

How Jesus Heals and Why It's Different than a Cure

By Bethany McKinney Fox

In the biblical gospels, we find many accounts where Jesus meets someone with what we today would call a disability and offers that person healing. What does it mean that Jesus heals, and how is this healing different from what we call a “cure”?

How Jesus heals vs. curing

Since our culture tends to think about bodies and disabilities through a medical perspective, it makes sense that when we think about healing, particularly for folks with disabilities, we might assume it means some kind of bodily healing, or cure. But especially in healing narratives where the gospel writer goes into detail, we realize these encounters are about much more than a cure.

If curing were the essential part, the narrative could end when the body is changed. But instead, gospel writers continue reporting far beyond the moment of physical cure to include details that wouldn't matter if curing the body were the main point. This is part of how we recognize that healing is not equivalent to curing in the gospels. A cure is simply a transformation of a body (part), a body that will eventually deteriorate and die. But Jesus's healing is much bigger and involves someone's entire life.

Why Jesus heals more than the body

In Jesus's context, having a disability was about more than what a person couldn't do (see, walk, etc.). It was also about what they were not able to be: namely, valued, integrated members of their social community and worship space, with meaningful vocations (things that continue to be true for too many people with disabilities today). So Jesus's healing work needed to involve *holistic transformation*.

Apart from bodily cure, the people Jesus heals experience healing socially, relationally, spiritually, and in many other ways. It is a whole life transformation, including transformation of how people perceive them.

In an encounter, Jesus will often remind the person (and anyone nearby) of that person's true identity—by calling them a daughter, son, part of the family of faith—something that was always true, but not always acknowledged by the broader culture. When they are healed on a social level, people are able to more fully integrate into their community. And spiritually, they recognize the truth of who Jesus is, often becoming followers or worshipers, and sometimes even gain a meaningful vocation as evangelists to their hometowns. These are all aspects of healing, going beyond cure.

What can we learn from Jesus about healing vs. curing?

The lingering question: as followers of Jesus, should we consider cure an essential part of healing?

Caring for people's bodies mattered to Jesus, and it should matter to us. But a common thread among the healing encounters is that the person left the encounter feeling good about what took place.

For a number of folks with disabilities today, a bodily cure is not something they need or even want, because they appreciate the bodies and minds God has given them. In these cases, to assume healing must include bodily cure could be harmful, something that did not occur when Jesus healed.

So to follow in the way of Jesus today means holistically healing (which may not include curing): deeper integration into community, growing connection to Jesus, and a meaningful life path. What would it mean to make space for this kind of healing for people?

<https://www.faithward.org/how-jesus-heals-and-why-its-different-than-a-cure/>

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EXPLORING SACRED MUSIC, WORSHIP, AND THE ARTS

THE CHURCH'S WORK OF HEALING: PRAYER, LAYING ON OF HANDS, AND ANOINTING

Lizette Larson-Miller

Even a casual reading of the canonical gospels reveals that much of Jesus's ministry was devoted to healing. His healing was of physical ailments (the woman with the hemorrhage, Mark 5:21–24)¹, or mental and spiritual ailments (“Jesus went about curing every disease and every sickness,” Matthew 4:23–24). He cured disabilities, such as the man born blind (John 9:1–12), as well as social maladies (the woman “caught in adultery,” John 8:3–11). Healing—making whole—was never an end in itself, but rather a means by which Christ led that person to resurrection and life (salvation). It was a sign of the reign of God begun. In all of the examples handed down to us, healing was a means to an end, as it always pointed to the presence and power of God. The healings recounted in the gospels might remain simply stories of what Jesus did long ago and far away, except that the body of Christ, the Church, is formed through the birth, life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ, and born into all of that through the waters of baptism. The Church is charged with the command to continue the work he began—to “do this” until Christ returns: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19). Stained glass depiction from St. Baavo Cathedral in Ghent of Jesus healing the sick. Photo by [Thomas Quine](#).

To be a disciple—or perhaps better, an apprentice—is not primarily to learn a teaching that is external to one's own being, but to pattern one's life on the teaching, and imitate the actions, of the Rabbi. What may begin with a deep knowing (“let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. . .” Philippians 2:5) is rehearsed and embodied socially, kinesthetically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:1–2). A chapter later in Luke, the charge to the original twelve followers is expanded to include others, an expansion that continues through the centuries to all those made disciples through baptism. “After this, the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. . .” “He told them “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” (Luke 10:1, 8–9). And so the Church proclaims healing and the presence of the kingdom of God in words and deeds until Christ comes again. But how does the Church do that?

The primary New Testament text and description of the early Church's care for the sick is embedded in the letter of James:

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. (James 5:14–15)

The author of the letter of James gathered together three fundamental ecclesial practices—tools of healing—by which the Church would minister with and to the sick. The first is prayer, which is attested to in scripture and early Christian writing as the obligation of all Christians. But here, it is not prayer spoken at a distance: it is prayer “over” the sick, which joins prayer to the second fundamental ecclesial practice, the laying on of hands. Many years ago, Godfrey Diekmann suggested that the laying on of hands was the fundamental gesture or action for the communication of God's presence in ritual and sacrament. He wrote that the “laying on of hands, understood as a conferring of the Holy Spirit, constituted in early Christianity the basic liturgical rite common to all the sacraments. In other words, this ‘prayer over’ is at the heart of the Church's prayer for the sick, the ritual by which the Holy Spirit has been brought “into the center and heart of the sacramental rites.”^[2] Finally, the letter includes a third element in the work of healing through the Church, and that is anointing with oil. All three of these—spoken prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing with oil—are forms of prayer. But how did anointing with oil become central to healing within the first century of Christianity, eventually becoming the primary ritual matter and action that gave its name to the sacrament of the sick?

Holy oils

Like many physical or ritual dimensions of sacramental celebrations, oil has a long history of biblical, cultural, and Christological associations that contribute to its centrality. Scripture describes oil used for various ritual and practical purposes, from simple cooking oil to the best of fresh oil used for offerings and exchanges, to scented oil mixed with expensive perfumes and spices used to set apart places and mark persons as holy.^[3] In the New Testament, anointing with oil is described in two different ways: first as a pouring over someone, and second as an anointing that effects a transformation of identity in someone. The second use of anointing with oil is connected to the identification of Jesus as the Christed or anointed One, and is linked to the Church's ongoing use of chrism. On the other hand, the oil of healing emerges from the term for the pouring out of oil, as seen in James 5 and in Mark 6:13 (“So they [the apostles] went out and preached that all should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.”) Culturally, especially in the climates around the Mediterranean Sea where Christianity was born, the natural healing properties of oil as an external unguent on the skin and on injuries, as well as the internal use of oil added as a medication or supplement to the diet, had already been well-recognized as an agent of healing long before the Christian adaptation of oil in sacramental practice.^[4]

From here the Church begins a long history of setting olive oil aside through an episcopal blessing so that it is recognized as both effecting a strengthening of the individual and being an action of the whole Church, because the bishop was the primary ecclesial symbol of the Church's unity. This oil is described in numerous stories throughout the first millennium of Christianity as being used by any of the baptized on any of the baptized as long as it was "confectured" by the bishop.^[5] The key is to distinguish between the healing by a charismatic individual, a tradition already evident in the Apostle Paul's writing, and the healing office of the Church with its sacramental efficacy, regardless of who was doing the anointing.

In the ninth to eleventh centuries, the specific task of spiritual healing (forgiveness of sins) began to supersede that of all other healings, particularly physical healing.

The healing described in the letter of James is holistic: those who are sick will be healed and their sins will be forgiven. James makes clear that health—wholeness—is about strengthening and enabling the sick to cope with the ramifications of illness, whether these be physical or spiritual. Throughout medieval Western church developments, anointing was part of a larger set of practices which gradually grew more and more elaborate, and included the laying on of hands, communion, psalms, and scripture readings. In the ninth to eleventh centuries, the specific task of spiritual healing (forgiveness of sins) began to supersede that of all other healings, particularly physical healing. As this sacramental emphasis mixed with the changes in the sacrament of reconciliation, the anointing with oil became not so much a holistic and physical healing but a spiritual healing at the end of life. It became a sacrament of the dying. Scholastic theologians placed *viaticum* (one's last communion) at the center of the final rites for the dying. These rites were re-ordered so that the anointing came last, *in extremis*, hence the term "extreme unction." In Roman Catholic tradition this sacramental practice endured until the 1970s when the rite was reformed after the Second Vatican Council. The return to a sacramental rite for the sick—and a holistic healing that points to the reign of God—has emerged over the past fifty years in many ecumenical circles. There was, for example, some thinking in Anglicanism along these lines at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a counter to the rise in spiritualism and various practices denying the importance of the Incarnation.^[6] But official rituals emerged primarily from the work of Vatican II:

"Extreme unction," which may also and more fittingly be called "anointing of the sick," is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.^[7]

The sick exercise a ministry to the larger Church by their witness of faith in Christ.

As similar sets of rituals have emerged in different churches, several key theological ideas have been more clearly articulated in recent decades. The first is to clarify the

difference between curing and healing. Physical illness may be healed, since all things are possible for God, but even if an immediate cure is not apparent to the human eye, a sacramental healing has occurred, since “sacraments always work.”^[8] This points to an essential distinction between curing an illness and healing the whole person. The Church’s ministry to the sick is to strengthen and restore relationships with God, community, and self; to overcome isolation, give hope and strength, and to know oneself in the love and mercy of God. The sick exercise a ministry to the larger Church by their witness of faith in Christ. They bear this witness both through their participation in the life and the suffering of Christ, and by praying for others from that position of greater knowing in Christ. The second clarification is to reiterate the difference between charismatic healing—the gift of healing given to an individual directly by God—and the healing office of the Church. Ecclesial communities have recognized the authority to anoint the sick based on different interpretations of James, some limiting the ministry to those in holy orders (deacons and priests or priests alone), and others to any of the baptized with suitable preparation. Above all, the blessing of the oil by the bishop (usually at an annual Chrism Mass) remains important for the ecclesial nature of the ministry and its sacramental efficacy. Third, recent decades have seen a growing understanding of the complexity of the human person. Using the insights of Christian anthropology, humans are understood not simply as dualistic (body and spirit), but psycho-social-somatic-spiritual beings for whom healing may mean social, emotional, and mental healing as much as physical and spiritual healing. The result is seen in expanded language of prayer and more frequent opportunities for the anointing of the sick.

“Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up.”^[9]

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<https://ismreview.yale.edu/article/the-churchs-work-of-healing-prayer-laying-on-of-hands-and-anointing/>

Wholeness and Healing

¶ *Theological Introduction*

Baptism witnesses to God's gift of salvation, in which he gathers people into the new creation in Jesus Christ. Baptism points to the way in which God in Jesus Christ is overthrowing an order of life corrupted by sin and death and bringing to birth a renewed creation, a creation alive with the healing presence of God's Spirit. Baptism is a sign of individual and corporate forgiveness and renewal within the life of the baptized. That life proclaims not only the risen power won by Christ for us in his resurrection and exaltation, but also our identification as human beings with the constraints and suffering borne by Christ in his incarnation and on the cross.

With the incarnation of Jesus, God begins the renewal of our alienated, weakened and fragmented human condition (Romans 8.3,4). In St Matthew's Gospel Jesus' baptism expresses his solidarity with us in our weakness (Matthew 3.14,15) and his healing ministry is seen as the outworking of the suffering servant who 'took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (Matthew 8.17). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ promise both the judgement of all that is flawed in human life and the recreation of our humanity. A powerful biblical image portrays the sufferings of the Messiah, of the creation, and of God's people, as the birth pains that herald the new age in which peace and righteousness reign (Luke 12.50; John 16.21; Romans 8.18-30; Colossians 1.24; Revelation 12). The Christ, the anointed one, is clothed with the Holy Spirit to bring good news to the afflicted and to proclaim the day of the Lord's favour (Luke 4.18-21).

It is apparent in Scripture that the physical, emotional, social and spiritual well-being of human beings are closely interconnected. Christ's work of reconciliation extends beyond the purely personal and relational to the social order and the whole creation (cf Colossians 1.15-27). The Gospels use the term 'healing' both for physical healing and for the broader salvation that Jesus brings. A common New Testament term for sickness is 'weakness' (*asthenia*) (Luke 5.15; 13.11,12; John 5.5); it carries broad associations of powerlessness and vulnerability, including human vulnerability in the face of the dominion of sin and death (Romans 5.6; 8.3). As Christians face weakness, they receive God's grace, expressed sometimes in an experience of healing and sometimes through the strength that comes in the bearing of weakness (2 Corinthians 12.9).

Furthermore, the New Testament also presents us with a picture of Christians in a running battle with forces of evil that are external to us but bear heavily upon our lives. Although the principalities and powers (Ephesians 6.12) are not always forces of evil, they can have an impact on the social and political order; the evil one not only brings temptation but takes people captive (Gospels, *passim*); the power of idols enslaves consciences (1 Corinthians 8); and pagan sacrifices are offered to demons with whom we must not be participants (1 Corinthians 10). This series of pictures, while not absolving us from personal responsibility for our actions, also strongly implies that without the grace of God we are at risk of being in the grip of an array of forces beyond our powers to resist or break. Yet there is victory in Christ, and we also learn that, in the final analysis, 'an idol is nothing in the world and there is no God but one' (1 Corinthians 8.4); and that victorious discernment categorizes all forces of spiritual evil as provisional and counterfeit. Their 'power' lies in their impact on us, and their 'reality' therefore is shadowy and interim only. But we nonetheless need deliverance from that power, and the language of healing and wholeness is entirely appropriate to that process.

Acts of healing in the Gospels are intimately related to the restoring of individuals to a place of worth within the social order (cf Mark 1.44; 5.15-20; 6.32-34; Luke 13.10-17). 'By his wounds you have been healed' (1 Peter 2.24) makes powerful links between human pain and vulnerability and the saving impact of Jesus' own suffering. The same interconnectedness is present where Scripture speaks of God's image in us to point to the way human life is marred and threatened by the impact of evil and is restored by the new creation in Christ (Romans 3.23; 2 Corinthians 3.18; Ephesians 2.13-16).

Healing, reconciliation and restoration are integral to the good news of Jesus Christ. For this reason prayer for individuals, focused through laying on of hands or anointing with oil, has a proper place within the public prayer of the Church. God's gracious activity of healing is to be seen both as part of the proclaiming of the good news and as an outworking of the presence of the Spirit in the life of the Church.

Such prayer needs to be sensitive to a number of simplifications or misunderstandings. It should not imply a simple link between sickness and sin; Jesus himself warned against the direct association of disability and sin (John 9.3). The receiving of forgiveness and the act of forgiving others may open the way to healing and wholeness. Prayer for healing and strengthening should not involve the rejection of the skills and activity of

medicine which are also part of God's faithfulness to creation (cf Ecclesiasticus 38.9-12; Psalm 147.3). Prayer for healing needs to take seriously the way in which individual sickness and vulnerability are often the result of injustice and social oppression. Equally importantly such prayer should not imply that the restoration of physical wholeness is the only way in which Christ meets human need. Healing has always to be seen against the background of the continuing anguish of an alienated world and the hidden work of the Holy Spirit bringing God's new order to birth. It is a way of partaking in God's new life that will not be complete until it includes the whole creation and the destruction of death itself.

¶ *Introductory Note*

These forms of service are intended to recognize the links between prayer for healing and the wider celebration in the Church of reconciliation and renewal in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- ¶ The first is a service most suitable for a diocesan or deanery occasion.
- ¶ The second, the Laying on of Hands with Prayer and Anointing at a Celebration of Holy Communion, is intended for occasional use, when appropriate, as part of the regular liturgical life of a parish.
- ¶ The third, Prayer for Individuals in Public Worship, is primarily intended for use in churches where such prayer for individuals is a regular feature of Sunday worship.
- ¶ The fourth, Ministry to the Sick, is intended for use in the sickroom, whether in hospital or at home.
- ¶ The fifth comprises prayers for protection and peace for use with or by individuals at need.

Those who come for prayer with Laying on of Hands and/or Anointing should make careful preparation. They may receive the Laying on of Hands on behalf of others who are not present as well as for themselves.

Where prayer is offered for those who will minister to others, this should be seen as prayer for the grace and discernment of the Holy Spirit, as well as prayer for healing. All who minister to others in need should have careful regard for the duty of confidentiality which this privilege brings. As part of their preparation, those who minister need to be ready to recognize where specialist skills may be required.

If a need for a more particular ministry of exorcism or deliverance is perceived, then the bishop's instructions should be followed and his authorized advisor consulted.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/wholeness-and-healing/wholeness-and>

From the Book of Occasional Services p 717-172

A Public Service of Healing This service is suitable for use in a congregation or other church setting. It may also be adapted as needed for use in a variety of settings, e.g., hospital, nursing home, or other health care facility. When unction is administered in the context of the Sunday Eucharist or a regular weekday Eucharist, the portion of this service entitled "Laying on of Hands and Anointing" is used. It is recommended that this take place immediately before the exchange of the Peace. The Word of God The service may begin as appointed for a celebration of the Holy Eucharist, or with the Penitential Order, or with the following greeting Minister The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. People And also with you. Minister Let us pray. After a period of silence, the Minister then says one of the following Collects, or some other appropriate Collect Loving God, the comfort of all who sorrow, the strength of all who suffer: accept our prayers, and to those who seek healing [especially N. and N., and all whom we name in our hearts], grant the power of your grace, that the weak may be strengthened, sickness turned to health, the dying made whole, and sorrow turned into joy; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen. or this 171 God our healer, whose mercy is like a refining fire: by the lovingkindness of Jesus, heal us and those for whom we pray; that being renewed by you, we may witness your wholeness to our broken world; through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit. Amen. or this Gracious God, we commend to your loving care all who suffer, especially those who come [here] seeking your healing grace [for themselves or others]. Give them patience and hope in their distress; strengthen and uphold them in mind and body; and grant, by your intervention, that all your people may be made whole according to your desire, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. One or two Lessons are read before the Gospel. Between the

Lessons, and before the Gospel, a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung or said. The readings may be selected from the following list, or from the Proper of the Day. From the Old Testament Exodus 16:13-15 (Manna in the wilderness) 1 Samuel 1:12-18 (Hannah prays to God) 1 Kings 17:17-24 (Elijah restores the widow's son to life) 2 Kings 5:9-14 (Healing of Naaman) 1 Kings 20:1-5 (I have heard your prayer . . . I will heal you) Job 7:1-4 (human beings have a hard service on earth) Isaiah 11:1-3a (The gifts of the Spirit) Isaiah 35 (eyes shall be opened...ears unstopped...the lame shall leap) Isaiah 38:1-5 (the healing of Hezekiah); see also 2 Kings 20:1-7 Isaiah 49:14-16 (I will not forget you) Isaiah 42:1-7 (The suffering servant) Isaiah 53:3-6 (With his stripes are we healed) Isaiah 61:1-3 (Good tidings to the afflicted) Ezekiel 36:26-28 (a new heart and a new spirit) Ezekiel 37:12-14 (I am going to open your graves) Psalms 13; 20:1-6; 23; 27; 30; 71; 86:1-7; 91; 103; 126; 139:1-17; 145; 146 172

From the Book of Common Prayer P 455-456

Part II. Laying on of Hands and Anointing

If oil for the Anointing of the Sick is to be blessed, the Priest says

O Lord, holy Father, giver of health and salvation: Send your Holy Spirit to sanctify this oil; that, as your holy apostles anointed many that were sick and healed them, so may those who in faith and repentance receive this holy unction be made whole; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The following anthem is said

Savior of the world, by your cross and precious blood you have redeemed us;
Save us, and help us, we humbly beseech you, O Lord.

The Priest then lays hands upon the sick person, and says one of the following

N., I lay my hands upon you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, beseeching our Lord Jesus Christ to sustain you with his presence, to drive away all sickness of body and spirit, and to give you that victory of life and peace which will enable you to serve him both now and evermore. Amen.

or this

N., I lay my hands upon you in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, beseeching him to uphold you and fill you with his grace, that you may know the healing power of his love. Amen.

If the person is to be anointed, the Priest dips a thumb in the holy oil, and makes the sign of the cross on the sick person's forehead, saying

N., I anoint you with oil in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Priest may add

As you are outwardly anointed with this holy oil, so may our heavenly Father grant you the inward anointing of the Holy Spirit. Of his great mercy, may he forgive you your sins, release you from suffering, and restore you to wholeness and strength. May he deliver you from all evil, preserve you in all goodness, and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

In cases of necessity, a deacon or lay person may perform the anointing, using oil blessed by a bishop or priest.

If Communion is not to follow, the Lord's Prayer is now said.

*The Priest concludes*The Almighty Lord, who is a strong tower to all who put their trust in him, to whom all things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth bow and obey: Be now and evermore your defense, and make you know and feel that the only Name under heaven given for health and salvation is the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Amen.*