

Divine Healing

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 9-11, 2010)

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, the good news, which 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).”¹

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

I. Divine Healing Is an Integral Part of the Gospel

The ministry of both Jesus and the apostles gives evidence that divine healing was integral to the proclamation of the gospel message. It was an important witness to Jesus as the revelation of the Father, the promised Messiah, and 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). Frequently the gospel writers testify that His healing miracles parallel His preaching of the gospel, both being the purpose of His ministry (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 varieties of sicknesses, diseases, deformities, defects, and injuries (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 ultimately the result of the fall of humans into sin, and in some instances may be linked to specific sin (John 5:14) or to the activity of Satan (Luke 13:16). He recognized also, however, that sickness is not always the direct result of specific 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’ ministry showed that divine healing is still a vital part of God’s nature and plan.

¹All biblical quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New International Version (NIV).

Healings also helped to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4: “Surely he took up [lifted and took away] our infirmities and carried [as a heavy load] our sorrows.” (“Infirmities,” *choli*, is the same word used of physical sickness and disease in Deuteronomy 28:59,61; 2 Chronicles 16:12; 21:15,18,19; Isaiah 38:9. “Sorrows,” *makob*, is the same word used of physical pain in Job 33:19.) Matthew, in the account of Jesus’ healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, sees this Isaiah passage fulfilled in the healing ministry of Jesus: “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases’ ” (Matthew 8:17).²

Isaiah also ties the sufferings of the Servant to the provision of salvation, a ministry fulfilled by Jesus (Isaiah 53:5,6). His sufferings were for our sins and lead to our peace with God: “And by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). The Isaiah context and the reference to it 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 teach that the gospel to be introduced by the Suffering Servant, Jesus, includes healing from both the spiritual and physical effects of the fall of the human race into sin recorded in Genesis 3.

When John the Baptist was imprisoned, he questioned whether Jesus was actually the promised Messiah or just another forerunner like himself. Jesus responded by calling attention to His messianic works that linked miracles and the preaching of the gospel to the poor (Matthew 11:4,5). 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-two 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 wrote the Book of Acts as an extension of the story 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).

The working of miracles, including divine healing, was 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, those who recognize His authority and conform 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 bring healing to Saul (Paul) (Acts 9:12–18).

The gospel message includes the provision of spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit to the Church, among which are the gifts of healings (1 Corinthians 12:7). All of these gifts, including that of healing, continue to edify or build up the Church and offer hope to every believer. Moreover, James asserts that healing is a normal aspect of the regular meetings of the Church. Whenever the community of faith is gathered, anyone who is sick may

² “Infirmities,” *astheneia*, denotes weakness and is often used to speak of sickness and disease (Luke 5:15; Acts 28:9); “Diseases,” *nosos*, seems to be used synonymously with *astheneia* here to indicate physical disease or illness (see also, Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Luke 7:21; Acts 19:12).

request prayer for healing (5:14). We are assured that divine healing is an ongoing manifestation of the gospel in the current day, and will continue until the return of Jesus.

II. Divine Healing Is Provided in the Atonement

The ministry of the priests under the Law foreshadowed the ministry of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses (*astheneia*, weakness, sickness, disease, timidity, infirmity)” (Hebrews 4:14,15). The Old Testament priests, through the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifices, made atonement for the sins of the people.

An examination of the concept of atonement in the Bible shows that in most cases it refers to a ransom price paid for redemption and restoration, which points to the redemption through Christ accomplished by the shedding of His blood in our behalf. The apostle Paul described it this way: “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25).

The phrase, “sacrifice of atonement,” translates the Greek *hilastērion*, which can be also translated expiation, propitiation, atonement, or mercy seat. Leviticus 16 records God’s expectations for Israel’s Day of Atonement and the ministry of the high priest sprinkling the blood of a sin offering on the atonement cover (the solid gold lid on top of the ark of the covenant). The ark contained the stone tablets 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, prophetically anticipating 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). 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 of Israel complained after the judgment that followed the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, God sent a plague on the Israelites. Moses sent Aaron out into the midst of the congregation, where he made atonement for them, and the plague was stopped (Numbers 16:47,48). The Law of Moses required that when the men of Israel were numbered, they were each to give a half shekel atonement offering for their redemption and to prevent a plague from coming upon them (Exodus 30:11–16). Atonement thus provided cleansing from sin and its consequences, including sickness and disease.

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 ultimate atonement (Romans 3:25; see also Psalms 65:3; 78:38; 79:9; Romans 3:21–28). 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).

Redemption, accomplished through the atonement of Christ, provides reconciliation for sin and its consequences. Even where sickness is not the direct result of specific 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.

From the parallel between redemption and atonement, we see that provision for the healing of our bodies is part of 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 now is a foretaste of this, and, like all the blessings of the gospel, flows from the Atonement.

III. Divine Healing Is a Gift of God’s Grace for All

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. They cannot be earned or deserved. It should be noted that instead of demanding healing from Jesus, the New Testament records that people came asking for His compassionate ministry. They did not look on healing as their right, but as a gracious privilege extended to them.

That we cannot earn God’s blessings, including divine healing, should make us realize the importance of cultivating our life in the Spirit, for the Spirit will “give life to your mortal bodies,” and that is our real hope (Romans 8:11). In fact, even though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16).

It is this inner renewal that makes us best able to have the faith to receive the gift of divine healing. To the woman healed of her twelve-year-long bleeding, Jesus said, “Your faith has healed you” (Mark 5:34). Paul at Lystra, when he saw that listening to his preaching had brought faith to be healed into the heart of a cripple, commanded him to stand up (Acts 14:9,10). Faith is seen also in the Roman centurion who recognized the authority of Christ’s word for the healing of his servant (Matthew 8:5–13) and the Canaanite woman who believed in Jesus for the healing of her daughter (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). James 5:15 promises that the prayer of faith offered for the sick by the elders of the church will make the sick well and the Lord will raise them up. Faith, then, receives healing through the simple Word of the Lord. But Jesus did not turn away from those who had little faith or who did not seem to express any faith at all. 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).

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. Faith is trusting the all-wise, all-loving, and all-powerful God to respond to the cries of His creation in His own way.

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). The usage of the name of Jesus is not a formula that can be used by humans to coerce the response of God. His name is the revelation of His character and nature, which we have in us only if we abide in Christ and His words abide in us (John 15:7). As a consequence of this, His will becomes dominant in our lives, conforming our will to His. Thus, our requests in His name are increasingly according to His will, opening the avenue for His responding to our prayers.

The revelation of God as “the Lord, who heals you” (Exodus 15:26) cannot be limited to Israel. The healing of the centurion’s servant and the daughter of the Canaanite woman show that healing is the privilege of Gentiles also. In fact, there is healing for all who desire it and will respond to Jesus. There is evidence that God’s gift of healing can even be experienced by one before their sins have been dealt with, as in the case of the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2–9,14).

Belief in divine healing neither opposes nor competes with medical doctors. The knowledge and skills of this profession bring help to many. It is true that the Bible condemns King Asa because “even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians” (2 Chronicles 16:12). But Asa had already sought for help from Syria in an act of unbelief and disobedience, refusing to rely on the Lord (2 Chronicles 16:7). The issue for which Asa is judged is not that he sought help from physicians but that he refused to seek the Lord.

When the woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years was healed, Mark records that “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 expressed and commended her for it.

Jesus also sent the ten lepers whom He healed 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.

Through the skill and training of physicians recoveries and restorations do occur, a truth that does neither refute nor diminishes the belief in divine healing. We rejoice should God, who is the source of all healing, work through the doctors, give thanks to them for their dedication, and offer continual praise to God. With all their learning, training, and skill, doctors are still not the last word to be uttered in diagnosing human maladies. We steadfastly look to God who is more than able to bring healing even in situations deemed to be hopeless.

IV. Divine Healing Will Be Fully Realized When Jesus Returns

We are living at present between the first and second appearances of Jesus Christ. At His first coming He provided, through His life, death, and resurrection, atonement for sin and its consequences. In this era divine healing, a gift of God's grace, is seen as a proleptic expression of the complete redemption of the human body. At His second coming what was begun will be brought to completion—salvation from sin and all its effects will be realized. In this period of the “already and not yet” some are healed instantly, some gradually, and others are not healed.

The Bible indicates that until Jesus comes we groan because we have not yet received the full 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). Even followers of Christ groan and travail in pain like the rest of creation, waiting patiently for the fulfillment of our hope (Romans 8:21–25). In that the human body is described by Paul as a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19), we must care for it and avoid that which would abuse it. But, no matter what we do for this body, no matter how many times we are healed, unless the rapture of the Church intervenes we shall die.

The promise and reality of divine healing does not rule out suffering for the sake of Christ and that of the gospel. 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, Moses' father-in-law, advised him to delegate some of his responsibilities so that he could stand the strain of leading Israel (Exodus 18:17,18).

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.

It is possible that the refusal to alter one's lifestyle to accord with biblical principles could hinder healing (John 5:14). While the amount of faith is not always, as noted above, determinative, if one does not believe that divine healing can occur, it might not. We must also be open to God's will and activities, always designed by His love and for our good, understanding that they are beyond our immediate ability to understand. He is, by healing us now and by not healing us, moved by His great compassion, desiring that we be drawn increasingly closer to Him.

We recognize that there have been abuses regarding divine healing. Excessive claims and unfounded judgments are offered by some. But we must not let that cause us to retreat from a positive proclamation of the truth of the Scripture. Peter and John were able to say

to the lame man who was to be healed, “What I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (Acts 3:6). May we, too, remain committed to the reality of the power of God to effect divine healing.

In humility we confess that we do not understand all that pertains to divine healing. We do not understand fully why some are healed and others are not, any more than we understand why God permitted James to be martyred and Peter delivered (Acts 12:1–19). Scripture makes it clear, however, that our part is to preach the Word, expecting signs, including divine healing, to follow. Finally, at the Lord’s return, “when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:54), the full realization of divine healing will have come.