

“The Gospel of Healing”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 7/19/2020
Text: Acts 5:12-16 at FBC of Newport, NH

//12 The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. 13 No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. 14 Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. 15 As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. 16 Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.//

—Acts 5:12-16 (NIV)

I am struck by the core nature of this movement of the newborn Church started by Jesus Christ. It is, at its heart peaceful and even healing.

Just previous to this, though, didn't we see the death of Ananias and Sapphira? That doesn't look very peaceful. And it wasn't. It was judgment. But if you remember correctly, it wasn't Peter doing any violence against those two; it was God. And it was God acting, not against the world, but against the camp of his own people—which properly put the fear of God back in the church. It even put the fear of God in the hearts of people who weren't in the church. So you didn't see anyone joining up just because it was cool or popular or for any secondary reasons other than for believing Jesus Christ is Lord. And evidently all this set the stage for a tremendous outpouring of healing and goodwill with the general population of Jerusalem.

Like I said, the core nature of this movement of the newborn Church of Jesus Christ is peace and even healing. Demonstrated here by the healing of people's bodies and by the casting out of demons. And those were but signs pointing people to the ultimate healing power of Jesus to forgive us of our sins.

But doesn't there seem to be violence all around the church right down through history? Yes. You can even start with Jesus himself. He's noted for turning over the tables and driving out the animals in the Temple courtyard. But people forget that he was directing that act against people who were operating as thieves within his Father's house. Even the most peaceful person can't be faulted for defending one's own house. And he did it for the sake of the world beyond that house, as he noted, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'" (Mark 11:17)

From the earliest points of Jesus' life and ministry there was deadly violence directed against Jesus. Yet, he faced it square on, especially at the cross, where he turned the tide against the violence itself. Like the ploy of an army that fakes a retreat, only to trap the enemy as they expose themselves. Only this was God's army of One. The overexposure was for the world to kill the

Son of God. Is there a greater possible sin than the killing of God? But the counterattack was for the crucified One to grant forgiveness for all violence and killing and sin of every sort—just for the asking.

Well, some might say that's fine for Jesus, but what about all the violence done in the name of the Church down through history?

Yes, there's violence done by the church centuries later when, for example, they set out to defend themselves against the relentless attacks by the Muslims. And there have been plenty of ways in which the church has employed wars and violence herself once she became established in political power. But at that point it becomes difficult to distinguish between the actual Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world with their business-as-usual of violence.

This, I believe, is because the Church was never intended to be "of this world." At least no more than as salt and light. Beyond that we have to acknowledge there's a mixture of wheat and tares growing even within nations identified as "Christian." But that doesn't mean the nature of the wheat is then exactly the same as that of the tares just because they're together in the same field. Clearly the fallen nature of our world has always been that of violence and war. It's just business as usual. But the Bible still presents the nature of the Church as being that of peace and healing for the human soul. It's harder to see, given the mixture of Church and State, but there are signs ... and wonders to behold down through the ages.

You can start with healing itself. The Church has definitely acted as salt and light in regard to healing from her very beginnings. I do believe Jesus, Peter and others healed people miraculously through the direct power of God's Holy Spirit. But I also believe that was but the foundation for the Church to go on with a passionate care for the sick and injured wherever the Gospel is preached. Not to mention a reverence for human life. There is a letter from a typical Roman soldier sent back to his wife. Among other expected subjects is this instruction:

"If—may you have good luck—you should give birth; if it is a boy, keep it; if it is a girl, throw it out." (*Unimaginable*, by Jeremiah Johnson, 2019, p. 26.)

Yes. It was common for the Romans to abandon their unwanted babies at the town dump. And it was common for Christians to rescue those babies and raise them. This was the nature of the Church's heart for healing. And it was part of the preaching of the Gospel. The Church has gone on to combine her ministry with the work of doctors, nurses, hospitals and more. And at times to the work of politicians in trying to save or even prevent the throwing away of babies.

The Church has also acted as salt and light for a kind of healing of ignorance as it has brought literacy everywhere it has preached the Gospel. And it was Christianity that started the first universities in the 11 and 1200s (during the so-called 'Dark Ages,' which weren't really all that dark). Christianity also innovated the principle of educating both men and women.

Then there was also the undoing of slavery. The seeds of this were

already found in the Gospel itself. But it wasn't combined with political power of enforcement until William Wilberforce persevered in the parliament of the United Kingdom to make real change. And then in the United States it took the shed blood of a civil war to make a difference in this country. God's servants of salt and light were at the forefront of this unique movement, the likes of which the world had never, ever seen before.

And then, the matter of separation of Church and State itself came about through the salt and light effect of the Church in the formation of the Constitution of the United States. This has yielded the greatest freedom in history for worship according to one's convictions and conscience. The salt and light of the Church never had it so good.

I say all this to keep us from thinking that Peter and the first century Church were the only ones to truly engage in the God-powered ministry of healing. It is appropriate that the Apostles themselves be able to demonstrate the direct, miraculous powers of healing just as Jesus did. For they were chosen to be part of the very foundation of the Church, with Christ the cornerstone—and they the strategic stones set for the rest of the building. I'm not saying there's no such healing available today. But I am saying it will be limited and won't be foundational as it was with the Apostles. However, there are many ways in which God has continued to bless the Church and the world with that same core Spirit of healing throughout every century.

And I am wondering what our roll might be right now in terms of healing. There are so many ways people need healing today. Some is direct healing of health, be it from infection from the Coronavirus or from complications in some other health area affected by all the changes and delays due to the Coronavirus. Others are just fearful and frustrated, given we still don't seem to quite know what we're dealing with in this pandemic. Basic questions, such as: Are we getting better or worse? Should everyone be made to wear masks or not? Should children go back to classes in the fall or not?

And while this alone is able to bring on heated, partisan debate, there has been an eruption in our country on the matter of racism. This, too, has been politicized and is still raging like a fire. To some this is supposed to be a revolution to bring about racial healing. To others this is an opportunity to bring about a purge of anything and everything 'unclean' according to the color of white. And to others still, this is an ominous prelude to something even worse.

Surely God has a place for the Church in the midst of all this. As such, we can be sure it will involve two things that are at the heart of the Church: bringing the message of the Gospel to the world; and bringing that message accompanied by signs and wonders of some kind of healing that only God can provide. The world talks a lot about saving the world, with revolutions, riots and rhetoric, but what it is really doing is revealing its need for the true Savior and for true healing. Remember this. And remember what God has been doing from the beginning.