

The Anointing Service

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I. Introduction

It is our purpose to examine the current practice of the anointing service within the context of the healing ministry carried out by pastors and elders in the SDA Church. Traditionally this service has been performed in strict privacy, although in most instances the congregation of the sick person was notified of the service. Recently, however, this practice has been modified by a number of pastors, moving it into the public arena to make it available to a wider circle of people.

Until recently pastors and elders have performed an anointing service in response to a sick member's request. Only in rare cases have they suggested that the ill member consider an anointing service for divine intervention in his behalf. With the new approach it is no longer the sick person who calls upon the elders of the church to pray for him and anoint him with oil. Pastors or elders take the initiative and appeal to large audiences, inviting people to avail themselves of this rite in order to experience healing.

How is this recent phenomenon to be explained? Is it an attempt to promote a spiritual revival? This would indeed be a desirable objective. On the other hand, every pastor and elder needs to examine this practice seriously in order to establish the real meaning of the scriptural counsel. This is the only way one can avoid a practice that may be rooted in some form of Pentecostalism or the charismatic movement. In short, we need to establish whether this recent use of the anointing service is in harmony with the scriptural counsel.

II. Exegesis of James 5:13-18

Since the anointing with oil for the sick is referred to in James 5:13-18 only, we will consider this passage exegetically in order to discover clear guidelines for our practice of this important rite. It is true, of course, that the New Testament refers to divine healings in many different places, but the anointing of the sick person with oil accompanied by prayer is unique with James. A careful examination of all the healing stories in the New Testament would be helpful, but this would call for a separate paper. For the present purpose, therefore, we will limit ourselves to the passage, James 5:13-18.

The passage begins and ends with prayer. Furthermore, the admonition to pray runs like a golden thread throughout. From this one gets the impression that the author, James, a brother of our Lord, was a man of prayer.

What is James' prescription for the sick in the congregation? He simply states, "If anyone suffers ill [*kakopatheî*] among you, let him pray. Is anyone cheerful, let him sing a psalm" (vs. 13). "Is anyone ill [or delicate]?[1] Let him call to himself the elders of the church and let them pray over him anointing him with oil" (vs. 14). Here we discover two prescriptions: First the ill person is to take the initiative to call on the elders of the church.[2] In some cases the elder(s) may suggest to the ill person to consider the option of anointing, but then leave it up to the sick member actually to call on the elders of the church.

The directions given the elders are very specific. They are to do two things for the sick person: (1) to pray over him and (2) to anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

The instruction to call upon the elders includes two implicit demands on the ill person. First, for the prayer of the elders to be effective the ill person needs to examine his own life for any known sin and then confess it to the Lord. As a matter of fact, the forgiveness of sins referred to in verse 15b seems to presuppose repentance and forgiveness for sins committed. Extrabiblical documents and Scripture itself demonstrate that in the ancient mind sin and

sickness, even death went together. According to Mark 2:5, for example, Jesus heals a paralytic, saying, "My son, your sins are forgiven." From this statement we may infer that the man's paralysis probably was linked to personal sin. Therefore confession of sin was necessary if prayer for the sick was to be effective. The sick person was not only to make confession to the elders but also to one another, that is, probably to those they have wronged. In the light of verse 15b the forgiveness of sins seems to imply that the healing process can best be promoted as the sick person examines his life for any known sin and humbly confesses it to God (cf. Psalms 66:18; 139:23, 24; Prov. 28:13).

It is noteworthy that the OT speaks much of the necessity of confession for those who are not well, and the rabbis developed elaborate formulas for the purpose.[3] The texts cited by the authorities show how the sick man's visitors, the "Jewish guild for visiting the sick" (*bikkur holim*), swept his room, reminded him to make a will, prayed for him and exhorted him to confess his sins in the belief that he would be cured. "Great is the power of repentance. . . . It brings healing" (b Yoma 86a). The New Testament church has continued this practice as can be illustrated by 1 John 1:9 and the passage in James.

Secondly, when a person calls for the elders to come he is to realize that such a call must not be a whim. He should earnestly ask the Holy Spirit to give clear direction in this matter that God's will be done. This could mean that the service may not have a happy ending. In fact, trauma or death may follow. For example, even if the sick person's condition should take a negative turn he may then rest assured that God's will is being done. On the other hand, if the service is being conducted in a charismatic manner, not paying careful attention to the person's spiritual preparation could have serious consequences. What would happen if the patient's desired restoration failed to occur? What effect would this have upon the person's relationship with God? In the light of this consideration one's desire for an anointing service should be initiated by the Holy Spirit who alone is able to give proper guidance and assistance in this matter rather than by a public appeal.[4]

The directions to the elders are simple and straightforward. They are to pray over the sick person and to anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord (vs. 14b). Here the question arises concerning the use of oil in the service. In the present context the oil is not sacramental or the "vehicle of divine power," at least the early church did not attach any sacramental efficacy to the ceremony of anointing. Later, however, the church used "holy oil" as a substitute for pagan magic in an attempt to heal the sick. By the eighth century this passage was used to support the Catholic practice now known as the extreme unction, the last rites performed for a dying person. The oil is not used as medicine either. In the present context it is symbolic. It is noteworthy that anointing in Scripture is performed when someone is set apart for special service. The oil is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the application of oil to the sick is a symbolic act whereby the sick person is set apart to be ministered to by the Holy Spirit.

The next verse 15a says, "and the prayer of faith will heal [save, *sosei*] the sick and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins he will be forgiven." This verse states positively that the sick will be healed and that his sins will be forgiven. But this seems to create some tension for us, because we observe that not every person anointed and prayed for by his elders will be healed.

It is important to remember, though, that "requests are to be made in harmony with God's will, for no man knows what is best for another" (*The SDA Bible Commentary* 7:540). "He may see best to permit it to continue for a time" (see *The Ministry of Healing*, 230). Prayer should therefore "be offered in trust and submission, with quiet confidence in a wise heavenly Father who knows what is best and who never makes a mistake" (*The SDA Bible Commentary*, 541).

In verse 16 the apostle gives the following two exhortations: "Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed." He then adds that "the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects." Another possible translation is this: "the prayer of a righteous man is very powerful in its operation."

What is the benefit of mutual confession? Mutual confession resulting in prayer not only promotes physical, but also spiritual health, for in verses 17 and 18 the apostle speaks of and demonstrates from the experience of Elijah the broad power of prayer in the life of the righteous.

Furthermore, confession brings healthy humiliation, for to stand there before a brother as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable.[5]

III. Recommendations

In the light of our brief discussion of the passage, James 5:13-18, the following points come into focus:

The anointing service is to be conducted for believers, more specifically those who have accepted the third angel's message.

While the sick person ought not to hesitate to call upon the elders to intercede for him, his desire to be anointed should be motivated by the Holy Spirit. Since such an experience touches on the most intimate relationship of an individual with God we hold that this service ought to be conducted in an atmosphere of privacy free from the group dynamics at work in large gatherings.

Since we are deeply concerned that this current trend of group anointings may draw its inspiration from charismatic circles and since there is always the danger that such a practice may end up as routine exercise, we hold that ministers and elders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church should abide by the guidelines given to us in the Scriptures and in the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy. As we have seen, in one case of severe illness Mrs. White deferred making a request for the anointing service for an extended time. This indicates her respect for the sacredness of this rite. She turned to the anointing service only as a last resort.

Therefore, we discourage the practice of making general appeals in large gatherings for people to participate in an anointing service. It does not fit the scriptural and Spirit of

Prophecy pattern.

We suggest that pastors, evangelists, and elders consider the following procedure instead:

1. Elders meet at the home of the ill person or at his bedside in the hospital.
2. After a word of greeting one of the elders should read the passage James 5:13-18.
3. It is in order for one of the elders to briefly yet very gently ask the sick person whether he understands the meaning of the passage, the nature of his illness and whether he has made things right with God and his fellow men including confession and reconciliation. He should be asked if he senses that the Holy Spirit is directing in this service and that ultimately God's will is to be done.
4. The sick person is then anointed with oil while the elders lay hands on the ill while one prays.

[1]. The Scripture texts are my own translation. The Greek word *asthenei* is a term used for bodily weakness or "sickness." In the light of John 5:16; 1 Cor. 11:30; and Mark 10:3 this term indicates that sickness is a penalty for sin. See Kittel, TDNT 492, 493.

[2]. Once Ellen White was asked "if we should pray for none that are sick except those in the third angel's message, or pray for all that shall make application, et cetera. James 5 is our rule to follow. 'Is any sick among you? let him call,' et cetera. It is those that are among us. God had shown me those who keep God's commandments are to have nothing to do [in anointing and special prayer] for the sick of those who are daily trampling them underfoot, unless it is in some special case where souls are convicted of the truth and are decided to move out upon it. The partition wall between commandment keepers and those who trample them underfoot should be kept" (Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862* 1 [Hagerstown, MD, 1985]: 404). In the light of this statement it is clear that Ellen White limits the practice of the anointing service to the inner circle of the church. Therefore, it seems very improbable that she would recommend its use on a wider scale.

On the other hand, while Ellen White "had responded a number of times to requests to join others in the service of anointing the sick and praying for their special healing, she deferred making such a request for herself. But after long months of suffering and no evidence of improvement, and although she and her attendants had done all that they could with proper hydrotherapy treatments, she was still almost helpless. Now her mind turned to what it was her privilege to do, to ask the brethren to come and anoint her and pray for her healing" (*White, Ellen G. White: The Australian Years 1891-1900* 4 [Washington, DC, 1983]: 39-40).

[3]. James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 199.

[4]. This writer does not hold the view that the Holy Spirit cannot or will not perform healings in a mass meeting. On the other hand, one must also realize that in large gatherings there are certain dynamics at work which may prompt some people to do what others are doing without being motivated by the Holy Spirit. This observation and the fact that Ellen White rightly limits the anointing service to the believers in the third angel's message seems to add strength to the idea that it would be better to limit this service to believers, still maintaining the privacy of the act. On the other hand, if the spirit moves a sick person who is a believer to request an anointing service he should not hesitate, but claim the promises of God. Says Ellen White, "Why is it that men are so unwilling to trust Him who created man, and who can, by a touch, a word, a look, heal all manner of disease? Who is more worthy of our confidence than the One who has made so great a sacrifice for our redemption? Our Lord has given us definite instruction, through the apostle James, as to our duty in case of sickness. When human help fails, God will be the helper of his people. 'Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up.' James 5:14, 15" (*Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene*, 113-114).

[5]. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 112, cited by R. Kent Hughes, *Faith That Works* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books), 265.