

Sent to Heal

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How should we think about disease, injury, sickness, and healing. In this essay we are not going to ask about what congress or the White House think. We won't care what Aetna or Kaiser-Permanente think. Instead of the perspective of Blue Cross what would be the perspective of "Calvary Cross"?

When we look at this or any other topic remember that our calling as Christians is never to be the cheering section for this or that political faction, economic theory, or corporate interest group in the world around us. All Christians at all times are called to be the salt of the earth, not just more conventional earth . . . the light of the world, not just disappear into one corner or another of the world. "Do not be conformed to this world" the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good, and acceptable, and perfect." "You are not of the world," Jesus tells his followers, "even as I am not of this world."

So as we ask about a Christian perspective on disease, injury, sickness, and healing we must adopt a radical stance of questioning authority in our surrounding culture and taking Jesus and Scripture as our point of departure. And when we do that . . .

- Did you know that the Bible has a great deal to say about health care, disease, injury, and physical suffering? It is a major --- not minor --- theme of Scripture.
- Did you know that curing and caring for the sick was one of the three or four major themes and activities of Jesus in the Gospels? And of Paul, Peter, and the early church after Jesus ascended back to heaven?
- Did you know that throughout the past two thousand years of history most Christians knew how important health care was in the faithful Christian life?

The Basic Story Line on Health Care in the Gospels

Unfortunately, it seems that our fellow Christians today have forgotten these things and pretty much lost their way on this topic. So let's review what the Bible has to say, starting with Matthew's Gospel (4:23-25). *Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.*

This passage comes after the stories of Jesus' birth and childhood, then his baptism by John the Baptist, and then the three great temptations. It is the launch of Jesus' public activity. And what is clear is that there are two basic activities, two parts to Jesus' agenda:

First, Jesus was teaching a message of "good news of the kingdom." Throughout his life Jesus' communication was not about bad news and condemnation. Nor did his message consist of lies, fear-mongering, manipulation, half-truths, insults, and accusations. Jesus spoke "truth in love" . . . good news, gospel. The good news he proclaimed was that we can turn away (repent) from being our own king and know God, our Creator and Redeemer, as the king of our life. All people can choose to turn away from

other gods and idols and put the living God on the throne of their life. Jesus proclaims this gospel of the kingdom over and over, everywhere; he tells it straight, and he tells it in parables.

Second, Jesus was “curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” The text says he cured “all the sick,” not just some of them, not just those with money, not just those with the right coverage or those who could make a co-payment for their appointment with him, not just those who were innocent and had maintained good health habits. All the sick. Universal coverage.

Jesus did not approach health care as an opportunity to make a financial profit. He didn’t incorporate and have an IPO for investors in a new Jesus Clinic.

But I would also point out that he didn’t call on the administration in Rome to take care of the sick. He didn’t call on Herod and he didn’t call on Caesar or the Roman Senate pass a program to take care of the sick.

Jesus saw people who were sick, and he did what he could to help them get well. That’s the storyline here. This is the Lord we have left our nets to follow.

Elaborating on Kingdom Values, Expanding Health Care Activities

This brief passage from Matthew 4 sets the stage and establishes a lifelong twofold pattern of Jesus activity: (1) teach about the kingdom and (2) help and cure the sick. What follows this foundational passage in Matthew’s Gospel is (1) Jesus’ amazing Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 – 7), an extended explanation of the values and ethics of the kingdom of God and its citizens; then (2) an extended narrative of the healing work of Jesus (chapters 8-9), a series of nine or so back-to-back episodes of Jesus reaching out and caring for the sick and injured.

In rough outline here is what happens in Matthew 8-9:

- someone with leprosy (making him an “untouchable” in that era) comes to beg Jesus for healing, and gets it (8:2-4),.
- a Roman centurion (representing the enemy, occupying military rule of Rome) appeals to Jesus to heal his paralyzed, suffering, near death servant back at his house; Jesus does it (8:5-13);
- Jesus goes to Peter’s house and heals his mother-in-law of a bad fever which had confined her to bed (8:14-15);
- some who are demon-possessed, and violently out of control (the dangerous patient) are healed by Jesus (8:16-17, 28-34);
- a paralyzed man is enabled to walk again (9:2-8).
- a woman suffering for twelve years from some kind of hemorrhage gets Jesus’ attention by touching his robe and is healed (9:19-22).
- the dead daughter of a local synagogue leader (not always a group supportive of Jesus) is raised to life (9:18, 23-26).
- two blind men regain their sight (9:27-31).
- a mute demoniac is enabled to speak again (9:32-34).

Are you seeing that this is no minor theme in the story of Jesus? Matthew 9 closes by summarizing (9:35-38): *“Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a*

shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’

I wonder how many of us Christians look out at the crowds of the sick and injured, the multitudes with no health care insurance and no resources, and are filled with the compassion of Jesus? How many of us spend any time at all praying and asking God to send out more laborers into this field?

Jesus' Agenda Becomes His Followers' Agenda

In Matthew 10 we come to a crucial point in the story (10:1-8): “*Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples . . . These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions . . . As you go, proclaim the good news: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.*”

So Jesus doesn't just play the role of preacher and healer himself. He commissions twelve disciples/apostles to do exactly the same two things: teach the good news of the kingdom and do whatever they could to heal the sick. The twelve apostles are an obvious parallel and symbol related to the twelve patriarchs and their twelve tribes in Israel. It is the role of Israel and the church, the new Israel, to carry on the work of God as exhibited in Jesus Christ.

In Luke's Gospel, which parallels Matthew's account to this point, adds the story that shortly after his commissioning of the 12 apostles, Jesus “*appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs . . . cure the sick who are there and say to them the kingdom of God has come near to you.*” (10:1, 9). According to Jewish tradition there were seventy nations in the earth so appointing and commissioning this larger band of seventy to do exactly the same tasks as Jesus and the twelve was a clear message that this was Jesus' mission to the entire planet. And when we move from the four Gospels to the book of the Acts of the Apostles we find the exact same pattern of activity. Nothing changes after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Peter, Paul, and the New Testament church preach the good news of the kingdom and cure the sick.

The Historic Conviction and Practice of the Church

Throughout the two thousand year history of the Christian church we find much the same pattern in which Christians are committed to healing as much as preaching and teaching. Here are just a few examples: during a 4th century famine in Turkey, Basil the Great of Cappadocia built a complex of buildings that included a church, a hospice for travelers, and a hospital for the sick. Throughout the Middle Ages much of the care of the sick was provided by the monastic orders of the Catholic Church. Some of these orders specialized in caring for particular illnesses. The Order of St Lazarus for example was known for the treatment of lepers and established many hospitals (known as ‘lazarettos’) throughout medieval Europe to treat leprosy. Medicine, law, and theology were the three great professions for which the medieval universities such as Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge educated advanced students.

Following the Reformation in the 16th century Protestant churches slowly began sending out medical missionaries to India, Africa, and elsewhere who typically followed Jesus' pattern. In 1793 the legendary evangelist William Carey (1761-1834) accompanied Dr. John Thomas in establishing a Christian mission in India. David Livingstone (1813-1873), the famous explorer and missionary to Africa studied medicine as well as theology for four years before sailing for Africa in 1840. Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), the founder of the China Inland Mission (1866), was medically trained and always saw health care and evangelism as a necessary combination. By the end of the 19th century there were more than sixty

hospitals in China as a result of Christian missionary presence. It wasn't just about winning converts; it was about bringing the healing presence of Jesus..

This has been a whirlwind tour of Jesus, Scripture, and Church history but I think the point is clear that Christians are sent out into the world in the footsteps of their Lord to bring healing to those who are sick, injured, and suffering. The *means* of healing might take lots of different forms from counseling and exorcism to medicine and drugs to surgery to laying on of hands and prayer. Whatever the means and the instruments, healing comes ultimately from the power and goodness of God. We cannot be faithful Christians and turn aside from this task because of our laziness, selfishness, callousness, ideology, or politics.

Four Possible Health Care Foci for Today's Disciples

Let's think about the Christian call to health care in relation to four possible foci today:

Governments and Health Care: No government-sponsored health care program will ever be able to adequately care for everyone's health needs (just like no government educational system will ever be able to adequately provide for everyone's educational needs). But to the extent that we can have influence by our votes or other political activities, shouldn't Christians try to help government health (or education) programs be as good as they can be? Isn't it wrong for Christians to join those who are rooting for government health care to fail? Isn't it unchristian to protest paying taxes in support of helping sick people in our society (our taxes always support a lot of things we might not approve of 100%—there is no such thing as tax purity)? We can't expect Caesar to get the job done perfectly of course and we need to resist Caesar's power at times, in the health care domain as in other areas.

But let's think primarily about how to "salt" and "light" (rather than criticize and obstruct) government health care initiatives in positive ways. And for sure if you make efforts to deny governmental health care to others, you must avoid all hypocrisy on the topic and refuse to accept any governmental help (Medicare, etc.) for yourself. If you take it for yourself but try to deny it to others, especially those with fewer resources than yourself, you are inviting judgment onto your head and into your household my friend. At least be consistent. The members of Congress who accept generous government-sponsored health care for themselves and vote against it for the poor are the rankest sort of hypocrites.

The Health Care Business: No market-based, health care business and industry will ever be able to adequately care for everyone's health care needs. For sure, markets, entrepreneurship, and competition can be a positive force in many aspects of our lives. But a wholesale dependence on "the love of money" to produce health care solutions is a strategy all Christians should see through in an instant. The love of money is a major root of evil, not the root of great health care for hurting people. Nevertheless, wherever Christians have opportunity to influence the health care business, we should try to help market-based medicine be as good as it can be, i.e., provide high quality care to as many needy patients as possible.

Where there is opportunity for Christians to create or influence hospitals, health insurance companies, and other institutions we should do what we can to steer them toward the goals we see in our Lord's agenda. I don't think all Christians should abandon for-profit hospitals, clinics, research labs, and pharmaceutical firms. But neither should we accept them and their profit-seeking without qualification. To the extent that we can have influence let's salt and light them and help them improve in delivering high quality health care to those in need. It is troubling when the health care free marketers continually use selfishness as grounds for their choices, e.g., "I want to be able to choose my own physician." Fine sir but how about using your skills and experience to entrepreneur some health care services available to

those who are currently without any choice of physician? There is a huge opportunity for innovation and entrepreneurship here.

If markets work, why does health care in the USA cost roughly double what it does in other “developed” nations? Doesn’t this suggest a business opportunity? Who will start a competitive health care “business” to undercut the inflated costs and capture the market? I do think there is opportunity here even though the larger story is that we do not actually have free market health care. What we have is a combination of inept government and colossal greed and inefficiency by corporate health care monopolies. Let’s see some brilliant business entrepreneurs capture the market for 60% the cost.

Church-based Health Care: But let’s move beyond the usual polarizing debates about government and business. We Christians have a great opportunity today to embrace anew the idea of ministering to peoples’ physical health through our local parish churches (alone or in partnership with other churches). Just as some church and parachurch groups today provide afterschool or evening supplemental Christian tutoring and schooling, so we could provide some supplemental basic health care services to members and neighbors. I think it is time for Christians to back off from arguments with each other about government and business-based health care --- and come together to develop some church-based solutions.

Maybe our church could host and sponsor a weekly drop-in clinic or even a parish nurse or nurse practitioner on the staff. Maybe a part of our budget should be for an emergency health care crisis fund (“insurance”). Maybe church memberships could self-insure, just as some churches sponsor credit unions to self-bank, and schools to self-educate. And more than simply reactive health care, maybe we could use our church as a base for teaching good nutrition and health habits, and sponsoring fitness and wellness programs for members and neighbors. Why expect government or business to meet these needs? Jesus didn’t. The church has historically taken a leading role. Let’s do it again.

Individual disciples in Health Care: Finally, why don’t we start viewing our fellow Christians who go into health care as true missionaries and ministers of Jesus Christ in the world today? Wouldn’t it be great if more and more Christians would choose to be trained to be doctors, nurses, physician’s assistants, nurse practitioners, hospital chaplains, pharmaceutical researchers, clinic workers, hospital orderlies, and biotechnology pioneers --- all in the name of Jesus Christ? I believe we should be encouraging such choices.

Wouldn’t it be great if we didn’t just have services to ordain preachers and pastors --- but also services and rituals to ordain doctors, nurses, and others devoting their lives to health care vocations? Why don’t we encourage and support (prayer, encouragement, funding) our individuals to enter such work? We treat our members who work in health care as though their work is “just a job.” It is not. It is a holy calling before God and should be prayed for as regularly and fervently as any pastoral or missionary worker would receive.

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We are passing through one of the most polarized, contentious periods in American and world political history. Today, the mudslinging, fear-mongering, confusion, and outright falsehoods in the health care reform “debate” (not really a debate so much as a series of confusing proposals and hysterical charges and responses) is depressing and discouraging to say the least. But our calling as Christians is not to let the world depress us or define our options and perspective on health care or any other topic. We are

called to be loyal citizens of the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of Pennsylvania Ave --- or of Wall Street. As I said before, it's about Calvary Cross, not Blue Cross.

Our calling is not to condemn the world but to bring some good news, some salt, some light. Our calling is to seek and to save the lost, to comfort and cure those who are hurting, those who don't show up on the world's radar screen at all, to find and care for the 100th sheep that is lost (and not be satisfied with caring for 99 of 100)..

We have a big job in front of us but at William Carey famously said: "Attempt great things for God and expect great things from God."