic histories, including 1 Samuel 19-20, 2 Kings 4:16-37, 1 Kings 17:17-23, 2 Kings 13:21, 1 Samuel 6:4-5, and 2 Samuel 24:10-25.

These examples give a general sense of the theological background of the Jewish community into which Jesus was born. Israelite religion from the time of Abraham was very strictly monotheistic and did not allow for the existence of an evil being concomitant to God. This explains Yahweh's traditional dual role as creator and destroyer, healer and smiter. During the intertestamental period (roughly 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), however, Israelite religion gradually came to be influenced by dualistic notions of good and evil found in both Hellenistic thought and Persian religion. The idea of an evil

force or figure apart from God slowly became tenable theologically, and indeed the Dead Sea Scrolls are evidence of the rise of dualistic views among Jews even before Jesus and Christianity came onto the scene.

### **Healings and Sickness in the Gospels**

Jesus apparently had a strong affinity for people suffering from sickness or affliction. As he said in Matthew 9:12, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those that are sick.” This section discusses healing miracles as a category, the types of diseases and conditions found in the healing stories in the Gospels, how the healings took place and were described, and the broader context and purpose of these healings.

Jesus’ healings are part of the broader miracle category. Jesus performed a variety of miracles from stilling a storm (Mark 4:35-41, Matthew 8:23-27, Luke 8:22-25), to walking on the sea (Mark 6:45-52, Matthew 14:22-33, John 6:15-21). Healings are the most numerous type of miracle, and healing was a central activity of Jesus in the Gospels. In fact, Morton Kelsey counted 41 healing stories, many that are repeated in more than one Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Matthew’s Gospel contains the most examples of healings, with Mark and Luke close behind. The Gospel of John contains the fewest. Jesus healed people almost everywhere he went. People were very attracted to him as a healer. The Gospels describe him as a charismatic, impressive person, and he also seems to have quickly developed a reputation as healer that brought large numbers of people to him. The Gospel of Luke in particular mentions in several places that Jesus had a “power:” “They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them” (Luke 6:18-19).

The typical form of the healing miracle is: a) the sickness or affliction is named or described, b) the sick person encounters Jesus, c) Jesus heals the person using word, touch, or technique, d) a cure occurs suddenly and visibly, and e) onlookers express amazement and wonder. The healing of Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:22-43, Matthew 9:18-25 and Luke 8:41-56), and of the paralyzed man (Mark 2:3-12, Matthew 9:2-8 and Luke 5:17-26) are good examples.

Although many of Jesus' healings are described individually, there are a number of Gospel verses that describe healings of many people. A typical description of Jesus casting out demons and curing the sick is found in Mark 1:32-34: "That evening...they brought to him all who were sick or possessed by demons...And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons..." A similar summary statement is found in Matthew 15:30: "Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute and many others. They put them at his feet and he cured them.

### ***What did Jesus heal?***

The types of illnesses and afflictions that Jesus cured fall into three main etiological categories: organic, unexplained, and demon possession. The first category included sicknesses such as blindness, skin disease, paralysis, hemorrhage, withered or non-functioning limb, fever, lameness, and edema. The cause of this illness or condition was not usually given, although details such as duration or the inability of doctors to help were occasionally given. This is in keeping with the Gospel writers' general tendency to highlight the miraculous healing event, not the cause of the original problem. In a number of cases (category 2), the illness was not identified; the person or people were simply described as "sick." This was true in many of the verses that talked generally about the healings of large numbers of people.

The third category, demon possession, warrants some discussion. The idea of demons causing illness may be difficult for many contemporary people to grasp, but it was a widely accepted view in the ancient world. The Jewish and Gentile populations of the near east at the beginning of the common era were similar to their Egyptian, Persian, Greek and other neighbors in believing in various types of evil or unclean spirits that could cause illness and misfortune. As discussed above, the Jewish religion during the last centuries before the common era had gradually been working toward the conception of a world in which evil beings existed along with the good. According to popular belief, thousands of demons dwelled around every person, constantly ready to enter the person and cause illness and trouble.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, then, there are a large number of illnesses and afflictions described in the Gospels that were said to be caused by demons, also called unclean spirits. Mark, Matthew and Luke each contain about ten descriptions

of demon possessions and other mentions of demons. Interestingly, the Gospel of John contains no mention of demons at all.

Various afflictions were ascribed to evil or unclean spirits or demons in the Gospels. They caused violent or insane behavior (Mark 5:1-5 and Matthew 8:28), blindness (Matthew 12:22), inability to speak (Matthew 9:32) or hear (Mark 9:25), epilepsy-like symptoms (Luke 9:39) and self-destructive tendencies (Matthew 17:15). Some Biblical scholars and interpreters of the Bible such as Morton Kelsey (1995) believe that demon-possession cases in the NT constitute what the modern world calls mental illness. While this view is popular, it is not unanimously held by scholars; it is simply not possible to make modern medical diagnoses based on the limited descriptions found in the Bible.

Demon-caused conditions were sometimes included in the summary statements that talked about mass gatherings of the sick and possessed and their healings by Jesus (for example, Matthew 4:24, Mark 1:32, Luke 7:21). No Gospel author explicitly explained the relationship between demonization and sickness, although the two categories could be separated by the authors using nuances of language. For example, in Greek, sickness was usually “cured” or “healed,” while demons were “cast out.” Mark, more than Matthew and Luke, was careful to separate demonization and sickness by only using the Greek verb “to heal” (*therapeuo*) with regard to the non-demonized sick. Matthew, on the other hand, sometimes used the word *therapeuo* to describe healings in exorcism cases. Further, an analysis of the Greek in Matthew 10:1 indicates that the disciples’ healing of sickness and casting out of demons *both* derived from the same “authority over unclean spirits.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, the fact that the form of the exorcism miracle generally follows that of the healing miracle indicates that the line between “natural” sickness and possession was not a hard one. See, for example, the man with the unclean spirit in Mark 1:21-28 and Luke 4:33-37, or the story of the possessed man of Gerasene in Mark 5:1-20, Matthew 8:28-34, and Luke 8:26-39.

### ***How did Jesus heal?***

The Gospel accounts indicate that Jesus’ healings involved a collection of actions-words such as statements (Luke 13:12, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment”),

commands (Mark 3:5, “stretch out your hand”), and rebukes (generally addressed to unclean spirits, as in Luke 9:42); or physical contact such as touching the person (Mark 1:31, the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law) or laying on hands (Luke 13:13, “he laid his hands on her” and she was healed); “magical” techniques such as putting the mud of saliva and dirt on blind persons’ eyes (Mark 8:23, John 9:6); and combinations of the above. In the case of words and touch, it is noteworthy that not only those of Jesus, but also those of the person being healed were apparently involved in the action of healing. For example, there are cases in which a person’s statements of faith seem to play a part in the healing (such as the leper in Mark 1:40-41 and blind man in Mark 10:46), and in which the faithful receive healing through reaching out and touching Jesus, not vice versa (such as the hemorrhaging woman described in Matthew 9:18-26 and elsewhere). The term magic is used to describe healings that seem to employ established techniques, such as the aforementioned application of mud to the eyes of the blind, a practice also found in Greek healing accounts,<sup>7</sup> and Jesus’ use of foreign words: *talitha cum* in Mark 5:41 and *ephphatha* in Mark 7:34.

Jesus responded in various ways to the people that he healed. He was not a medical technician; he did not first diagnose a condition or attempt to understand its cause or condition in a technical way. His healings primarily consisted of touching the sick and/or saying words to them. There are very few mentions of physicians in the Gospels (Luke 8:43, Mark 5:26, Luke 4:23, and Matthew 9:13).

According to the Gospels, Jesus healed people spontaneously as he encountered them in his daily ministry and travels. He did not ask them questions about their pasts or specifics about the nature of the illness. The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law is a good example. “When Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her . . .” (Matthew 8:14-15; also Mark 1:30, Luke 4:38). Another example takes place just before the feeding of the five thousand: “. . . he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.” (Matthew 14:13-14).

There is a great deal of variety in the healing stories, among Jesus’ healing approaches or techniques, the contexts of the scenes, and the meanings associated with them. In general, however, two primary themes are faith and compassion. Less common

are examples that link sickness with sin or healing with forgiveness. The faith of the person being healed, or the faith of that person's friends or family, was very prominent in healing stories, especially in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>8</sup> A good example is the healing of two blind men in Matthew 9:27-30. Jesus first asked the blind men, "Do you believe I am able to do this?" They replied yes, and he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you," whereupon their eyes were opened. Statements such as "your faith has made you well" and exclamations by Jesus that believers' extraordinary faith had enabled healing are found in the stories of the Centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:2-10, the hemorrhaging woman who touched Jesus from behind in Matthew 9:18-26 and elsewhere, and in Blind Bartimaeus who regained his sight in Mark 10:46-52. It is even recorded in Mark 6:56 that some people were healed simply by touching Jesus' clothing: "And wherever he went...they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched him were healed."

In addition to examples of the prominent faith of those who received healings, there are several cases of the faith of friends or family of a sick person leading to the person's healing. This is the case of the boy in Mark 9:14-29 who was possessed by a spirit that caused epileptic-type symptoms, whose father cried out to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Jesus then rebuked the unclean spirit and it came out. Another example is the paralyzed man, brought to Jesus on a stretcher and lowered through the roof by his friends. Jesus healed him after seeing his friends' faith (Mark 2:3-12, Matthew 9:2-8 and Luke 5:17-26). In the case of the Centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:2-10, and the father of a dying boy in John 4:47-54, the healing took place at the supplicant's request when the sick person is not even present.

There are also examples in the Gospels where Jesus is said to have healed out of compassion. In Luke 7:11-17, Jesus was moved by compassion to raise up the dead son of a widow.<sup>9</sup> In Matthew 14:14, Jesus saw a large crowd, "had compassion for them and cured their sick." Later that evening, he fed them all with five loaves and two fish. In Matthew 20:30-34, Jesus was "moved with compassion" and gave sight to two blind men who had shouted "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" from the side of the road as he passed them. In Mark 1:40-42, Jesus was "moved with pity" by a leper's request



for cleansing, and healed him. John, Chapter 11, recounts how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, both out of love and as an incentive for the disciples to belief in Jesus.

There are only a few examples of healings that have direct associations with sin and forgiveness of sin. One is Mark 2:5-12 (also Matthew 9:2 and Luke 5:20), the story of the paralyzed man who was brought to Jesus on a stretcher by his friends. Jesus saw the friends' faith and told the man 'Son, your sins are forgiven,' and the man was able to get up and leave (verse 5). Jesus carried out this healing in order to demonstrate his authority to forgive sins (verse 10). Another example is the story of the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethzatha told in John 5. Jesus first asked the man if he wanted to be made well (verse 6), and then told him to stand up, take his mat and walk (verse 8). A controversy surrounding working on the Sabbath followed. Afterward, Jesus saw the man again in the temple and said, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you" (verse 14). Another example involves the woman who had sinned, Mary Magdalene. Though not a physical healing, Jesus' forgiveness of Mary Magdalene's sins paralleled some healing scenes, as he told her: "Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:48, 50) and "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11).

The discussion in John 9:1-7 regarding sin and blindness is unusual and instructive. As Jesus and the disciples walked along, they encountered a man who had been born without sight. The disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Jesus then mixed saliva with some dirt, applied it to the man's eyes, instructed him to go wash in a pool, and the man was then able to see. We will see below that this scene's theology is more commonly found in the letters of Paul and the other Epistles than in the Gospels.

### ***Why did Jesus heal?***

The healing works of Jesus depicted in the Gospels were one component of his ministry as a whole. The healings took place in a wide variety of contexts and were related to an assortment of theological and practical issues. The healings served as evidence that the Kingdom of God had come; they affirmed Jesus' authority as son of

God; they revealed God's mighty power in the world; they introduced changes to the ways that Jews and Gentiles related to each other; and--very importantly--they simply expressed love and compassion toward human beings and attempted to alleviate their suffering. The healing stories served to convey a number of points central to the Christian mission.

Many of the healing accounts in the Gospels have been called "pronouncement stories." That is, the stories are couched in a narrative framework that leads up to a pronouncement by Jesus. The numerous scenarios of healings performed on the Sabbath are usually related to pronouncements. The freeing of the woman in Luke 13:11-13 who had been bound by Satan for 18 years was immediately followed by a confrontation with the leaders of a synagogue, and Jesus' winning of the argument with the exclamation, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound...be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:16). In the case of his healing of a paralytic man on the Sabbath (Matthew 9:1-18, Mark 2:1-12, Luke 5:17-26), Jesus replied to the complaints of the scribes with a statement that "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Matthew 9:6). Witnessing this scene, the crowds "were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings" (Matthew 9:8). The faith and persistence of the Caananite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 made a statement that God's mission through Jesus extended beyond the Jewish people and to the Gentiles. Jesus' healing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19 also made this point: one, a Samaritan, came back to thank him, and Jesus said, "Were not ten made clean...Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" The Beelzebub controversy found in Matthew 12:22-32, Mark 3:20-28 and Luke 11:14-23 is a statement regarding Jesus' authority over the demonic forces, as well as of the Kingdom of God's arrival. Finally, in both Matthew and Luke, quotes from Isaiah that "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:4-5, Luke 7:22) served as proofs and assurances to John the Baptist that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

### ***The Apostles' healing work***

While Jesus is the centerpiece of the four Gospels, he also commissioned the apostles to carry out the ministry of preaching and healing. The apostles do so in the Gospels and to a greater extent in the book of Acts. The Gospel of Luke ended with Jesus promising the disciples that he would send them “power from on high” (Luke 24:49). This promise was reiterated in Acts 1:4, then carried out on the Pentecost when they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). The apostles subsequently performed numerous miracles, including healings, as they won converts and spread the Gospel to the “ends of the earth.” The first miracle in Acts took place when a disabled beggar outside the temple asked Peter for alms. Peter replied, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” He then took the man’s hand and raised him up, and the man’s legs were healed (Acts 3:1-8). This healing was followed by pronouncements and faith statements by Peter regarding Jesus, “. . . And the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you . . .” (Acts 3:16). According to Acts 5:15, the power of Jesus worked so strongly that at one point it is mentioned that people were healed by touching Peter’s shadow. Miracles of all kinds are depicted in Acts as part of the new Church’s geographic expansion. Healings in the book of Acts parallel those of the Gospels, and convey similar messages regarding the Kingdom of God’s presence on earth and the authority of Jesus as the Messiah.

### **Healing in the Epistles**

Following the Gospels and Acts, most of the remaining books of the Bible comprise letters, known as the Epistles. Paul was the founder of this genre--indeed, he was probably the first NT author, writing twenty or thirty years before the first Gospel was put to writing (Harris, 1997, 415-416). The issues and concerns that occupied the individuals who carried out the mission of Jesus Christ--as they saw it--after his death were probably somewhat different than those of Jesus himself. The early Christians faced several enormous challenges: first, to make sense of what Jesus’ life, teachings, actions and death had meant, and were to mean, to Christians then and into the future; second, to organize and spread this gospel; and third, to guide a spontaneous, grass-roots movement that had centered on a single charismatic leader through the process of

becoming a large, orderly, socially and politically sustainable institution. Healing miracles were not to play such a prominent role in the Epistles. Healings were occasionally mentioned as examples of the “deeds of powers” performed by apostles, but not discussed very much. The Epistles do, however, contain enough discussion of healing, health, and issues surrounding suffering and adversity to provide a general view of the early Church’s perspectives on these issues. The Epistles are also important because they set the tone for the theological and institutional developments which have since followed for the last two thousand years.

### ***Healing and the physical body***

One of the most prominent discussions of healing in the Epistles occurs in Paul’s letter First Corinthians, chapter 12, the chapter regarding spiritual gifts. Paul stated that there were various gifts of the Spirit: these included gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). Healing, then was fourth in a list of spiritual gifts. It is not clear whether the gifts were listed in order of importance, or were of equal importance. Paul stressed that the most important point regarding these gifts was their source, the Holy Spirit, and that they are intended for the common good of the community. The Spirit chose to bestow these gifts upon individuals, not vice versa. Later in the chapter following a description of the figurative body of the church, Paul gave another list: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:27-29). Overall, the theme of chapter 12 is that there are different gifts that God gives to different people for the benefit of the community. Paul further emphasized that patient and kindly love is the greatest gift that should permeate and guide the other gifts.

Healing is discussed in more detail in the Letter of James. In James 5:13-16 we find the following: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one

another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” This passage is interesting for several reasons. First, it appears to describe specific healing rites of anointing with oil and praying that were practiced at the time of the early Church. Unfortunately, there is no other firm record of these rites so it is not known how extensively they were used. Second, this passage from James shows a theological connection between sin and illness, a relationship also found in the OT and Gospels and Acts.

The attitude that sickness was related to sinfulness is found more often in the Epistles than the Gospels. As we have seen, Jesus rarely drew a connection between the two in the four Gospels. In Acts there are a few examples of sickness or health being linked to sin--the most striking being the sudden, dramatic deaths suffered by Ananias and Sapphira for lying and keeping money from the community (Acts 5:1-11). Also, in one of his letters, Paul blamed the improper consumption of the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper for sickness and even death among the Corinthian Christians. “When we are judged by the Lord, he says, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world,” he wrote (1 Corinthians 11 27-32).

Paul's attitude toward the body supplies another view on early Christian attitudes toward health, sickness and healing. Paul seems to have dichotomized matter as problematic and spirit as good. Paul's language regarding the world was often rather harsh, as seen in the second half of the preceding quote from 1 Corinthians 11. In Romans 8:9-13 he wrote, “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you . . . Though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness...for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” There is a real ambivalence to the physical body in this quote; it is the dwelling place of the Spirit, yet by definition a source of great pitfalls. In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 he wrote that “...you are God's temple and...God's temple dwells in you. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.” According to 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, the worst sins one can bring upon the body are overindulgence in food, fornication<sup>10</sup> and prostitution. Paul used strong, negative language in his pleas to Christians to care for themselves.

## *Suffering and Christianity*

Another aspect of life that relates to health and sickness is suffering. The suffering of Jesus became a central axis of the early Church's understanding of what his life, death and resurrection meant for believers and what it meant to be a follower of Christ. The NT contains a good number of verses that deal with suffering, particularly the Epistles. Paul's description of the "thorn in his flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10) is representative of much of what the Epistles have to say about suffering. "And to keep me from being too elated . . . a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger from Satan . . ." Paul asked God to relieve him of this affliction, "but He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' . . . For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong." A central message here and elsewhere is the edificatory aspects of suffering. In Romans 5:2-5, he says ". . . we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance . . ." See also Hebrews 12:7-11, 1 Peter 4:6-7, James 1:2-4 and 5:10-11, 1 Thessalonians 3:3-5, and 2 Corinthians 4:16-17 for various perspectives on suffering for Christians.

## *Christianity and Community in the NT*

Suffering should be understood within the context of early Christian views of community. Suffering is seen as a sort of training or initiation that enables the Christian to attend to the sufferings of other Christians through participating in the sufferings of Christ. Acts 14:22 discussed Paul and Barnabas' ministry of encouragement to Christians in Antioch: "There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'it is through many persecutions that we must enter the Kingdom of God.'" Paul expressed this even more clearly in 2 Corinthians 1:1-7: ". . . so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction . . . For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings . . ." Paul's discussion of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 also relates community and suffering.

A very different description of the early Christian community is found in Acts. According to Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37, the community shared its resources in common. Members sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with the group, according to individuals' needs. "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous heart." (verse 46). "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions...there was not a needy person among them" (verses 32-34). Members of the community sold their possessions and "laid [the proceeds of what was sold] at the apostles' feet" (verses 32-35). Indeed, the young church was seized with fear by the striking down of Ananias and Sapphira after they failed to submit all of their proceeds to the apostles (Acts 5:1-11).

Finally, Paul shows a positive vision of social and community life in Romans 12:12-18, as well as theological sentiments that bridge the Gospels and Epistles: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of saints; extend hospitality to strangers . . . rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly . . . If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

While Paul's letters sought to counsel burgeoning Christian communities by providing rules and precepts for thought and action, it was ultimately Jesus' injunctions found in the Gospels that served as the foundation for their social ethics. The most thoroughly codified list of these guidelines is found within the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-11). Here, Jesus diverges from prior concepts of messiahship emphasizing a coming warrior-king that would deliver Israel from its oppressors. Instead, his vantage is one that stresses this pending kingdom on earth as one of peace, service, and benevolence. This version of a higher righteousness to expand the values of the Mosaic Torah asserted that certain types of ostensibly lowly persons--the sorrowful, the peacemakers, the hungry, and the persecuted--enjoyed divine favor. In doing so, the Beatitudes challenged earlier biblical thought that viewed material prosperity and earthly success as signs of godly endorsement. Falling early in the Gospel of Matthew (and also reasserted near the beginning of the Gospel of Luke from 6:17-7:1), these statements laid the groundwork for Jesus' ministry to people with illnesses and disabilities.

Near the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is brought before the Pharisees to defend his theology. Asked about the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus provided a two-part response. First, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." He then added, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:36-39). Assembling with his disciples after this questioning, Jesus thoroughly rebuked the Pharisees as hypocrites preoccupied with religious legalities at the expense of community ethics. For the high priests, "Justice and mercy and faith" had become neglected, as the Pharisees "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:23-24). As demonstrated above, in later NT writings, the values of justice, mercy toward the downtrodden, and an all-encompassing love for other humans would continue to guide Christian thought. And as Christianity continued over the past two millenia, it is these principles that have often underscored approaches to promote health and social justice.



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1 D.W. Amundsen and G.B. Ferngren. "Medicine and Religion: Early Christianity through the Middle Ages." In Marty and Vaux's Health, medicine and the faith traditions. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), 93.

2 The word LORD, capitalized, refers to the name YHWH in the Hebrew original.

3 Cf. Kelsey, 26-36, or Kee, 659-660 for lists of examples.

4 On pp. 42-3, Kelsey reports 41 healing works. He also reports that of the 3,779 verses in the four Gospels, 727 related to healing of "physical or mental illness and the resurrection of the dead."

5 J.K. Kuemmerlin-McLean. "Demons: Old Testament." In Anchor Bible dictionary (vol. 2, pp. 138-140). (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 140.

6 Kuemmerlin-McLean, 141. This verse infers that exorcism involved breaking the demons' direct power over individuals, while healing sickness involved defeating the indirect influences of negative spirits. Unfortunately, Matthew was not specific, and this is the closest we can come to understanding his conceptualization of healing sickness and casting out demons.

7 There are accounts of the first century Roman general and emperor Vespasian healing a blind man by putting his saliva on the man's eyes. Cf. Harold Remus. "Miracle: NT." In Anchor Bible dictionary (vol. 4, pp. 856-869). (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992).

8 Centrality of faith is one of Matthew's main theological theses, and he tended to highlight the faith of the recipient of healing in his Gospel's tellings of these stories. Cf. Matthew's emphasis on faith in the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (Matthew 9:18-26, compared to Mark 5:21-43 and Luke 8:40-56).

[9](#) Raising the dead is certainly not the same as healing the sick, but functionally this type of miracle parallels healing. It bears resemblances to many healing stories, in Jesus' emotional reaction to the scene and his spontaneous performance of an extraordinary reversal of the recipient's physical condition.

[10](#) It is important to note that the translation of the Greek *pornoeia* as "fornication" is not accurate. Biblical scholars do not agree on the meaning of *pornoeia*. It seems to refer to sexual practices unacceptable to Paul, but what exactly these practices were cannot be verified.