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WHY DID JESUS HEAL ON THE SABBATH?:

What Jesus's Most Controversial Miracles Mean for Us Today

BY ANDY BLOSSER

Anyone who has been an Adventist (or a member of a Sabbath-keeping religious group) for long enough knows that there are myriad views about what types of things should not be done on Sabbath. Every cultural niche of Adventism has its list of taboos, along with legions of forward-thinking (and mostly younger) critics who seek to upend them.

These debates are all very fascinating, but they may have one major detrimental feature; obsession with determining what not to do on Sabbath may distract us from the more important task of figuring out what we *should* be doing on the day. "Rest" is the obvious answer. But what does resting mean, especially in the complex twenty-first-century world where one person's "rest" might be another person's hard labor? (A personal example: As a person with a sedentary job, I like to indulge in physical exercise as "rest." Meanwhile, my partner—who works on her feet in the medical field all week—finds "rest" to be more literal.) What, then, should Sabbath's positive agenda be?

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Surprisingly, most of the Bible says little about positive recommendations for Sabbath-keeping. The Pentateuch commands rest and rest-giving (Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15) and calls the day a "holy convocation" (Lev. 23:3), but gives few details about what people were expected to spend their time doing on the day. Nevertheless, there is one category of texts that seem to give Christian Sabbath-observers a specific recommendation for what Sabbath-keepers should aim to accomplish. Furthermore, I will argue that the deeply practical implications of these texts have not been fully grasped by most Christians.

Jesus's Sabbath Healings

Controversies over Jesus's Sabbath healing are found throughout the Gospels (Matt. 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 6:1–11; John 5:1–18; 9:1–41). The basic narrative in every instance is always the same; Jesus stands in public view of all the religious authorities, and He deliberately—in the cheekiest way possible—heals someone, provoking outrage from the officials. Consider, for example, Luke 6:6–11:

> On another Sabbath He had gone to synagogue and was teaching. There happened to be a man in the congregation whose right arm was withered; and the lawyers and the Pharisees were on the watch to see whether Jesus would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they could find a charge to bring against Him. But He knew what was in their minds and said to the man with the withered arm, "Get up and stand out here." So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I put the question to you: is it permitted to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" He looked round at them all and then said to the man, "Stretch out your arm." He did so, and his arm was restored.

Note that Jesus is not asked by anyone to perform this miracle—even by the disabled man himself. Jesus seeks him out to heal him precisely because He wants to make a point about Sabbath, for "he knew what was in their minds." Jesus aims at presenting a particular theology of Sabbath before His viewers. The same type of Sabbath healing-as-theological-performance is also visible in Luke 14:1–6.[1] In these passages, Jesus's praxis shows that healing on the Sabbath is not incidental, but is central to the purpose of the day. It is not that Jesus is "caught" healing and contrives a justification for why it was acceptable to do it. Rather, Jesus deliberately makes healing an integral part of the ritual of Sabbath.

The fact that Jesus's Sabbath healings were intentional—combined with the fact that they appear frequently within the Gospels—suggests that they are ripe with theological and ethical meaning. Clearly, both Jesus and the Gospel writers wanted to make a point about how Sabbath should be observed. What is that point? It seems straightforward; Sabbath is a time for healing. If, as Jesus says, "the one who believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and even greater works than these" (John 14:12), we should imitate Jesus by using Sabbath as a time to heal. But this raises another question—an absolutely essential one. What were Jesus's healings all about in the first place?

Defining Jesus's Healings

In the modern world, influenced by the development of scientific medicine, there is a specific meaning to the word "healing." We tend to think of healing as solving biological problems. Even when we refer to "mental illness" we typically reduce it to various chemical imbalances, some of which can be repaired by correctly administered therapeutic drugs. However, this was not always the case.

In their work, Bible scholars John J. Pilch and John Dominic Crossan assess the meaning "healing" might carry in non-Western societies, particularly in ancient Mediterranean peasant communities.[2] To illuminate what Jesus was doing through His miracles, they make a key distinction between *disease* and *illness*, a conceptual binary first formulated by Arthur Kleinmann.[3] Diseases are bodily malfunctions that impair physical health, resulting from pathogens, chemical imbalances, or toxins. Modern medicine, as a rule, attempts to cure diseases. Illnesses are different, though closely related. An illness is a broader

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form of social or political toxicity that often gives rise to disease. You cannot cure an illness with a drug or surgical procedure. Illnesses can only be cured by changing a person's social standing or personal circumstances.

Pilch points out that "biomedical specialists (who address disease) tend to ignore the sick person's account of the experience and prefer to rely on laboratory tests for 'the truth.'"[4] To a large extent, this method works. By separating subjective factors from the analysis and treatment, modern medicine formulates general practices that can correct numerous ailments. The only flaw is that this process is incomplete. Pilch observes that this is where non-Western cultures—like the ancient eastern Mediterranean culture of Jesus's time—may do a better job. For such cultures, the act of "healing" aims at doing more than just curing the disease; it also attempts to change the symbolic meaning of the suffering person's experience, as well as that person's life circumstances. Pilch describes the role of healing rituals in these societies, contrasting them with the modern medical approach:

> Healing is directed toward illness—that is, the attempt is made to provide personal and social meaning for the life problems created by sickness. Treatment, of course, can be concerned with one or the other aspect of a human problem (disease or illness) and either or both can be successfully treated. The complaint against modern biomedicine is that it is concerned only with "curing the disease" while the patient is searching for "healing of the illness." This dichotomy separates what nearly all human societies view as essential in healing—that is, some combination of symptom reduction along with other behavior or physical transformation that reflects that society's understanding of health and the provision of a new or renewed meaning in life for the sick person.[5]

In this framework, shamans, witch doctors, and other folkhealers are engaged in a symbolic process of societal restructuring. By "casting out a demon," placing a sacred substance on a person's diseased body part, or touching a person with a skin disease, they may not create a biological remedy, but they change the person's social position. In ancient honor/shame societies, this type of action could be pivotal for helping the person at every level of her/his life.

According to Pilch and Crossan, Jesus's healing miracles addressed illness, not disease. Of course, this could be a misleading distinction, because the two categories feed into each other, and the heavy dichotomy between disease and illness that Pilch and Crossan insist on is probably—in my view—overstated.[6] One might cure an illness, but that illness could be so closely connected to a specific disease that curing the one could look like curing the other. To give a contemporary example, a child might be suffering from migraines and vision problems as a result of bullying in school, and removing the child from the toxic situation (the illness) could result in an immediate cure from the physical malfunctions (the diseases). Nevertheless, I think the distinction remains helpful, because the technological bent of modern society easily forgets about the significance of illness. Returning to the example of the child bullied at school, one can easily imagine a temptation to give the child medications to address the diseases, rather than directly tackling the illness itself—which may in fact be a more difficult task.

According to Pilch, through His healing rituals Jesus "restored meaning to life and the sufferer [was] restored to purposeful living."[7] How did this happen exactly? Because Pilch and Crossan allow for the unreliability of the textual accounts in the Gospels, there is no solid answer

to this question from their work.[8] Nevertheless, using the anthropological insights they offer, we may infer that Jesus performed some type of symbolic actions which effectively changed the social status of the persons suffering from illnesses. In other words, healing restored their identity. For example, by putting His hands on people with severe psoriasis or women with menstrual disorders, Jesus was exercising a power to transform their socially imposed lack of dignity.[9] Healing also created a renewed functioning for the individual within the social system. This happened through radical table fellowship—what Crossan calls "open commensality." As David F. Watson points out, the story of Jesus healing the man crippled with dropsy on the Sabbath in Luke 14 is followed by several stories in which Jesus advocates welcoming disabled persons ("the blind, the crippled, and the lame") into banquet celebrations.[10] These persons could not contribute to the banquet. Some might argue that they were parasites (Ayn Rand would call them "looters"). But by honoring them at the banquet table, they would be designated as human beings whose value did not depend on their productivity.

Crossan also points out that healing illness could take the form of social resistance against an oppressive authority system that fosters indignity.[11] For example, the exorcism that took place in the region of the Gerasenes in Mark 5:1–17 clearly appears to be an act of coded anti-Roman resistance, given the unmistakable identity of the demons as "Legion."[12] The Roman governmental system was built around physical and financial force, instrumentalization of the poor, "lording it over" the unlucky multitudes, and simultaneously posing as a philanthropist (Mark 10:42). Jesus's regime overtly rejected all these features. By affirming the value and significance of people that the existing regime portrayed as worthless, Jesus expelled the "swine" mentality that typified the Roman government's ruling protocol.

Application: Healing Sabbath Observance

If Pilch and Crossan's model of healing holds weight (whatever its inadequacies), the implications for Sabbath are clear. If the Sabbath is made for healing, and healing is (at least in part) about addressing the structural and social illnesses that grip humanity, Sabbath must be intended for structural and social change. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus showed that this day is a time in which inequalities should be remedied and the types of negative conditions that threaten life should be fixed. Sabbath and repairing the world are integrally related.

In Seventh-day Adventist theology, discussion has largely swirled around what day Sabbath is and what the origins of Sabbath are. Sabbath has been often framed as a *theonomous* institution to which we owe our allegiance. The problem with this focus is that it sidelines practical reflection on what Sabbath-keepers should accomplish for the world. Jesus's Sabbath observance indicates that the day serves a purpose: correcting those deeply entrenched circumstances that create illness.

This model of Sabbath observance has particular relevance for the current ecological crisis human beings face, as well as for smaller-scale crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. When examining either of these problems, it may be tempting to focus on the diseases they create. Curing diseases is enormously important, of course. But even more important is addressing the social and political structures that give rise to these diseases—the complex of wellbeing factors that, in the Pilch-Crossan model, constitutes illness. In our world, Sabbath should be a time dedicated to addressing these structures.

For example, climate change functions as a disease. Its symptoms are poverty, inequality, mass migration, reduction of biodiversity, and others. Scientists who wish to cure the disease have one primary agenda—reducing greenhouse gas emissions. From a scientific perspective, this is all that is necessary. If emissions can be reduced, the symptoms will disappear, and the disease will be cured. However, this approach may not adequately address the illness itself, which is an unhealthy relationship between human beings and the earth. This relationship arises from an attitude in which humans take it as their responsibility to coercively manipulate earth's resources for the purpose of economic "advancement." Because our societies function through exploitation of the earth, we find ourselves unable to step outside of the matrix of ecological oppression in which we live. Every time we buy or sell (Rev. 13:17), we participate in this fundamentally unsound set of circumstances. We need scientists to find cures for this disease, but if we want a permanent fix, we also need healing miracles to address the illness itself.

Sabbath could be a time for healing this illness. Modeling themselves after Jesus, Sabbath-keepers could

intentionally employ the day as a time that changes the fundamental attitude of earth exploitation that frames nearly all our actions. In part, this may happen simply through the cessation of human activity. Even unintentionally, by desisting from shopping and excess driving, Sabbath-keepers may exert a healing influence. But if Jesus's actions are a guide, we should do more than this. We should also create rituals that explicitly challenge the illness of earth exploitation. For example, some Sabbath practitioners associated with the "Green Sabbath Project" have used rituals such as ecologically friendly communal meals and other consciousness-raising events to highlight Sabbath's relevance to our environmental illness.[13]

This type of direct Sabbath healing could also involve focused actions to help those who suffer from ecological illness. For example, Sabbath-keepers could use the day to offer locally sourced, carbon-friendly food to individuals and families who normally could not afford it. Sabbath-keepers could offer "greening" services such as insulating houses or repairing bicycles. These activities would operate on the level of curing the disease (reducing carbon emissions), but they would also function to heal the illness, by highlighting a different mentality toward the earth, time, and human relationships.

It is important to realize that this activity may look like "work" and traditional Sabbath-keepers might balk at doing them. This is why it is crucial for theological educators to emphasize that they are activities that fall in line with Jesus's own healing activity, which was itself criticized as "work" by some traditionalists of His day. This is another place where the distinction between disease and illness becomes crucial. If we think of Jesus's miracles as simple cures for diseases, we might argue that "work" on the Sabbath is only acceptable if we are faced with an urgent form of suffering that needs immediate repair. (Some Sabbath-keepers might use the classic phrase, "If it could be done on any other day of the week it shouldn't be done on Sabbath.") But once we realize that Jesus's actions went beyond simply curing diseases, we discover an ethical summons to make Sabbath a day for total transformation of the circumstances that lead to suffering.

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These ethical applications could extend to other areas besides climate change, which I do not have space here to fully address. The COVID-19 pandemic has obviously involved a disease, but at the same time, its severity partly results from a societal illness. This is demonstrated by the fact that infection and death rates have been much higher among minorities and the poor. The virus has also functioned as a result of a disconnected social culture in which responsibility for the collective welfare of others has been sidelined in favor of unfettered personal freedom. Sabbath has immense relevance for healing these dimensions of illness as well.

Conclusion

The idea that Sabbath healing should take the form of social restructuring might seem strange to modern readers. Perhaps part of the reason this understanding of healing could seem foreign to us is that we tend to think in a spiritual/physical binary. As Chris Doran points out, "The radical dichotomies between body and soul or heaven and Earth or human and nonhuman have caused such deep schisms in our ways of thinking and living that it appears to many outside of Christianity that Christians have forgotten the very nature and effect of Jesus's healing ministry on people."[14] The type of healing Jesus conducted embraced the entire person, drawing together the physical, political, and spiritual aspects of that person's life. This idea of healing is perhaps best captured by the KJV's translation of the Greek *hugieis* as "whole." For example, when Jesus encountered a paralyzed man on the Sabbath in John 5:6, He asked him "Wilt thou be made whole?" From a socio-political perspective, the man's response is fascinating: "Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming,

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another steppeth down before me." In other words, the man's problem is not merely a biological infirmity. He is marginalized—left out of the standard structures of wellbeing. Jesus heals him not only by repairing his body but by making him "whole." In like manner, Sabbath observers should aspire to Sabbaths of "wholeness"—days on which we heal the broken relationships we have with each other and with our planet.

Endnotes

1. The passage reads: "One Sabbath He went to have a meal in the house of a leading Pharisee; and they were watching Him closely. There, in front of Him, was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the lawyers and the Pharisees: 'Is it permitted to cure people on the Sabbath or not?' They said nothing. So He took the man, cured him, and sent him away. Then He turned to them and said, 'If one of you has a donkey or an ox and it falls into a well, will he hesitate to haul it up on the Sabbath day?' To this they could find no reply." Once again, Jesus appears to be conducting the healing precisely as a demonstration of proper Sabbath observance.

2. See John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) and John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991). Crossan's work draws extensively on Pilch's—thus some scholars refer to their approach as the "Pilch-Crossan Model." See Jan-Olav Henriksen and Karl Olav Sandnes, *Jesus as Healer: A Gospel for the Body* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 25–40. For an overview of the different approaches to Jesus's healings in New Testament scholarship over the last century see Bernd Kollmann, *Neutestamentliche Wundergeschichten: Biblisch-theologische Zugange und Impulse für die Praxis* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 137–166.

3. According to Kleinmann, "Disease refers to a malfunctioning of biological and/or psychological processes, while the term illness refers to the psychological experience and meaning of perceived disease. Illness includes secondary personal and social responses to a primary malfunctioning (disease) in the individual's physiological or psychological status." See Arthur Kleinmann, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: An Exploration of the Borderland between Anthropology, Medicine and Psychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 172.

4. John J. Pilch, "Insights and Models from Medical Anthropology for Understanding the Healing Activity of the Historical Jesus," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 52, no. 1 (1995), 317.

5. Pilch, "Insights and Models," 320.

6. This is a common criticism of Pilch and Crossan, offered most trenchantly by Pieter F. Craffert, "Medical Anthropology as an Antidote for Ethnocentrism in Jesus Research? Putting the Illness-Disease Distinction in Perspective," *Harvard Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (2011): 12–13. Craffert alleges that the Pilch-Crossan model too easily dismisses the legitimacy of bodily malfunction as a problem for ancient collectivist societies. One could not simply heal an illness in a strictly separate way from healing a disease. I tend to agree with Henriksen and Sandnes, who argue that "Pilch and Crossan were simultaneously right and wrong. Their observations on health and a collectivistic culture are basically relevant, but they oversimplify complex and complicated matters" (Henriksen and Sandnes, *Jesus as Healer*, 31). It could be that the claim that Jesus ignored the body when performing healings is itself an imposition of a type of bodily/social dualism

7. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 14.

8. Crossan points out that "no single healing or exorcism is securely or fully historical in its present narrative form, although historical kernels may be discernible in a few instances." See John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 302.

9. This aspect of the healing stories is noted by Wendy Cotter, especially with regard to the story of the blind beggar Bar-Timaeus and the various stories of leper healing. See Wendy Cotter, *The Christ of the Miracle Stories: Portrait through Encounter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 19–75.

10. David F. Watson, "Luke-Acts," in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, eds. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 315–317.

11. Crossan proposes that "besides *supportive companionship* and *religious faith*, the practice of *covert resistance* can contribute to healing" (Crossan, The Birth of Christianity, 301).

12. Crossan notes: "The demon is both one and many; is named Legion, that fact and sign of Roman power; is consigned to swine, that most impure of Judaism's impure animals; and is cast into the sea, that dream of every Jewish resister. And it may be left open whether the exorcist is asked to depart because a cured demoniac is not worth a herd of swine or because the people see quite clearly the political implications of the action." See John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 90. Crossan's understanding of exorcism healing is connected to anthropological work on demon possession that points to political oppression as a key factor in the rise of possession disorders. For an example of this work see Ian M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), 31, 35.

13. See www.greensabbathproject.net

14. Chris Doran, *Hope in the Age of Climate Change: Creation Care This Side of the Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 11–12.

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