

Divine Healing

Official Assembly of God Doctrinal statement

Divine healing is an integral part of the gospel. Deliverance from sickness is provided for in the atonement, and is the privilege of all believers.

Position Paper

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Divine Healing: an Integral Part of the Gospel

From its inception the General Council of the Assemblies of God has recognized divine healing for the whole person as an important part of the gospel. It is part of the good news that Jesus commissioned His disciples to proclaim.

The Assemblies of God constitution in its Statement of Fundamental Truths, section 12, states: "Divine healing is an integral part of the gospel. Deliverance from sickness is provided for in the atonement, and is the privilege of all believers (Isaiah 53:4,5; Matthew 8:16,17; James 5:14—16)."

Though it is impossible in a brief paper to cover all the facets and implications of this statement or answer all the questions which have been raised concerning it, we shall attempt to show that the statement is scripturally sound.

I. An Integral Part of the Gospel

As we observe the ministry of both Jesus and the apostles, it is evident that divine healing was not something peripheral. It was an important witness to Jesus as the revelation of the Father, as the promised Messiah, and as the Savior from sin (see John 10:37,38).

The Bible shows a close connection between the healing ministry of Jesus and His saving, forgiving ministry. His power to heal was actually a witness to His authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5—12). Again and again His healing miracles parallel His preaching of the gospel and show the same compassion (Matthew 4:23; 9:35,36).

People came from all directions both to hear Him and to be healed (Luke 5:15; 6:17,18). He never turned any away but healed all who came to Him (Matthew 12:15; 14:14), curing all varieties of sickness, disease, deformities, defects, and injury (Matthew 15:30,31; 21:14). He also delivered people from demons and the problems they caused (Matthew 4:24).

Jesus recognized that sickness is often the result of sin (John 5:14) or of the activity of Satan (Luke 13:16). He recognized also, however, that sickness is not always the direct result of sin (John 9:2,3). There were times when it was rather an opportunity for God to be glorified (Mark 2:12).

Miracles of healing were an important part of the works God sent Jesus to do (John 9:3,4). This is in line with the Old Testament revelation of God as the Great Physician, the Lord who heals (Exodus 15:26; Psalm 103:3, where the Hebrew participles used in both cases indicate it is God's nature to heal). Jesus showed that divine healing is still a vital part of God's nature and plan.

Healings also helped to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior. As the Great Physician, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4, which in the Hebrew is very emphatic: "Surely our sickness He himself has borne [lifted and taken away], and our pain He carried [as a heavy load]. ("Griefs" [KJV] is the same word used of physical sickness and disease in 2 Chronicles 16:12; 21:15, 18,19; Isaiah 38:9. "Sorrows" [KJV] is the same word used of physical pain in Job 33:19.)

Matthew applies this specifically to the healing ministry of Jesus: "He himself took away our sickness and bore away our diseases" (Matthew 8:17, literal translation). Isaiah ties this in with the saving ministry of Jesus (Isaiah 53:5). His sufferings were for our sins and lead to our peace with God: "And by his wounds we are healed [healing has come to us]."

The context in Isaiah 53:6 and the application in 1 Peter 2:24,25 emphasize especially the healing or restoration from sin. However, in view of the emphasis on physical sickness in Isaiah 53:4, it is clear that these passages include healing from both the spiritual and physical effects of our sins and waywardness.

When John the Baptist was imprisoned, he began to wonder whether or not Jesus was actually the promised Messiah or just another forerunner like

himself. Jesus responded by calling attention to messianic works which linked miracles and the preaching of the gospel to the poor. Again, healing was an important witness, an integral part of the gospel (Isaiah 61:1,2; Luke 4:18; 7:19—23).

Divine healing continued to be an integral part of the gospel through the ministry of the apostles and the Early church. Jesus sent out the Twelve and the Seventy to preach and to heal the sick (Luke 9:2; 10:9).

After Pentecost "many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles" (Acts 2:43). Luke treats the Book of Acts as an extension of what Jesus did and taught, not only through the apostles but through a Church filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1,8; 2:4).

Miracles, however, were not limited to the apostles. The promise of Jesus was to all believers (John 14:12—14) who would ask in His name (that is, recognizing His authority and conforming themselves to His nature and purposes).

God used deacons such as Philip to preach and heal (Acts 8:5—7), and an otherwise unknown disciple, Ananias, to heal Saul (Paul) (Acts 9:12—18). Mark supports healing in the ministry of believers (Mark 6:13, 9:38,39; 16:15—18).

Gifts of healings are included among the manifestations of the Spirit intended to edify or build up the Church (1 Corinthians 12:7) and are tied in with the witness to Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3).

II. Provided for in the Atonement

Under the Law attention is given to the priests, whose ministry points to our great High Priest who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Hebrews 4:14,15). The priests, through the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifices, made atonement for the sins of the people.

An examination of the atonement in the Hebrew Bible shows that in most cases it refers to a ransom price paid for redemption and restoration. This points to the redemption through Christ where He shed His blood in our behalf and in our stead. God has set Him forth to be a propitiation (literally, a mercy seat) through faith in His blood (Romans 3:25).

The reference to the mercy seat goes back to Leviticus 16, where the high priest went once a year to sprinkle the blood of a sin offering on the mercy seat, the solid gold lid placed on the top of the Ark of the Covenant. In the ark were the tables of stone of the Law, which the people had broken. The broken Law called for judgment and death. But when the blood of a spotless lamb was sprinkled, representing the sinless life of Christ, God saw that sinless life instead of the broken Law and could give mercy and blessing.

The primary purpose of the atonement was cleansing from sin (Leviticus 16:30; see also Romans 5:11 where "atonement" [KJV] is the same word translated "reconciliation" in Romans 11:15 and 2 Corinthians 5:18,19). It is also clear, however, that atonement brought release from the penalty and consequences of sin in order to bring restoration to God's blessing and favor. When the people complained after the judgment that followed the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, God sent a plague on the Israelites. Moses then sent Aaron out into the midst of the congregation, where he made atonement for them, and the plague was stopped (Numbers 16:47,48).

We read also that when the men of Israel were numbered, they were to give one-half shekel atonement money for their redemption and to prevent a plague upon themselves (Exodus 30:12,15). Atonement thus provided for the consequences of sin, including sickness.

The Bible makes it clear that people could not pay the price for their redemption, so God out of His love and for the glory of His own name provided the atonement (Romans 3:25; see also Psalms 65:3; 78:38; 79:9; Romans 3:21—28).

That this atonement provided not only for the sin but the consequences of sin is pictured by Hosea buying back his wife at a great cost to himself when she was to be sold in the slave market (Hosea 3:1—5; 13:4; 14:4).

It is further illustrated by the brazen serpent incident: All the people had to do was look at it in order to live (Number 21:9).

All this was accomplished through Christ at Calvary (John 3:14—16). There He made a full atonement for the whole person. The New Testament speaks of this as redemption, which has essentially the same meaning as atonement.

Through Christ we have received redemption and the forgiveness of sins (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; Hebrews 9:15).

Again, atonement provides for the consequences of sin. Even where sickness is not the direct result of sin, it is still in the world because of sin. Therefore it is among the works of the devil Jesus came to destroy (1 John 3:8) and is thus included in the atonement.

The Bible indicates, however, that until Jesus comes we groan because we have not yet received the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23). Only when the dead in Christ rise and we are changed do we receive the new bodies which are like His glorious body (1 Corinthians 15:42—44, 51—54).

From the parallel between redemption and atonement, we see therefore that the provision for our bodies is the redemption spoken of in Romans 8:23. We receive the forgiveness of sins now in connection with the redemption of our souls. We shall receive the redemption of our bodies when we are caught up to meet the Lord and are changed into His likeness (1 Corinthians 15:51—54; 2 Corinthians 5:1—4; 1 John 3:2). Divine healing is a foretaste of this, and, like all the blessings of the gospel, flows from the atonement.

Again, the language of Isaiah 53:4 specifically speaks of physical ills and indicates that Christ in His atonement was concerned about providing for sickness as well as sin. Matthew 8:16,17 not only confirms this, but shows that the atonement includes divine healing as a means of meeting the needs of those who come to Jesus.

III. The Privilege of All Believers

Just as salvation is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8), so all God's blessings and gifts are ours by His grace or unmerited favor. We do not earn them. We do not deserve them.

No one in the New Testament demanded healing. People came to Jesus beseeching Him. They did not look on healing as their right, but as a gracious privilege extended to them.

As the privilege of believers, the promise of healing does not rule out suffering for Christ's sake and the gospel's. We are expected to be prepared to follow His example (Hebrews 5:8; 1 Peter 2:19,21; 4:12—14,19).

Nor are we to look to divine healing as a substitute for obedience to the rules of physical and mental health. Jesus recognized the need of the disciples to get away from the crowds and rest awhile (Mark 6:31). Jethro saw that if Moses did not delegate some of his responsibilities to others, he would wear away (Exodus 18:18).

Neither is divine healing a means of avoiding the effects of old age. Moses did retain a clear eye and his natural strength until the day of his death (Deuteronomy 34:7). But this privilege was not granted to King David (1 Kings 1:1—4).

The gradual breakdown of old age, pictured so graphically in Ecclesiastes 12:1—7, is the common experience of believers as well as unbelievers. Healing is still available to the aged, but the part that is healed usually continues to age like the rest of the body. We do not yet have the redemption of the body.

Even we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit groan and travail in pain like the rest of creation, waiting patiently for the fulfillment of our hope (Romans 8:21—25). No matter what we do for this body, no matter how many times we are healed, if Jesus tarries we shall die.

However, the Bible does not tell us this to discourage us, but to make us realize that we must encourage and cultivate our life in the Spirit, for the Spirit quickens (resurrects), and that is our real hope (Romans 8:11). In fact, even though outwardly one is perishing, inwardly one is being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Actually it is this inner renewal that makes us best able to have the faith to claim the privilege of divine healing. To the woman healed of the issue of blood, Jesus said, "Your faith has healed you" (Mark 5:34).

Paul at Lystra, when he saw that the hearing of the gospel had brought faith to be healed into the heart of a cripple, commanded him to stand up (Acts 14:9,10).

The inner renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:10) is seen also in the great faith of the Roman centurion who recognized the authority of Christ's word (Matthew 8:5—13) and the Syrophenician woman who

believed that even a crumb would meet the need (Mark 7:24—30; Matthew 15:28).

That divine healing comes through faith is further confirmed by the fact that unbelief hindered its reception at Nazareth (Mark 6:5,6) and at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:14—20). There Jesus indicates the necessity also of expressing faith by praying and fasting (Mark 9:29).

Prayer is one of the chief means of healing in the Old Testament. Many of the Psalms include prayers for healing. Many of the prophets prayed for the healing of others. James 5:15 promises that the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up.

Great faith then receives healing through the simple Word of the Lord. But Jesus did not turn away from those who had little faith or weak faith. Those who are sick often find it is not easy to express faith, and Jesus did a variety of things to help them.

Some He touched (Mark 1:41; 8:22), took their hands (Mark 1:31; Luke 14:4), or laid His hands upon them (Mark 6:5; 8:25; Luke 4:40; 13:13). Others He helped by a variety of acts, some of which called for faith and obedience on their part (Mark 7:33; 8:23).

Others found that to touch Him or His garments helped them express faith (Mark 3:10; 5:28; 6:56; Luke 6:19).

Peter's shadow had the same effect for a time (Acts 5:15). So did the handkerchiefs and work aprons from Paul's tent-making shop (Acts 19:12). The faith, however, had to be in the Lord, not in the means used to help them express their faith. This seems to be the reason for the great variety of means used, lest people get their eyes on the means rather than on God.

In the same class is James 5:14, which instructs the sick to call the elders of the church to anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. It is not the oil (a symbol of the Holy Spirit) that brings the healing, but the prayer of faith.

The promise "anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing" is closely connected with prayer, asking in Christ's name (John 14:12—14; 16:23,24). His name, however, is the revelation of His character and nature. We have that in us only if we abide in Christ and His words abide in us

(John 15:7). Then our will lines up with His, and we can ask what we will, and it shall be done.

Some have tried to limit healing (especially the promise of Exodus 15:26, the covenant of healing or health) to Israel. But the healing of the centurion's servant and the daughter of the Syrophenician woman show that healing is the privilege of Gentiles also. In fact, there is healing for those who desire it and will respond to Jesus, even though He has not yet dealt with their sins (as in the case of the impotent man at the Pool of Bethesda, John 5:2—9,14).

Others have tried to set divine healing in opposition to or in competition with the medical profession. This need not be so. Physicians through their skills have brought help to many.

It is true that the Lord is the Great Physician. It is also true that the Bible condemns King Asa because "in his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians" (2 Chronicles 16:12). But Asa had already sought for help from Syria in an act of unbelief and disobedience when he refused to rely on the Lord (2 Chronicles 16:7). The emphasis is not that he sought physicians (which in this case may have been heathen physicians), but that he refused to seek the Lord.

It is evident that the physician had an honorable place in Israel (Jeremiah 8:22). Jesus also presented the medicinal use of oil and wine by the Good Samaritan in a favorable light (Luke 10:34).

When the woman with the issue of blood was healed, we are told 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 5:26). If it was wrong for her to go to physicians, this would have been the perfect place for Jesus to have said so. But He did not. Instead, He accepted the faith she now expressed and commended her for it. Even today God has performed many miracles for those given up by doctors.

Jesus also sent the 10 lepers back to show themselves to the priests (Luke 17:14). Under the Law the priests were in charge of diagnosis, quarantine, and health (Leviticus 13:2ff.; 14:2ff.; Matthew 8:4). Thus Jesus recognized that human diagnosticians have their place.

The priests, however, were agents of the Lord, and in this sense it is possible to take all healing as divine, whether instantaneous or gradual (see Mark 8:24). On the other hand, those healed in the Bible did not testify to divine healing until the healing was actually accomplished by divine power.

We recognize that there have been abuses today. But we must not let that cause us to retreat from a positive proclamation of the truth of the Scripture. The apostles were able to say, "What I have I give you" (Acts 3:6).

Gifts of healings are among the variety of gifts and manifestations of the Spirit set in the Church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4—11,28—30). Like the other gifts, these seem to be administered through members of the Body for the edification of those who need them. (Just as the word of wisdom does not make a person wise, the gifts of healings do not make people healers. Rather as a fresh word of wisdom is given for each need, so a fresh gift of healing is given by the Spirit for each individual sickness.)

We find also, both in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, that there were times when the gospel was being preached in new areas and new situations when miracles of healing were especially prominent. This seems to be the case when special miracles were done by the hands of Paul (Acts 19:11).

In humility we recognize that we do not understand all that pertains to divine healing. We still see through a glass darkly. We do not understand why some are healed and others are not, any more than we understand why God permitted James to be martyred and Peter delivered. Scripture makes it clear, however, that our part is to preach the Word and expect the signs to follow.