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Christ the Physician

by

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A physician is one who heals. The healing is of physical or emotional illness or disease. Much of Christ's public ministry was devoted to the healing of physical diseases. Christ was a physician *par excellence*. The purpose of this paper is to describe Christ's healing miracles, and to relate this ministry to today's physicians.

I. Gospel Miracles

The Bible is a record of God's relationship with His people. It is written in many literary styles. The New Testament is specifically about Christ and His miracles. For the purpose of this review, we accept the Gospels as being historically accurate. Because the gospels were specifically meant to be a record of Christ's three-year earthly ministry, we will limit our inquiry to His physical healing as described by the Evangelists in the Four Gospels.

Miracle is a generic term with many meanings. They are defined in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*¹ as "extraordinary and astonishing happenings that are attributed to the presence and action of an ultimate or divine power." We will use this definition in the following discussion. Miracles can be further categorized as:

- 1) healing miracles, the cure of medical disease
- 2) nature miracles, the multiplication of loaves and fishes
- 3) exorcism, the casting out of demons and, finally
- 4) pronouncement miracles, the prophesying of future events

There are twelve instances (see table 1) where the evangelists recorded Jesus curing an unenumerated "many" and nineteen occurrences of individual acts of specifically described diseases (and three instances of restoration of life) (see table 2). The former twelve do not individualize each cure. We will concentrate on the latter. Interestingly, there were six exorcism miracles and four nature miracles.

The evangelists wrote the Gospels to tell those in the Christian community, who did not personally know Christ, about his life and mission. Their narratives were not clinical medical histories in the form of case studies. Several miracles are recorded by two or more evangelists, many are not. Many are described individually, but others are simply references to the fact that Christ "healed many." The healing miracles should be accepted as they were intended by the evangelists, that is, to be their descriptions of Christ's supernatural ability to cure the physical and mental sufferings of others. Efforts at specifying blindness, for example, as total or partial, or what is meant by palsy, serves no purpose and would in any event be impossible.

II. Purpose of Christ's Miracles

The reason for performing His miracles was twofold: Christ intended, first, to use His supernatural power to promote His message of salvation as a revelation of God's mercy. Second, to alleviate the sufferings of the person with the disease.

First, Christ became man to redeem mankind and to proclaim His message. To proclaim His message, He had to get the attention of His Palestinian audience. One dramatic means of doing this was to perform miracles. He was able to draw parallels between physical healing and spiritual salvation, and so influence His listeners.

Secondly, Christ was compassionate and healed to relieve the suffering and pain of those with infirmities. The evangelists specifically noted Christ's feeling of pity and concern for those that were sick.

III. Specific Healing Miracles

There were four instances each of curing blindness and healing cripples. Again, "cripple" is used in the generic sense and includes paralysis, withered hand and the palsy. There were two miracle cures of both lepers (one a single case and one of ten lepers) and "fevers." There were single instances of cures of deafness, severed ear, dropsy, and hemorrhage. Finally, there were three cases of restoration of life.

IV. Characteristics of the Healing Miracles

There were three recurring characteristics that the evangelists recorded regarding Christ's miracles. They noted that Christ touched (ten of nineteen) many of his sick subjects to effect the healing. He touched the eyes of the blind and the ear of Peter's victim. Christ also employed spittle and clay when touching the deaf and blind individuals.

There were several instances when the evangelists specifically noted that Christ was moved by compassion toward those who suffered and whom He subsequently cured. The concern for those with illness characterizes Christ's ministry and was documented frequently by the evangelists.

Finally the evangelists noted in several instances that Christ requested of those He cured that they not tell anyone else about the cure. This request not to publicize the cures was probably for two reasons. First, it would increase the public commotion and speed up Christ's public ministry, which was to last three years. Secondly, it would enrage the leaders and prompt them to silence Jesus before His allotted time.

V. Healing in the Early Church

Christ instructed His disciples to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons" (Mt. 10-8).² The New Testament describing the early Church is filled with instances of miraculous healing both physical as well as spiritual. While many of the New Testament cures are of clearly physical disease, most were of illness that had emotional and/or spiritual components.

Similarly, many if not most of today's diseases, from hypertension to ulcer disease, also are multi-faceted. We tend to focus on the purely physical and ignore the psychosomatic and life style aspects of diseases. The current trend toward holistic medicine is evidence of the broader emotional and spiritual implications of illness. Christ in the Gospel stories is telling us sometimes about the complex relationship between the human body and soul.

VI. Relevance for Today's Physician

A review of Christ's healing miracles has relevance for today's physicians for several reasons. First, the human condition as far as illness and pain are concerned has not changed significantly in the past two millennia. Blindness and crippling, neurologic problems were common

then as now. We are still confronted by most of the illnesses that Christ faced.

Secondly, to promote His ministry, Christ appealed to the peoples of Palestine in a direct and dramatic manner. He miraculously cured and thereby conveyed His message that spiritual healing was as necessary to gain the Kingdom of Heaven, as was physical healing to function on earth. We should provide emotional support along with medical intervention.

Thirdly, Christ downplayed His healing and this modesty might be good advice for today's physician following therapeutic success.

Finally, Christ's healing miracles are particularly important to physicians because we must be compassionate, or more specifically, empathetic, toward the illness and suffering of our patients. Of interest are the frequently recorded instances of "touching", that mediated Jesus' cures. Indeed, most of His cures involved touching. Touching is a remarkably human act. Perhaps the time-honored tradition of the physician's "laying on of hands" should be reemphasized in medical school.

Hopefully by meditating on Christ's ministry and particularly on the healing miracles, physicians will deepen their sense of faith, which in turn should motivate us to be even better physicians.

Table 1. Healing Miracles (General)

Miracles	Gospel Verse	Comment
"He cured many who were sick"	Mt. 8:16, Mk 1:32, Lk 4:40	Touch: "He laid His hand on each of them."
"He cured them all"	Mt. 12:15 Mk 3:10	Privacy
"Curing every disease and illness"	Mt. 4:23 Lk 6:17	
"As many as touched were healed"	Mt. 14:34 Mk 6:58	Touch
"Curing every disease and illness"	Mt. 9:35	
"Blind regain their sight, the lame walk"	Mt. 11:4 Lk 7:21	
"He cured their sick"	Mt. 14:14 Lk 9:11 Jn 6:2	Compassion
"To be cured of their ailments"	Lk 5:15	
"Curing a few sick people"	Mk 6:5	Touch
"He cured them"	Mt. 15:30	
"He cured them there"	Mt. 19:2	
"He cured then"	Mt. 21:14	

Table 2. Christ's Specific Healing Miracles

Miracles	Gospel Verse	Comment
Woman with hemorrhage	Mt. 9:20 Mk 5:25 Lk 8:43	Touch, Compassion
Cleansing of ten lepers	Lk 17:11	One of ten returns
Cleansing of a leper	Mt 8:2 Mk 1:40 Lk 5:12	Touch, Compassion, Secret
Man by Bethesda pool	Jn 5:8	Compassion
Blind man at Bethesda	Mk 8:22	Touch
Blind Bartemaeus	Mt 20:30 Mk 10:46 Lk 18:35	
Man born blind	Jn 9:1	Touch
Man with dropsy	Lk 14:1	
Peter's mother-in-law's fever	Mt 8:14 Mk 1:30 Lk 4:39	Touch: "He touched her hand"
Man with withered hand	Mt 12:9 Mk 3:1 Lk 6:6	Compassion
Paralytic at Capernaum	Mt 9:2 Mk 2:3 Lk 5:17	Compassion
Centurion's servant	Mt 8:5	Paralysis
Nobleman's son	Jn 4:47	Fever
Deaf and dumb	Mk 7:32	Touch
Severed ear	Lk 22:51	Touch
Two blind men	Mt 9:27	Touch
Jairius daughter	Mt. 9:18 Mk 5:22	Touch, Restored Life
Widow of Naims son	Lk 7:11	Touch, Compassion, Restored Life
Lazarus	Jn 11:1	Compassion, Restored Life