PROBING THE DEMISE AND RECOVERY OF HEALING IN CHRISTIANITY

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Part One: The Demise of Healing in Christianity

As we examine historical sources, we find that Christians have not been the only ones concerned with the healing of the sick over the years. In fact, we know that there is practically no civilization that has not had some religious concern for higher Being and for the achievement of wholeness in human life. Another approach to healing is that which emerges from the pages of classical Greek antiquity. Note the difference between the perspective of healing in the context of the kingdom which Jesus announced, and the understanding of healing which stems from classical humanism. The latter view remains a viable option in our day. The first hospitals, so far as we know, are to be found among the ancient Greeks. There was a god of medicine that the Greeks called Asklepios, who probably was a deified version of an ancient physician by that same name who healed people in ancient Greece. His daughter was
called Hygiea, from which we get the word "hygiene." There was an elaborate ritual connected with this particular tradition in these hospitals. They were really centers of cultic, priestly life, as well as centers of physical healing. The sick incubated in temples under the care of priests/physicians. The problem was that only the elite could afford the care provided by this pagan form of humanistic religion. Only those who had sufficient means were treated. Those who came with incurable diseases had the means for care.

The symbol of this tradition was the snake, as reflected today in the insignia of the snake upon the lapels of medical personnel. They were harmless yellow snakes that slithered about the hospital grounds in these ancient cultic centers, moving over people who were in a state of insomnia, thinking that there was some kind of therapeutic benefit stemming from this procedure. The ancients believed the snake incarnated the god in some mysterious fashion.

Those with incurable diseases were brought to these centers. After persons were treated in this fashion, they offered animal sacrifices to Asklepios in a cultic ritual. Archaeologists have discovered long lists of what are called votive tablets, or records of persons who had gone to these centers and had left their contributions following their sacrifices. Thus, in the ancient world, and outside our Judeo-Christian heritage, there was a concern for healing that was connected with religion, whose gods were apotheosized human figures. The mere wedding of religion and medical science does not make for Christian healing. This contrasts very clearly with Jesus’ enunciation of the kingdom, and especially those signs of its appearing, which are the healings.

In the ancient Greek tradition, the healer was deified. Healing was not linked to obedience to the God of creation and redemption. Healing was not linked to life in the kingdom of God. It was also for those who were affluent. It was not for the afflicted, the masses for whom Jesus came.

With this background in mind, let us look briefly at some of the attitudes toward healing and medicine in the early church. As the early church began to proclaim her message in the first century, she was bringing the gospel into a culture surrounded by Hellenistic society. It was a world in which medical physicians were scarce. It was a world in which Hellenistic centers of learning scorned the Christian mission.

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