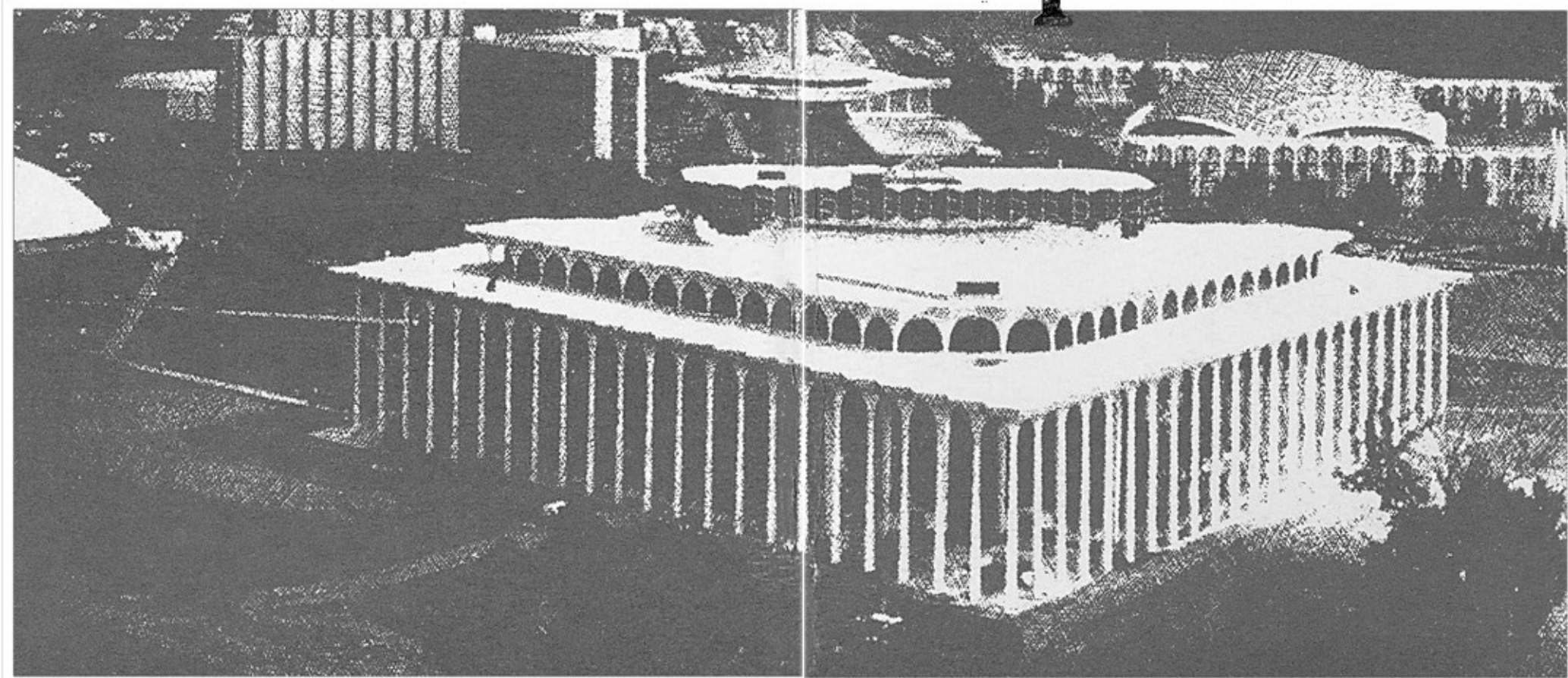




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# Healings: Sign or Gift

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*As signs of the kingdom "at hand," healing is a divine response to repentance and faith. Can the same be said of healings within the household of faith, the church? Or must other criteria be applied to the interpretation? It is here that current charismatic exegesis must be scrutinized rigorously.*

In the gospels, healings are signs that the kingdom of God is "at hand." According to Mark, Jesus announced the beginning of His mission by saying: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). To paraphrase it: Repent and believe in the good news of the kingdom "at hand." It is all the more noteworthy, because so frequently ignored or distorted, that the gospel of the kingdom is the only gospel Jesus preached; it is the only gospel that He commissioned His church to preach.

In the text above, the time fulfilled is prophetic time. It is the consummation of the time foretold by the prophets of old. The Messiah has come, and His coming presages the kingdom of God "at hand" . . . but not yet fulfilled.

The invitation to repent and believe in the gospel of the kingdom is the precondition to entrance into the kingdom. However, with Jesus' rejection and crucifixion, the fulfillment of the kingdom was indefinitely postponed. The linear history of the Old Testament prophets was abruptly exchanged for an apocalyptic consummation beyond linear time. While prophetic time was fulfilled in the coming of Messiah, the kingdom is not thereby consummated. The commission to the church is to complete the unfinished agenda left by Jesus. It is to herald the kingdom of God "at hand" with an invitation to discipleship in the kingdom.

It is in this context of the proclamation of the kingdom of God that healing as a sign of the kingdom at hand is to be understood. This, at least, is what the longer ending of Mark's gospel clearly states; e.g., "And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it" (16:19). Whether

this ending is authentic or not is not at issue here. At the very least, it represents an ancient understanding of the role of signs in the fulfillment of the Great Commission. In this Luke concurs, for the admission of the Sanhedrin acknowledged that the healing of the lame man (Acts 3:1ff.) was a "notable sign" that could not be gainsaid (3:16).

The ministry of Jesus may be subsumed under three rubrics: preaching, teaching, and healing. Exegetical accountability dictates that all aspects of His ministry must be interpreted in their relationship to the dominant theme of the gospel of the kingdom. His preaching was the proclamation of the kingdom of God with the invitation to discipleship therein. His teaching was the explanation, in precept and parable, in metaphor and story, of the nature of that kingdom. His miracles of healing were manifestations of the powers of God's kingdom. They were signs that the kingdom is indeed "at hand." Within the context of the preaching and teaching of the kingdom, they still are. Divorced from this context, "miracles" are at risk of being subverted into magic where formulae (incantations?) replace proclamation of, and discipleship in, the kingdom. No miracle is self-authenticating. It is the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom that authenticates the sign. The sign confirms, but the word authenticates.

The pattern outlined above may be illustrated repeatedly in the ministry of Jesus, and of the apostles. Immediately after announcing the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus recruited Simon and his brother Andrew, and James and his brother John, as the first disciples of the kingdom (Mark 1:16-20). In the order of the kingdom, discipleship takes precedence over signs. It did then; it must do so now.

The first four disciples accompanied Jesus into Capernaum. There, on the Sabbath day, as Jesus was teaching the gospel of the kingdom in the synagogue, a man with an unclean spirit interrupted Him. Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man, to the amazement of the synagogue congregation (Mark 1:21ff.). The exorcism of the demoniac is intelligible here precisely as a manifestation of the powers of the kingdom message He was teaching.

Subsequently, as Jesus itinerated throughout Galilee, preaching in the synagogues the gospel of the kingdom (Mark 1:39), He was accosted by a leper: "If you will, you can make me clean" (Mark 1:40). Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched him, thereby breaking the law. The laws of that kingdom preempt all other ordinances. In His kingdom, the king is touched neither by contagion nor by condemnation. He is moved only by a wrenching compassion for the plight of the leper (Mark 1:39ff.).

On a subsequent occasion, while preaching the good news of the kingdom at Capernaum, the house where He was staying was thronged. Four men, bearing a paralytic on a litter, resorted to the drastic expedient of removing a portion of the roof so that they might lower their paralyzed friend into the presence of Jesus. Jesus' initial remark seems, at first glance, to be out of context. On second thought, however, it is consistent with the priorities of the kingdom. "My son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). Discipleship

takes precedence over the sign of his healing. Forgiveness is the divine response to faith. The good news of the kingdom offers forgiveness for the guilt, and deliverance from the power of sin. The subsequent healing is the sign that confirms the preaching of the kingdom. It was, indeed, that all men may know that Jesus has power on earth to forgive sins that He said to the paralytic: "Rise, take up your pallet and go home" (Mark 2:11). Healing for soul and body manifested the powers of the kingdom "at hand."

Without belaboring the point, Paul's witness confirms the precedent provided by the gospels. In his epistle to the Romans, he summarized his ministry thus: "by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ" (Romans 15:19). A reference by Luke to Paul's preaching at Rome characterizes more precisely the gospel preached by Paul. While dwelling as a prisoner in Rome, Paul received all who visited him "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28:31).

As signs of the kingdom "at hand," healing is a divine response to repentance and faith. Can the same be said of healings within the household of faith, the church? Or must other criteria be applied to the interpretation? It is here that current charismatic exegesis must be scrutinized rigorously.

Are healings within the faith community signs of the kingdom "at hand," a divine response to repentance and faith? Or must other criteria be applied to their interpretation? If Paul is a trustworthy guide, then the latter is the answer to these questions. But what are the other criteria?

In interpreting Paul's "spiritual *manifestations*" (I Corinthians 12:1ff.), it is of considerable consequence for the interpretation that of the nine manifestations of the Spirit identified there (v. 2:7-10), only healings are characterized as gifts (v. 9). They are not signs. In the subsequent discussion, tongues are a sign for unbelievers (14:22), while prophecy is edification, exhortation, and consolation for believers (14:3). What is clear from the context is that "gifts of healings," bestowed upon those who are already disciples of the kingdom, are not signs of the kingdom. Believers do not need signs. To belabor believers with faith texts from the gospels is text out of context *eisegesis*.

The designation of "gifts" is in itself a clue to the character of "healings" within the body of Christ. A gift is always and everywhere at the sovereign discretion of the giver. It is not a reward for services rendered. Much less is it a decoration for meritorious character or conduct. And under no circumstances can it be coerced, not even by heroic faith. A gift can be a gift only when it reflects the unconditional freedom of the giver to give or to withhold. Within the life and experience of the faith community, gifts of healings are love gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit upon the beloved.

This then is the only criterion for "gifts of healings" in the church. "All these manifestations of the Spirit (v. 7) are inspired by one and the same Spirit who apportions gifts of healings, etc. to each one individually as he wills" (I Corinthians 12:11).

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