



Who You Gonna Call?

One of the abuses of the gospel in our day is that of the promise that when a believer is sick all they must do is either pray, or to attend a healing meeting and their sickness will be miraculously removed. The likes of Benny Hinn, Prophet Joshua and their ilk have given a black eye to the face of orthodox, biblical Christianity. These false teachers offer the moon and deliver nothing but disappointment and deceit. Multitudes are left still disabled in their wheelchairs or continuing to suffer with pain and worst of all, their faith has been shattered. We who know the scriptures are appalled at the abuse of the name of Christ as it is dragged through the mud of an already sceptical and cynical world at large. As the media exposes such frauds the enemies of Christ believe that they now have more ammunition with which to debunk the gospel message. But equally distressing is the fallout of believers retreating into the comfortable (and lamentable) shelter of claiming that God does not heal in our day as He did in a former. I believe that both of these are wrong responses.

Let me say from the outset that this article is not advocating a healing line in the church. But our reluctance to do so is not because we do not believe that God heals. Rather we will not have a traditional healing line simply because the church members are not called forth by Scripture to do so. Rather, if anyone is called to 'get in line' it is the eldership.

The epistle of James (5:13-20) addresses this issue of healing in the life of the church by exhorting sick church members to call the elders of the church to come to them prepared to pray for healing with the very clear encouragement that such believers should not be surprised when they are healed! Yes, biblical Christianity offers the distinct possibility that believers can be healed by God through the means of prayer. Let me give a brief explanation of this passage and then close by a strong biblical exhortation (read: 'encouragement').

James gives three directives for the varied experiences of believers as he writes to those who are 'afflicted' (that is, undergoing troublesome circumstances); those who are cheerful (those in 'happier' circumstances); and those who are sick. It is to this third group that James then gives specific instructions in the rest of the chapter.

The first instruction given by James is that a believer who is not well should call upon the '*elders of the church to pray over them*'. Now, let me ask, when you are sick and you cannot get well, who do you call? Most would answer, my doctor (of course you wouldn't do this at a church service!). And there is nothing inherently wrong with this. But James leaves us in no doubt that a *persistently* sick believer should utilize the benefit of a praying eldership. They are to call upon the elders to pray over them.

Second, the elders are to pray over the sick believer '*anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord*.' What does this mean?

Well, at this point there are two major interpretive options to choose from. First, some believe that this is a reference to the use of medicine. And that is an acceptable interpretation. When the good Samaritan came upon the afflicted Jew he '*bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine...*' (Luke 10:34) which seems to indicate that oil was used medicinally. Thus, many interpret this passage in James as telling us to 'take your medicine and have the elders pray.' Again, there is nothing wrong in such counsel. Praying does not exclude the use of God given means for healing and often God does use medicine in the healing process.

But another interpretation is that oil as used here is seen its typical sense of being a symbol of being set apart to God.

Under the Old Testament economy the priests were sanctified unto God by the anointing of oil. This was also the case in the appointing of Kings as well as to symbolize an offering as being set apart to God. Thus some (including myself) would argue that the use of oil in this prescribed situation was symbolic of the declaration that one who has requested prayer is serious about following the Lord. They have thus examined themselves before Him and have confessed all known sin. And because the rest of the passage puts such an emphasis upon this issue of dealing with sin, it seems very clear to me that this was James' point. Further, when you consider that James was writing to Jews, this symbolic metaphor of the use of oil would be readily understandable.

To summarize, James is telling these believers that if through normal means they are not experiencing any physical relief then they should examine themselves before the Lord, repent if necessary, calling upon the elders to attest to their spiritual condition and to seek their prayers.

Finally, James says that *'the prayer of faith shall save (heal) the sick.'* And clearly the faith of the elders is here at issue.

It is a travesty that the con artists who pose as faith healers will often berate those who are not healed because of the sick person's lack of faith. And yet in the passage before us those in the healing line (*if* blame is to be apportioned) should point the finger at the ones praying for healing!

Though this is a complicated issue let it suffice for this article to point out that since true faith comes from God, James is making the point that the elders who are called upon to pray for the sick, when given assurance by God, can count on the individual being healed.

So where does that leave us when it comes to practical exhortation/application of this passage? Among other lessons, it tells BBC that there should be a lot more phone calls being made to the elders when sickness lingers. Since the priority of the elders' ministry is prayer and the ministry of the Word, we should be more frequently involved in praying over the sick. And be assured, we are happy to do so. Also be assured that God *does* answer prayers according to His sovereign plan. And that includes healing.

So the next time that you, your doctor and your medicine are not able to sort out your physical illness, who you gonna call?

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