

Prayer and Anointing with Oil

An Examination of James 5:13-15

¹³ Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. ¹⁴ 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: ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.

Introduction

The question addressed in this paper is, “Is it scriptural, in the context of James 5:13–15, to anoint with oil when the elders are called to pray for the sick at one’s bedside?”

There are some biblical practices which are generally retained in modern Christianity, either through holding to biblical example and precedent or simply because of religious tradition. This is true of the laying on of hands in deaconal and ministerial ordination or in group prayer for the sick (Acts 6:1–6; 13:1–4). There is no communication of the Holy Spirit as with Apostolic example in that era (Acts 8:14–17; 19:1–7), nor as alleged in either Romanism or High Protestantism. The laying on of hands among Evangelicals and Baptists at ministerial ordination or in prayer is simply symbolic or traditional—a setting apart of the individual to that particular work after Apostolic example (Acts 13:1–3), without the necessary impartation of certain charismatic gifts (1 Tim. 4:12–14),¹ or when praying for the recovery of the sick. The Apostolic practice of fasting before or at ordination services

¹ 1 Tim. 4:14, μή ἀμέλει τοῦ ἐν σοὶ χαρίσματος, ὃ ἐδόθη σοι διὰ προφητείας μετὰ ἐπιθέσεως τῶν χειρῶν τοῦ πρεσβυτερίου. It seems evident that Timothy received a charismatic gift at his ordination through both prophecy and the laying on of hands by the presbytery.

has been largely omitted in modern Christianity (Acts 13:2–3; 14:23). The practice or non–practice of anointing with oil when the sick are prayed for is also largely a matter of tradition. It is the aim of this paper to situate the use or non–use of anointing with oil in a scriptural context and to note the issues both historically and doctrinally.

Scriptures

There are but two direct New Testament references to anointing with oil in the context of sickness:

Mark 6:7–13. ⁷ And he called *unto him* the twelve, and began to send them forth by two and two; and gave them power over unclean spirits; ⁸ And commanded them that they should take nothing for *their* journey, save a staff only; no scrip, no bread, no money in *their* purse....¹² And they went out, and preached that men should repent.¹³ And they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed *them*.

James 5:13–15. ¹³ Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. ¹⁴ 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: ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.

Textual and Contextual Issues

There are several significant issues in the text and immediate context which may have a determining effect upon one’s understanding of this subject:

1. The immediate context reveals three conditions which call for proper spiritual reaction and behavior: first, if someone is undergoing a time of affliction, he is commanded or urged to pray [Κακοπαθεῖ τις ἐν ὑμῖν, προσευχέσθω]. The verb is a pres. mid. imp. Κακοπαθέω, a general term for something stressful, suffering hardship or adversity, a calamity, being

troubled or afflicted. This could be mental, medical, physical, moral, financial, spiritual, religious or social. Prayer is urged rather than complaint, dissatisfaction or giving way to depression.

Second, if anyone is merry, he is urged to sing praises to God [εὐθυμεῖ τις, ψαλλέτω]. The verb is a pres. act. imp. This is a godly, scriptural outlet for joy, cheerfulness or happiness.

Third, if anyone is sick [“weak”] to the point of incapacitation [We might use the term “bed-ridden”], he is urged to call for the elders of the church [προσκαλεσάσθω τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας]. The aor. imp. connotes a sense of urgency and determination. Their visitation, or response to this summons in the context of v. 14–15, would include some inquiry into the cause, nature and extent of the sickness, as the church is directly or indirectly involved. It seems that the intercessory prayer and anointing with oil would largely depend upon the discernment and prerogative of the elders and the relation the individual had with the congregation.

There is nothing within the immediate and larger context which would limit such an action as prayer for the sick or anointing with oil to the charismatic era of Apostolic Christianity. Indeed, the entire context and the calling for elders seem to preclude such a limitation of the time-frame.

2. Both terms used for “sickness” connote “weakness.” The term “sickness” in Mark 6:13 is ἀρρώστους, “weak, feeble, sickly.” In James 5:13, the term is ἀσθενεῖ, which connotes weakness, incapacity or impotence. Such “weakness” may be mental, spiritual or physical. It seems here in the immediate context to be physical, but it could include the physical effects of

something mental or spiritual.² The idea of incapacity lends itself to the fact that the sick person calls for the elders of the church to come to his or her bedside for intercessory prayer. Further, the words “let them pray over him” [προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν] assumes that the sick person is incapacitated or bed-ridden.

3. Summoning for the elders of the church [προσκαλεσάσθω τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας] to the bedside of the incapacitated person would necessarily presuppose a felt need on the part of that individual, a subjective investigation as to the sickness itself, a prompting of the Holy Spirit and a desire to deal with the cause and nature of the incapacity, including the confession of sin if necessary. If any of these were lacking, the necessary biblical context for visitation and prayer would be precluded. As the elders were to “pray over him” [προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν] this would imply an immediate proximity and a laying on of hands, although not stated in the text. Such an action, though not commanded here with prayer, would be instinctive, as it accompanied other healings.³

Further, if such practices as praying and anointing with oil were only for the Apostolic Era and those with charismatic gifts, why call for the elders of the church? Why not call for those so gifted (1 Cor. 12:1–11, 28–31 esp. v. 9)? Would not calling for the elders as spiritual office-holders and leaders, still seem to set

² Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, I, pp. 490–493. See also Kees van Kralingen, “Anointing with Oil,” *Reformation Today*, No. 237, September–October, 2010. This article is practical and balanced, from a Reformed perspective.

³ Douglas A. Moo, “James,” *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, pp. 176–177.

at naught the Spirit's diverse ministry through those who possessed the specific *charismata* of healing? Further, why limit the prayer and anointing to sickness? Why not the blind or crippled, the withered or maimed? It is presumed that the supernatural gift of healing would have effected cures among these also.

4. The entire context puts the prayer and anointing with oil in a private setting which has nothing in common with an alleged "healing service," which would be public in nature. To apply this situation to a public forum and invitation to be healed would invalidate the biblical context.
5. Mark and James are not exactly parallel, though both mention anointing the sick with oil. Mark 6:13 makes anointing with oil a major issue in the context of the miraculous casting out of demons and the healing of sickness. The construction uses a verb in an independent clause [καὶ ἤλειφον ἐλαίῳ πολλοὺς ἀρρώστους καὶ ἐθεράπευον]. The context would seem to put the healing of sickness in the realm of the miraculous together with casting out demons. James 5:14 makes anointing with oil a minor issue, framed in participular form, which is subservient to the main verb associated with prayer, and thus giving the emphasis to prayer [καὶ προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἀλείψαντες [αὐτὸν] ἐλαίῳ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου]. Because of these differences, some have separated the healing of Mark 6:13 from that of James 5:13–15.
6. The term for "anointing with oil" in both Mark [ἤλειφον ἐλαίῳ] and James [ἀλείψαντες [αὐτὸν] ἐλαίῳ] is ἀλείφω, which denotes to "anoint, rub, daub, smear." It is the usual or general term for anointing persons or things. The usual term for sacred and

metaphorical anointing is χρίω. This has caused some to dismiss the idea of anointing with oil as a symbolic act of renewed consecration when done “in the name of the Lord” and in conjunction with specific prayer. Ἀλείφω is used for physical, literal anointing in the New Testament. It was necessary for James to use this term when referring to a literal anointing.

Taking the idea of “rubbing” or “daubing,” some refer this act to the use of medicine—the prayer dealing with the spiritual aspect and the oil dealing with the medicinal aspects of the sickness.⁴ However, in the LXX, ἐπιχέω, a term other than χρίω was used for the sacred anointing of a pillar by pouring oil upon it in connection both with a solemn vow on the part of Jacob (Gen. 28:16–22),⁵ and the term ἀλείφω was used at least twice for the anointing of the levitical priests (Ex. 40:15 and Numb. 3:3).⁶ In the Septuagint,

⁴ Cf. R. C. H. Lenski, “The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James,” *The Interpretation of the New Testament*, pp. 660–661; A. T. Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James*, pp. 255–256; Donald W. Burdick, “James,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, XII, p. 204.

⁵ Gen. 28:18. [ἔστησεν αὐτὸν στήλην καὶ ἐπέχεεν ἔλαιον ἐπὶ τὸ ἄκρον αὐτῆς], ἐπιχέω, “to pour over.” This was a solemn act of anointing, or a pouring out of oil, accompanied with a solemn vow on the part of Jacob.

⁶ Cf. Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint*, I, p. 52. Note: Kralingen states correctly that the term χρίω was never used for physical anointing in the New Testament—but it was the common term for physical anointing in a sacred sense in the Old Testament. See Kralingen, *Op. cit.*

it was used at times as an equivalent for $\chi\rho\acute{\iota}\omega$.⁷

The anointing with oil in the context of prayer in the James passage would not have a sacramental sense, as the efficacy was in the intercessory petition, not the anointing. Indeed, it would work confusion to attribute a sacramental character rather than symbolic to the anointing with oil—an almost magical quality to a physical substance. The former was effectual; the latter was symbolic, and at most an act to bolster the faith of the incapacitated person. Could it not be in part an acknowledgement that all healing comes from God, that such healing derives from the work of the Holy Spirit and is subject to His prerogative?

7. Oil was a common medical element used for treating some, but not all types of sickness (Isa. 1:4–6). The “Good Samaritan” in our Lord’s parable “poured oil and wine” upon [ἐπιχέων, pres. act. ptc., “to pour upon,” *not* ἀλείφω, an anointing] the man’s wounds in a medicinal manner (Lk. 10:33–34). However, if this “anointing with oil” merely referred to the acknowledgment of medical attention, it ought to be noted that rubbing with oil, although common, was not prescribed for every sickness. Further, where would the oil be rubbed? Unless this act was symbolic and the anointing was upon the head—even if denoting medical issues—would it not be proper [though sometimes very indiscreet] to apply it to the part of the body affected by sickness if such were

⁷ The term ἀλείφω occurs twenty-eight times in the LXX. Douglas A. Moo, “The Letter of James,” *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, pp. 238–242. He also points out, with others, that if James was referring to physical anointing, this is the term he would have used. Cf. also, Douglas A. Moo, *TNTC*, p. 179.

visibly localized? Thus, even if the reference pointed to medicinal issues, the anointing itself would be symbolic.

8. If the cause of the disease were evident, and called for medical attention, then would it not have been best to call for the doctor and not the elders?
9. “Anointing with oil in the name of the Lord” [ἀλείψαντες [αὐτὸν] ἐλαίῳ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου] would seem to put this act into the spiritual realm which would be consistent with prayer for a renewed consecration as a symbolic act, and would indicate more than the mere recognition of the necessity for medical attention. Anointing with oil while invoking the name of the Lord would make this an act of faith,⁸ a gesture commanded in Scripture as a symbol of putting the matter before the Lord in faith, and strengthening the faith of the one who is sick.
10. “The prayer of faith” [καὶ ἡ εὐχή τῆς πίστεως]. There are two diverse terms for “prayer” in this passage, v. 14, προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν and v. 15, εὐχη τῆς πίστεως. The first term [προσεύχομαι] is the general word for “prayer;” the latter term, εὐχη, denotes a specific request, a vow, and would be the most fitting term for an intercessory prayer for renewed consecration. This refers to the prayers of the elders, not to the faith of the incapacitated person. The burden to pray in faith is on the elders—that they come to the incapacitated person spiritually prepared, and representing a praying church.

⁸ See Kurt A. Richardson, “James” *The New American Commentary*, pp. 232–233. Douglas A. Moo, after giving a very balanced survey of the various views, concludes that it was not medicinal, but a symbolic act of consecration. “James,” *PNTC*, *Loc. cit.*

11. “And the prayer of faith shall save the sick [καὶ ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως σώσει τὸν κάμνοντα], and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.” The words “shall save” [σώσει] can refer to both spiritual and physical deliverance or restoration. This is an acknowledgment that some sickness is directly hamartiogenic.⁹ If all conditions are met and it is God’s will, there is a complete restoration, physically, spiritually and congregationally.¹⁰

Historical and Doctrinal Issues

There are a number of historical and doctrinal issues which have arisen because of this passage in James. These need to be discussed:

1. The first issue for consideration must be the erroneous doctrines which have derived from a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the James 5:13–15:

The Romish doctrine of Extreme Unction. This is the anointing of the vital organs and the extremities of a dying person with oil by a priest. This rite derived from this passage, but the situation and reason are not the same. The Scriptural account is for the recovery and restoration of a sick person, not the final rite of

⁹ *Hamartiogenic*, i.e., sin-engendered. All sickness may be traced indirectly to sin as characteristic of fallen, sinful humanity. Some sickness, however, is the direct result of sin.

¹⁰ The assumed confession of sin in this context in vs. 15–16, “... and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed,” may imply that there may be sin or offenses between this person and other members of the church which would have to be dealt with. If such were known, these would be dealt with before the elders would pray and anoint with oil.

alleged forgiveness and comfort for a dying individual.¹¹

The Eastern Orthodox Church uses a “rite of unction” or anointing with oil [Ἐυχέλαιον].¹² This differs from the Romish or Western Catholic Church in the following: first, the oil is not consecrated beforehand, but at the given time by seven priests rather than bishops. Second, the unction or anointing is given for any serious illness, not solely reserved for the dying. The rite is performed in the church [sanctuary] if possible. Third, the rite is valid if at least three priests are present to officiate.¹³

The Anglican service of the “Visitation of the Sick” wherein “the sacraments of the body and blood of our Lord” [“sacred communion”] are administered by an Anglican priest and the doctrine of the “Sacrament of Comfort,” which is administered by prayer and anointing with oil on the head or breast, deriving from this passage in James. Modern bishops, it has been lamented, no longer consecrate a holy oil for such a rite.¹⁴

NOTE: The Romish, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican doctrines give a sacramental value to the anointing with oil rather than a symbolic significance. Yet they do retain the idea that the application of oil is an anointing.

¹¹ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 445–450.

¹² Ἐυχέλαιον. This term is derived from the word “prayer, εὐχη, and ἔλαιον, oil. See Douglas A. Moo, *PNTC*, *Op. cit.*

¹³ See E. C. S. Gibson, “James,” *The Pulpit Commentary*, XXI, p. 71.

¹⁴ See E. C. S. Gibson, *Op. cit.*; Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James*, pp. 232–234.

The modern Pentecostal or Charismatic healing service also derives from this passage. The differences, however, plainly reveal the diverse nature of such a “healing service:” first, healing services are usually set apart as a distinct part of a public meeting. The passage in James is a distinctly private meeting held in a private home between the sick person and the elders of the local church. The sick person summons the elders; the elders do not invite the sick for public healing. Second, the prayer of the elders, “the prayer of faith,” is the Divinely–ordained instrument for the healing or restoration of the sick person, neither the oil nor the person’s own faith.

In such public “healing services,” if a person is not healed, he or she is often told that he or she does not have the necessary faith to be healed. This is emotionally and spiritually devastating. Often the mental or psychological condition of the sick person is made much worse by the incapacitating nature of the physical sickness. One only has to consider the devastating effects of chemotherapy, various narcotic medications or the traumatic effects of serious injury, surgery or a debilitating disease to understand that the mental or spiritual condition may be already greatly deteriorated. The anointing with oil as an accompaniment to prayer may help the sick person to focus on the power of God, the Great Healer and Good Physician. It may help focus emblematically on the Holy Spirit, and it may thus become a visible means of grace through its symbolism.

In addition to the previous view, there are some in the modern Charismatic Movement who claim to possess the Apostolic gift of healing. We are not told that any of the elders had such a gift. It was their prayer of faith which restored the sick, not a supernatural charismatic

gift which was limited to and worked only through certain supernaturally-gifted individuals.

2. Are the prayer and anointing with oil a guarantee that healing or recovery will inevitably take place? Not necessarily. It may be the will of God that an illness continue for his glory, as with the Apostle Paul, who, although he healed others, remained infirmed (2 Cor. 12:7–10). All healing comes from God and is a matter of his will (1 Jn. 5:14–15), whether he blesses the use of medical procedures or heals directly [“...the Lord shall raise him up...” v. 15].¹⁵ Although we do not live in an era where miracles are predominant, yet the Lord at times is pleased to move and effect a sudden cure, a providential deliverance or a definite intervention into the affairs of men in answer to prayer. Prayer itself, by its very nature, anticipates a Divine answer!

With regard to healing or restoration, Sometimes the healing is immediate; at other times it is more gradual. The “prayer of faith,” i.e., that prayer which is offered up in faith to God as the elders intercede for the sick person presumably rises from hearts and minds solemnly and fully prepared to pray for the given situation in faith. It may be presumed that the entire church would be in prayer for the elders on this mission and act of faith. It would be presumptuous—almost inconceivable—that the elders would approach the bedside of such a sick person without having solemnly prepared themselves both individually and corporately before approaching this preeminent act of faith.

3. There are some who hold that James 5:13–15 refers to the Apostolic Era and the temporary supernatural gifts or

¹⁵ Douglas A. Moo, “James,” *TNTC*, pp. 184–185.

charismata which were given at that time for the establishment of the New Testament Church as the Divinely-ordained institution for this gospel economy.¹⁶

If James 5:13–15 has reference only to the Apostolic Era and the *charismata*, it is strange that although our Lord used mud made from spittle on one occasion (Jn. 9:1–7), and simply spittle on another (Mk. 8:22–26), and often laid his hands on the sick and infirmed (Matt. 8:1–3; Mk. 6:5; Lk. 4:40; 13:11–13), took them by the hand (Mk. 1:30–31; 5:39–42; 9:23–25) or simply spoke a word (Matt. 8:5–13; 9:1–7; Lk. 8:43–48; 18:35–43), He never once used oil in any act of healing. Neither did the Apostle Paul, although he was used by the Lord to heal many, at times through extraordinary miracles (Acts 19:11–12; 28:8–10). And there were times when Paul could not or did not heal those close to him who were sick and a burden to him, although he doubtless and characteristically prayed for their healing and restoration (Phil. 2:25–27; 2 Tim. 4:20).

The Apostle Peter never used oil to our knowledge, although he took those he healed by the hand (Acts 2:3–8; 9:36–41), and at times was enabled to perform miracles by passing through a multitude (Acts 5:12–16) or by simply speaking a word (Acts 9:32–35). We have no record that our Lord or any of the Apostles ever used oil in anointing the sick, except in Mark 6:13. If this practice were limited to the Apostolic Era, then James 5:13–15 as a command stands as an anomaly to the usual Apostolic practice.

¹⁶ Among those who espouse such a view: B. H. Carroll, *Interpretation of the English Bible*, XIII, pp. 47–50; John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, XII, pp. 139–140; E. T. Winkler, “James,” *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 70–71.

4. Some hold that the anointing with oil was medicinal, and that the oil symbolized the necessity of medical treatment.¹⁷ Albert Barnes is of this opinion, but adds that because the elders of the church were called, the cure would not be miraculous, but simply “the use of appropriate means accompanied by prayer.”¹⁸ Others vehemently disagree, holding that James would have told the sick to call for the doctor and not the elders.¹⁹ *Even if the anointing with oil only pointed to the necessity of medical treatment, its use was still symbolic, and the question is only concerning its purpose, not its efficacy.* Among those who would disagree concerning its symbolic medical properties, most consider the symbolism to be that of spiritual power, healing, recovery or focusing on the Divine presence, especially with the invocation of the Divine Name.

Some, as Sophie Laws, see the anointing with oil as an integral part of the process and one with the prayer, and so not to be disassociated from it as a separate issue. Cf. the use of the contemporaneous aor. ptc. Thus, according to such thinking, it neither refers to medicinal nor to symbolic significance.²⁰

5. Calvin held that the anointing with oil was limited to the charismatic era of the Apostolic Age with its supernatural gifts. It was his judgment that such was not used indiscriminately, but judiciously lest it suffer

¹⁷ A. T. Robertson, *Loc. Cit.*

¹⁸ Albert Barnes, *Notes: Hebrews–Jude*, pp. 91–92.

¹⁹ B. H. Carroll, *Loc. cit.*; Robert Johnstone, *Lectures Exegetical and Practical on The Epistle of James*, pp. 402–404; Peter H. Davids, “The Epistle of James,” *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, pp. 193–194.

²⁰ Sophie Laws, “The Epistle of James,” *Black’s New Testament Commentary*, pp. 126–127.

abuse.²¹ John Gill follows suit.²² Thomas Manton takes a similar view, associating this rite with the miraculous gifts of the Apostolic Era, though he stresses that the anointing with oil was symbolic of the cure. He also maintained that this rite was probably inherited from Jewish practice. He further stated that not everyone so anointed was healed, that “God gave out his grace and power as he saw good.” He and John Trapp both mention a story about the use of prayer and anointing with oil in the time of Tertullian (c.170–220) by one Proculus, to effect a cure.²³ Trapp mentions that some in his day thought the rite was a continuous ordinance of the church.²⁴

6. Although many of the Puritans followed the Reformers in their view that the anointing with oil was limited to the Apostolic Era and the age of the temporary miraculous gifts or *charismata*, Thomas Goodwin very strongly argued that this rite is a standing ordinance for the churches. He presented six arguments for its continuance and then sought to answer the major objections.²⁵
7. James Adamson, with others, sees in the use of oil and the invoking of the name of the Lord a preventative to resort to pagan or merely Jewish practices, which abounded. Invoking “the name of the Lord” would make

²¹ John Calvin, *James*, pp. 314–315.

²² John Gill, “An Exposition of the New Testament,” *Gill’s Commentary*, VI, pp. 801–802.

²³ Thomas Manton, *Works*, IV, pp. 445–452; John Trapp, *Commentary on the Old & New Testaments*, V, p. 704.

²⁴ John Trapp. *Loc. cit.*

²⁵ Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, XI, pp. 458–462.

this an exclusively Christian practice.²⁶ He further states that this use would have “a valuable psychological effect in the ritual,” i.e., it would strengthen one’s faith.²⁷

9. Some, while dealing very thoroughly with the James 5:13–15 remain uncommitted as to the exact nature of anointing with oil or a given historical time–frame.²⁸
9. Meyer, while holding that the anointing was the conductor which communicated supernatural power, viewed this as analogous to the laying on of hands.²⁹ While neither action would be necessarily miraculous in the present day, is there not a distinct parallel when the laying on of hands is considered symbolic in either praying for the sick or at an ordination service?
10. There are some, in addition to Romanists, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans and Charismatics, who have held that the anointing of oil, deriving from James 5:13–15, is valid for today. Thomas Goodwin has already been mentioned. This is true among certain pastors within

²⁶ See the discussion of the use of oil with prayer in Ralph. P. Martin, “James,” *Word Biblical Commentary*, pp. 207–209. Martin further admonishes against coming to any definite conclusions concerning the exact significance of anointing with oil due to the scant evidence in the New Testament for the practice.

²⁷ James. Adamson, “The Epistle of James,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 197–198.

²⁸ D. Edmond, Hiebert, *James*, pp. 294–296; Simon J. Kistemaker, “James, I–II John,” *New Testament Commentary*, pp. 175–177.

²⁹ H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the New Testament*, X, pp. 156–157, see footnote 1.

Evangelical, Fundamentalist and Baptist ranks.³⁰

History witnesses to several instances of healing in the life and ministry of Mr. Hanserd Knollys, A. M. (1598–1691), an eminent and influential Baptist minister both in New England and in England. On one occasion, in the midst of a large group of ministers and believers, Mr. Knollys prayed for a blind woman and anointed her with oil. Her sight was restored. Although the record of the procedure is somewhat at variance with the passage in James, the incident has been noted by several historians.³¹

During a time of great illness, Mr. Knollys called for two eminent Particular Baptist preachers, William Kiffin and Vavasor Powell,³² who came to him, prayed over him and anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord. He

³⁰ The author has interviewed several and researched historical instances of the use of oil with prayer in the restoration of sick persons. These have included pastors among the Fundamental Baptists, Landmark Baptists, Reformed Baptists and Sovereign Grace Baptists. Douglas A. Moo is of the opinion that this rite is valid for the present time. Cf. both *PNTC* and *TNTC*. In the latter Moo devotes a special section to the question of anointing with oil and healing, pp. 183–187.

³¹ The instances of the healings, including a somewhat detailed account of the woman's restored sight, is given by Jim Scott Orrick, "Hanserd Knollys," *A Noble Company: Biographical Essays on Notable Particular-Regular Baptists in America*, ed. By Terry Wolever. Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2006, pp.4, 15–17; Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists*, I, p. 338.

³² Powell considered this a gospel ordinance from the following declaration in his Confession of Faith: "Visiting the sick, and for the Elders to anoint them in the name of the Lord, is a Gospel ordinance and not repealed, *James* 5:14. 15." Joseph Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, II, p. 214.

recovered.³³ William Kiffin with Thomas Patient, another eminent Particular Baptist minister, prayed for and anointed with oil a Christian sister in Smithfield, who recovered. This was also a well-known incident.

Such anointing with oil on the basis of James 5:13–15 was commonly practiced among the General Baptists in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were careful to maintain a strict adherence to the Scripture in this practice. Prayer and anointing with oil was also practiced among the Welsh Baptists of the Middle Colonies in America during that era. Thus, we have four of the most eminent Particular Baptists of the Seventeenth Century practicing this rite and witnessing to its effectiveness, and also two distinct groups of Baptists, both in England and in America who recognized and practiced it.³⁴

Notes and Observations

A summary of thoughts and observations from the foregoing textual, historical and doctrinal issues:

1. The anointing with oil in Mark 6:13 and James 5:13–15 are diverse. Mark occurs in the context of miraculous healing in the casting out demons. Anointing the sick with oil was a major concern in their healing. James occurs in the context of intercessory prayer by the church elders and the anointing with oil is a secondary issue grammatically and contextually.

³³ J .M. Cramp, *History of the Baptists*, p. 438; Barry M. Howson, "Hanserd Knollys," *The British Particular Baptists*, Michael A. G. Haykin, Ed., I, pp. 41, 49; Ivimey, *Op. cit.*, p. 227.

³⁴ Walter Wilson, *The History and Antiquities of the Dissenting Churches*, I, p. 411; J. J. Goadby, *Bye-Paths in Baptist History*, pp. 293–298; Terry Wolever, ed., *Op.cit.*, p. 289.

2. From interviews and research, it seems that the issue of anointing with oil as an accompaniment to prayer for the sick largely depends upon one's religious background and tradition.
3. Evidently few have seriously and personally studied the matter out and researched it biblically and historically.
4. Many among Evangelicals and Baptists have been prejudiced against such a practice because of the sacramental use of anointing with oil in the Romish and Eastern Orthodox Churches and the healing services of the Charismatics and various "faith healers."
5. There is nothing in the text or context which would indicate or necessitate that prayer and anointing with oil for the sick was limited to the Apostolic Era and the early decades of Christianity when the temporary *charismata* were given and exercised.
6. If the practice were limited to the early decades of Christianity and the era of the *charismata* or temporary supernatural gifts, then why were not those who possessed such gifts of healing called? Calling for the elders of the church would place attention upon the church, its government and its involvement, and would seem to preclude the idea of an immediate, miraculous healing and rather become a call for recovery from sickness.
7. For an incapacitated person to call for the elders of the church for prayer and anointing would presuppose that this individual had been prompted by the Scriptures and by the Holy Spirit to commit to such an action. All this would presuppose a strongly felt need and would be indicative of a heart and mind submissive to the Scriptures and to the leading of the

Holy Spirit. Every sickness has a spiritual and mental aspect, as well as a physical aspect.

8. Such a summons of the elders of the church would presuppose that the person's relation to the church [ἐκκλησία, assembly, congregation], both collectively and individually, was scriptural and without offense. The context (vs. 13–18) implies that every aspect has been taken into consideration. Such sickness may be providential chastisement which would bring the individual to the point of being willing to confess and make things right (1 Cor. 11:30–32; Heb. 12:4–14). This would also necessarily include any sin or offense against another church member or against the congregation as a whole.
9. Such a prayer meeting was not a public meeting, but a private one. Any public demonstration would invalidate the very nature of such a summons. Such a meeting would be the very opposite of a “healing service.”
10. The prayer of faith, i.e., prayer offered up in faith, is given through the elders of the church. Supporting them in this act of faith is a unified and praying church. The elders themselves have been solemnly prepared for this meeting and anointing. They come to the bedside of the incapacitated individual in the fullness of faith, as representatives of the church,³⁵ to intercede and seek the recovery of the sick. It must never be thought that such a “prayer of faith” can in any way manipulate God in some superstitious way or either circumvent or change his will. As all true faith is God-given, such prayer would be prayed in submission to God's will, in accordance with this

³⁵ See B. H. Carroll, *Op. cit.*, p. 47; Dan G. McCartney, “James” *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, p. 253.

scriptural mandate and in humble anticipation of a God-honoring answer.

11. The anointing with oil is symbolic, not sacramental. Whether for medical or spiritual reasons, the application of the oil was in the nature of an anointing.
12. The anointing with oil in the name of the Lord is a symbolic, physical act which accompanies prayer to strengthen the faith of the one anointed, an act of renewed consecration to the Lord, a giving of one's self up to the Lord and his restoring prerogative and power.
13. Although prayer and anointing with oil are commanded, the laying on of hands is not. Yet it is instinctive to lay hands on the sick when several surround and pray over such a person. *Is it not strange that, while the laying on of hands is not questioned, the anointing with oil is?*
14. The Lord has been pleased to use and bless this practice throughout the centuries. Eminent Christians, and Baptists among them, have prayed over the sick, anointed them with oil in the name of the Lord, and have witnessed their prayers answered and the sick recovered.

Conclusion

The primary and essential Baptist distinctive is not that we immerse converted persons. Rather, it is that we hold the Scriptures to be our sole rule of both faith [what we believe] and practice [how we live]. In any pursuit, debate, controversy, research or stand for the truth as we understand it from the Scriptures, the one deciding factor is, "Is this biblical?" We must be willing to examine our own religious traditions and prejudices. We must constantly seek to conform ourselves to the Word of God, as properly and consistently exegeted and

interpreted. We must understand that every doctrine possesses a history, and that history must be explored. Divine truth is coherent or non-contradictory, and we must seek to become so in our own grasp of Divine truth.

To avoid or oppose certain beliefs or practices simply because others with whom we do not agree practice such is never a sufficient or consistent reason. We may be robbing ourselves of some aspect of the truth which is scriptural. Are we fearful of examining our own views? Are we willing to change when faced with a better and clearer grasp of the truth? If we are not, then, to the extent that we turn from the truth out of expediency, fear or tradition, to that extent we lose the ability to discern truth from error.

It is the opinion of the author that the anointing with oil in the name of the Lord accompanying prayer for the seriously ill is scriptural, if all the scriptural criteria are met. He finds nothing which would limit this practice to the Apostolic Era and the early decades of Christianity with their temporary charismatic gifts.

While there are inherent dangers in every aspect of truth and practice within biblical Christianity, if all the scriptural safeguards and commands are followed there should be no tendency to move away from truth toward either the error of sacramentarianism or toward the other extreme in the Charismatic direction. Satan attacks wherever he can gain an opportunity. We should expect that when a church seeks to conform itself to the Scriptures, he will raise what opposition or confusion he can.

The anointing with oil is a lesser issue than the prayer of faith. It seems to be on the same level as the laying on of hands. Yet the Scripture commands the one and not the other. We find it strange that although many immediately object to the anointing with oil, none object to the laying on of hands

when praying for the sick! This simply points to the strength of religious tradition and prejudice.

For the elders, it is a serious, solemn matter to be called to pray over a seriously ill person and to pray in faith, without reservation and do so effectually. It is, perhaps, the greatest act of faith for the elders as a body. Such a visit presupposes much time spent in prayer and in scriptural and spiritual preparation. It also assumes a praying church represented through these elders.

The author believes that being called to the bedside of a seriously ill person for prayer and anointing with oil has been, is and will remain a relatively rare occurrence for the following reasons: first, some simply do not believe that this is biblical for our day, and will seek refuge in religious tradition or retreat from any practice which they deem questionable. Second, some are private and seek to keep all matters to themselves, including illness and personal suffering. Third, such a request would presuppose that the Holy Spirit is at work in a determining fashion to prompt that person to confess his sins, right himself in his relationship with the Lord and with anyone and everyone in the local congregation. The visit of the elders would be at their discretion should there be any question as to motive, unconfessed sin, or issues with anyone within the local assembly. Finally, the entire church is either directly or indirectly involved, as it is an informed and praying church which sends the elders to respond to the request of the sick, and it is a prayerful, sober representative group of elders who make such a solemn visit.

A Final Note

One's attitude and practice will be largely determined by his tradition. Whether some will be convinced or not, this paper will have served its purpose if our brethren are willing to consider the issues and make a fair judgment. To those who

have experienced or witnessed such a time of prayer and anointing with oil, nothing need be said.

The author wishes to acknowledge the help he has received in various discussions with other pastors and elders who have come to a like conclusion and have had experience in this matter, and with some who disagree. Every discussion has been helpful and enlightening. The experience of the former has been parallel. Such times of preparation for such a visit, earnest prayer before ever making the visit, and the prayer meeting itself and the anointing with oil have all made great, serious and blessed impressions upon the lives and ministries of these brethren. In every instance, the prayer meetings have been awesome and edifying, and in every instance the recovery of the sick has become a reality.

The author has received the most written help from some of the commentaries and historical works listed in the footnotes, and is thankful that some have explored this issue as fully as possible. D. Edmond Hiebert and Douglas A. Moo must be mentioned for their careful exegesis. Mention must also be made of Daniel M. Doiani's excellent exposition of James 5:13–20 and the personal experience of his infant daughter's healing in his commentary on James in the *Reformed Expository Commentary* Series, pp. 189–204. The author especially recommends the article by Kees van Kralingen, "Anointing with Oil" in *Reformation Today*, Number 237, September–October, 2010, and the section by the Puritan Thomas Goodwin in his *Works*, Vol. XI, pp. 458–462. Finally, it has been both interesting and edifying to see the witness of some of our prominent Baptist Forefathers and at least two distinct Baptist groups in the past, both in England and in the American colonies, to this practice.

—W. R. Downing

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Our church believes and preaches the gospel of the free and sovereign grace of God in the salvation of sinners, and seeks to gain the widest possible hearing for the truth of the Gospel.

We further believe that an expository ministry which expounds the whole counsel of God is the only approach which consistently glorifies God in obedience to the gospel mandate.

We hold to a Baptist view of Covenant Theology, and thus the Moral Law as the God-ordained means of conviction of sin and the rule of life for the believer.

Finally, we hold that it is the clear mandate of God for the pastoral ministry to labor to bring every member to doctrinal and spiritual maturity for the glory of God.

We believe that biblical preaching is central to the life and worship of the church, and that God has ordained the public preaching of the Gospel as the major means of extending the kingdom in this economy.

Believing in the work of the Holy Spirit through the truth in the convicting and converting of sinners, and that men are to be pointed to Christ and urged to faith and repentance in the context of gospel preaching.



Published by P.I.R.S. Publications
A Ministry of Sovereign Grace Baptist Church
271 W. Edmundson Ave.
Morgan Hill, CA 95037
www.sgbcsv.org
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