

JACQUES YVES N. MBENDE

Healing as an Approach for Discipleship in the Bible: A Missiological Perspective

This article is written because of an experience I had on the school campus where I serve. At that time, I was the school chaplain and among the students that enrolled in 2011 was one who a few weeks after school started told me about her health condition. Since childhood, she had suffered because of a heart malformation that was coupled with severe asthma. I tried to reason with her and convince her that the school environment would probably not be good for her health situation. She told me her parents had insisted on her coming to our campus for two reasons. First, medical efforts had been fruitless in improving her situation, and second, her parents said that since the university was a Christian school that therefore prayer would sustain their daughter. And, that is exactly what happened. During the year we had regular occasions to pray with her. Semesters after semesters her medical crisis became less intense and more and more rare. During her years at the school she also took Bible studies and eventually was baptized a few months before her graduation. Reflecting on that experience with her, I was struck with an idea: Is it possible that healing could provide an approach to discipleship?

This article attempts to do the following: (1), to define healing and discipleship, (2), to look at an instance of healing in connection with discipleship in the Old Testament (OT), (3), to present healing as an approach for discipleship in the New Testament (NT) Church, and (4), to briefly introduce what Ellen White says concerning healing as an approach to discipleship.

Working Definitions of Healing and Discipleship

What is healing and how does the Bible present it? How is discipleship defined? The following will help in serving as definitions and at the same time will be used as a basis for understanding my reasons for the suggestions given at the end of the study.

The word *healing* is not commonly used in Scripture and unfortunately the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* (1979) does not provide a definition for the word healing. It instead refers to gifts of healing and refers the reader to see “Spiritual Gifts.” When looking at the definitions and comments provided for Spiritual Gifts nothing is said about healing. It is also interesting that explanatory notes are given for all the other gifts except for the gift of healing. Other sources offer good descriptions of the concept of healing.

In ordinary usage today it (healing) is applied to the non-medical treatment of disease, often spoken of as faith, divine or spiritual healing. This usage is based on a fragmented view of the human person in which the doctor looks after the body and the church looks after the soul. If we adopt the scriptural view of a person as a whole being, then healing includes the whole person and all means of healing, whether medical or nonmedical, physical or spiritual. All healing is of God whether provided through creation, providence or redemption. (*New Dictionary of Theology* 2000, s.v. “healing”)

Biblical healing in this study is a healing that is inclusive of the medical treatment provided in hospitals and healing as a result of prayer that calls for God’s intervention.

In discussing the question of discipleship, I am not dealing with a person’s salvation for it seems that only God is best placed to conclude whether or not a person is saved. From a biblical perspective, most people would agree that discipleship is the act of being what Jesus meant by disciple (*Nelson’s New Christian Dictionary* 2001, s.v. “disciple”).

Until one is able to distinguish the various usages of the term disciple, it is difficult to comprehend what is involved in discipleship. Dwight Pentecost suggests that the word disciple means a learner, a pupil, a scholar, one who comes to be taught. The idea of teaching and learning is preeminent in the word disciple (1996:10). The Bible also gives evidence that it is possible to approach the Word (Jesus) simply by having one’s intellect stirred, by listening to some new thing without any relationship to the truth or without any impact of that truth on one’s life as illustrated by the hundreds of curious people who used to listen to the preaching and teaching of Jesus without any intention of becoming his disciple.

One becomes a disciple in the biblical sense only when one is totally and completely committed to the person of Jesus Christ and His word. Apart from that commitment to Him and His word, one has no right to call himself a disciple of Jesus Christ. (Pentecost 1996:10)

To put it bluntly, discipleship involves commitment. It involves

identification with Christ in his shameful death. It is a matter of renunciation of oneself; it is about setting aside one's own aims, goals, ambitions, and desires in life. It involves sacrifice for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. It implies setting aside one's own will and one's own rights and acknowledging that Jesus Christ has the right to be obeyed, the right to rule (see Matt 8:18–22; Luke 10; John 14:15; 15:14). Russell Burrill argues that the word disciple does not suggest a rapid conversion to the person discipling, but a slow process by which one is made a disciple (1998:16). Therefore, I view discipleship as a lifelong experience.

Healing and Discipleship in OT

This section will look at the story of Naaman and how because of his healing he became a convert and worshiper of the God of Israel (2 Kgs 5:1–19). In reference to the Lord of the Hebrews, the psalmist says, “He shall deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and he who has no helper” (Ps 72:12). Internal evidence from the account in the second book of Kings shows how the healing occurred. Naaman had to go and dip himself seven times in the Jordan River. In connection with what Isaiah wrote about “the sons of the stranger who join themselves to the Lord” (Isa 56:6), many commentators include Naaman among those sons of the stranger. For instance, Krummacher declares that the name Naaman signifies well-formed, beautiful . . . and that he was a heathen, born and educated in all the idolatrous blindness of his people (2005:170). Notwithstanding, he had been faithful to his convictions of right, and had felt his great need of help. Ellen White concludes that Naaman was in a condition to receive the gifts of God's grace. She explains that he was not only cleansed from his leprosy, but blessed with knowledge of the true God (1898:239). It is also important to note the detail of Naaman being faithful to what he knew, because obedience is crucial in matters of discipleship. After his healing, Naaman returns to the prophet's home and makes an interesting request that Krummacher considers to be “a confession, an irrevocable renunciation of the service of idols, an eternal and joyous renunciation of the kingdom of darkness . . . and the first token of homage and devotion which he presents on the altar of Jehovah (2005:181).

Moreover, in 2 Kgs 5:17 Naaman speaks of himself as Elisha's servant and requests from him two mules' burden of earth. According to Krummacher, it is for the purpose of worship. He explains that Naaman desires to have a few sacks-full of Israelitish earth, material earth, but to which he attaches a kind of spiritual importance. He designs, that immediately upon his return home, every vestige of his former delusion shall be abolished and effaced. No idolatrous image, no heathenish symbol shall be tolerated in his house, but an altar to the living God shall be erected there, that to

everyone it may testify of the great blessing which had been conferred upon him (Krummacher 2005:204). Ultimately, as a new convert, Naaman will henceforth be a worshiper of the true God of Israel and will be his follower. Those are vital elements for being a disciple.

Healing and Discipleship in the NT Church

Acts 9:10–18 presents the story of Ananias who prayed for God to heal Paul's eyes. After a life that involved the persecution of the believers in Jesus, Paul's life takes a dramatic about face and he now becomes Christ's disciple and serves him. Therefore, one of the functions of the gift of healings seems to be to offer people an opportunity to follow Jesus and serve him. Acts 9:36–42 describes another instance where Peter raises Dorcas from death and gives her the opportunity to continue her service on behalf of the needy. Hence, one can conclude that a second function of healing is to open the door to continued service for those who are already a disciple of the Lord. Acts 3:1–8 and 9:32–35 tell of two cripples, one in the temple in Jerusalem and the other in the city of Lydda. Both of them are healed by Peter. They both witness about the Lord and give glory to God. Thus, a third function of the gift of healing suggests that when healings are performed in the name of Jesus that the healed person gives witness and as a result many people turn to the Lord.

These passages suggest that after the time of Jesus, the NT Church continued with its healing mission. The narratives that mention healings appear to have been used by the Holy Spirit to affirm the disciples' message in the eyes of Gentiles and for the edification of the newly formed Christian Church. Therefore, the function of healing in discipleship was to give glory to the risen Lord, to encourage the person who was healed and other pre-believers to follow and serve God, and to strengthen people in their walk with Jesus.

Another interesting feature of many of the biblical narratives was that there was always a human intermediary involved in the healings who prayed, spoke, or commanded. Therefore, it is possible to view this human contribution as an instrument God uses or as a healing channel for God's work in the world. It is also interesting that many of the people who were healed grew in a discipleship relationship with God.

Ellen White on Healing as an Approach to Discipleship

There is a clear indication that Ellen White envisaged a close relation between healing and strengthening one's desire to become a disciple. Looking at the approach of the physician Luke, she notes the following:

In his work as a physician he ministered to the sick, and then prayed for the healing power of God to rest upon the afflicted ones. Thus the way was opened for the gospel message. Luke's success as a physician gained for him many opportunities for preaching Christ among the heathen. (White 1905:141)

White's statement points out the "healing power of God" and the way (emphasis mine) that is "opened for the gospel message." This gives insight to at least two points: on one hand, God can heal any sick person; on the other hand, such healing can be an opening for the gospel message. Thus, I argue that the idea of healing as an approach to discipleship is present in Ellen White's writings.

White also implies that it is the divine plan that one should work as the disciples worked. Physical healing is bound up with the gospel commission. In the work of the gospel, teaching and healing are never to be separated (White 1905:141). A similar idea is also contained in her book, *Medical Ministry*, where she specifically encourages physicians to combine healing with presentations of the gospel.

Our physicians need a deeper insight into the evangelistic work that God expects them to do. Let them remember that if they do not work for the healing of the soul as well as for the healing of the body, they are not following the example of the great Medical Missionary. (White 1932:41)

She also urges doctors to study the Word of God diligently, that they may be familiar with its promises and may be able, in tenderness and love, to point sinners to the Great Healer. Through these kinds of statements Ellen White confirms that healing can be used as an approach to discipleship.

Three Suggestions for the Future of Mission

The fact that the Bible and Ellen White presents healing as an approach that can be used to introduce people to the Lordship of Jesus Christ has several basic implications for the spreading of the gospel in both entered and unentered areas of our world.

1. Since there are different ways through which people hear and accept the gospel, the church should continue to promote healing as a means for evangelism. Adventists have used prophecy, media, family, archeology, health, and literature as methods to present biblical truth. However, there are those in society that will only be reached with God's love if they experience God's healing touch.

2. An atmosphere of healing should be developed and encouraged in each church so that members will not feel the need to visit Pentecostal or

charismatic churches in order to receive prayer for their physical illnesses. Healing is still part of God's plan and can reinforce the concept of a loving, caring heavenly Father.

3. Since Adventist health care institutions are already involved in ministering healing to people it seems it would be worthwhile to systematically follow-up former patients to continue to share a wholistic message of truth and healing with them.

Conclusion

This article affirmed that the various instances of healing in the Bible are not placed in the Bible only for the sake of telling the story of each healing event. A close look at numerous healing occurrences reveals how the healed person subsequently either became a follower or worshiper of the true God of Israel or was encouraged to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. Based on the Word of God affirming that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8), I believe the same God who healed in the past still desires to do it today. Moreover, I stand on the opinion that since healing has served as a tool for discipleship in the past, the same can occur in our contemporary world. Contemporary mission should never get rid of methods that have been fruitful in the past, especially when the First Missionary is still in charge.

Works Cited

- Burrill, Russell C. 1998. *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church*. Fallbrook, CA: Hart Books.
- Krummacher, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2005. *Elisha: A Prophet for Our Times*. Redding, CA: Pleasant Places Press.
- Kurian, George Thomas. 2001. *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishing.
- Pentecost, J. Dwight. 1996. *Design for Discipleship: Discovering God's Blueprint for the Christian Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications.
- White, Ellen G. 1898. *The Desire of Ages*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- _____. 1905. *The Ministry of Healing*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- _____. 1932. *Medical Ministry*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.



Jacques Yves Nganing Mbende is an ordained pastor who teaches Theology at the Université Adventiste Cosendai in Cameroon. He and his wife Clarisse have two children, Shalom and Adam-Kabod.