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## Review

# Confession, Prayer, and Healing: Rethinking James 5:14-16

Daniel Dei and Robert Osei-Bonsu\*

School of Theology and Missions, Valley View University, Oyibi-Dodowa, Ghana

\*Corresponding Author's E-mail: [pastorbonsu@hotmail.com](mailto:pastorbonsu@hotmail.com)

## Abstract

**This article is a study of the relationship between confession, prayer, and healing within the context of James 5:14-16. A grammatical-historical study of James 5:14-16 reveals the context as the spiritual renewal of the spiritually weak or wearied. Based on this context, the study implies that the sick refers basically to those who are spiritually weak or lacking spiritual strength; the elders who are to be called refer to the overseers or leaders of the faith community; the use of oil suggest a symbolic use of it as a means of refreshing the spiritually weak; the healing of the spiritually weak is the sole discretion of God; and persons lacking spiritual strength are to confess their sins, first to God (in the event of direct sin against God), and second to one another (in the event of sins against others). Contrary to popular opinion, the study concludes that James 5:14-16 should be primarily understood as directives for the spiritual restoration of the spiritually weak.**

**Keywords:** Auricular confession, confession, extreme unction, grammatical-historical, healing, prayer.

## INTRODUCTION

From the 1980s, there seems to be a souring interest in research on the relationship between prayer and health. Most of these studies seem to have been done in the academic disciplines of psychology and medicine. In these academic disciplines, the research tends to focus on prayer as a coping mechanism (Benson, 1996); the relationship between preferred styles of prayer and psychological types (Levin, 2001); and whether or not there are benefits that prayer offers to the sick (Chamberlain and Hall, 2007). However, the last theme seems to be the focus of current studies.

The results of these researches have produced mixed realities. For example, on March 24, 2006, the Washington Post reported that "...prayer is the most

common complement to mainstream medicine, far outpacing acupuncture, herbs, vitamins and other alternative remedies." This assertion finds support in the statement of McManus (2002: 14) who avers that religious practices (such as prayer) are "linked to improved physical and mental health." Yet there are other studies that have only found negative correlation between prayer and health. One of such studies is the *STEP* project, the largest scientifically rigorous study on the efficacy of prayer in recent times. In this project, Carey (2006) "found no significant difference whether subjects were prayed for or not, except some negative effects among those who knew they were receiving prayers."

This disparity in results of research on the relationship

between prayer and health has led some to move away from such studies. Rosner (cited in Chamberlain and Hall, 2007: 33), in particular, has expressed doubt concerning the authenticity of subjecting “prayer to empirical analysis.” To a certain extent, Rosner may be right. This is because most of these studies appear to have been damaged by crude assumptions about the nature of prayer and of God (though scarcely mentioned). Also, most of these researches tend to ‘test’ the efficacy of intercessory prayer by methods usually reserved for the testing of drugs.

However, it does appear to us that the relationship between prayer and health can be empirically studied from a biblical perspective as well. It is for this purpose that we have composed this article. We intend to demonstrate the relationship between confession/and prayer and healing within the context of James 5:14-16. With the use of the *grammatical-historical* hermeneutical method, we shall argue that the context of James 5:14-16 is primarily a spiritual renewal of the person lacking spiritual strength as a result of suffering (hunger, disease, persecution, etc.), direct sin against God, or sin against other people. These findings will be discussed with particular highlights on implication of findings which are informative to present-day Christians in Africa involved in the healing and prayer ministry.

### **Searching for the Meaning of James 5:14-16: Four Dominant views**

The passage in James 5:14-16 has been variously studied. Much of these studies seem to have produced varying, and sometimes opposing, conclusions about the exact meaning and consequential application of James 5:14-16 to present-day Christian experience. Incontrovertibly, these results have revealed that the passage under study has been an occasion of “a great deal of misunderstanding (Blue, 1988: 834)” among biblical scholars and various faith groups within Christendom. In the following subsection of the study, the authors present four dominant views that have been expressed concerning this passage.

#### **James 5:14-16 and Roman Catholic Tradition**

Using James 5:14-15 as a principal passage, the Roman Catholic tradition holds that the author prescribed “Anointing with Oil” as an ordinance of the church. This view provides support for the practice of extreme unction, otherwise known as “anointing the sick (Boyle, 2009: 76),” as a “sacrament (Maquire, 1962: 4)” in the Roman Catholic Church. According to the Roman Catholic Tradition, “Extreme Unction is definitely a true sacrament, instituted by Christ and handed down to us by the Apostle James in the fifth chapter of his Epistle (Maquire, 1962: 5).”

The primary aim of this sacrament is not a restoration of bodily health, which may be a “secondary” effect (Maquire, 1962: 5). Was this the case, Maquire (1962: 9) contends “Christians would never have to die.” Rather the “purpose of Extreme Unction is to help the dying Christian end his (sic) life devoutly (Maquire, 1962: 26).” The basis of this view is found in the interpretation given to the word σώσει in verse 15. Translating it as “restore” or “save,” Maquire (1962: 8) identifies four (4) other times in which James uses this term and argues that “in these other four times, St. James always uses it clearly in the sense of spiritual salvation rather than bodily health. Very probably, he also intends this word to have the same meaning here.” Aquinas terms it “the sacrament for the departing (cited in Boyle, 2009: 77, 78).”

Before receiving this sacrament, it is a requirement that the dying person receives the “sacrament of Penance if he [sic] is in the state of mortal sin. And he [sic] needs the Eucharist (Maquire, 1962: 10).” However, it is only the priest that must hear the confessions of the dying person (Maquire, 1962: 29). This practice finds support in the meaning attributed to the word *seniores* (Vulgate version of the Greek πρεσβυτέρους) in verse 14. It is strongly held that πρεσβυτέρους refers to “ordained priests or Bishops (Maquire, 1962: 5).” As such only priests can hear the confessions (Auricular Confession) of the dying (Fourth Lateran Council, 1215 AD, Canon 21; Council of Trent, 1545-1563, Session 14, Canon 7; and Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1495) and perform the extreme unction for them subsequently. McNeill (1952: 93) describes auricular confession as a practice that began on the basis of “gradual admission, leading ultimately to the requirement, of the frequent penance which had long been earnestly rejected.”

The advocates of extreme unction and auricular confession using James 5:14-16 as foundational passage may do well to substantiate their position by clarifying two points from this passage. First, how do they prove the performance of the sacrament of extreme unction only for the person at the point of death? We do not see any statement from the text that fully instructs such practice. Second, it does not appear clear from James 5:14-16 how only the priest must hear the confession of the sick. These two points need clarification. Until that is done, this position would appear inadequate as accurate interpretation of the meaning of the original text.

#### **James 5:14-16 and the Reformers and the Puritans**

Popular among the reformers and the puritans is the view that James 5:14-16 describes a miraculous healing that existed within the Christian Church for a brief duration. For them, the practice of anointing with oil seems to have been designed “chiefly for the authentication of Christianity and to confirm it in heathen countries (Pink, 2011: 40).” The apparent seldom nature of its usage by

the apostles in the New Testament would serve to illustrate the point that the practice as described by James had a temporary objective. Pink (2011: 41) has observed that “the grace of healing has disappeared, like all other miraculous powers, which the Lord was pleased to exhibit for a time, that He might render the power of the Gospel, which was then new, the object of admiration forever.”

In our opinion, this position appears inadequate to explain the meaning of the text. In more obvious terms, it seems as if this viewpoint is denying the reality of miraculous healing. If proponents of this viewpoint could assign another convincing explanation for the miraculous healing of the sick that have been wrought by a seeming blind application of this text, then they would have authenticated their position. As it stands now, this view would appear inadequate an explanation of James 5: 14-16.

### James 5:14-16 and Edward Irving

Edward Irving has provided another view on the meaning of James 5:14-16. He takes the text to mean a description of “supernatural endowment that is lost but which could be regained through a return to primitive piety and purity (Pink, 2011: 42).” For this reason, Irving suggests a return to apostolic faith and practice would re-introduce this gift into the Christian community. Current traits of Irving’s understanding of James 5:14-16 seems to be the underlining motivation for the current surge of ‘faith healing’ ministries in Christendom. Unfortunately, Irving does not indicate how present-day Christians may initiate the move to return to the apostolic order.

### James 5:14-16 and the Dispensationalist

Another explanation of James 5:14-16 has been given by Dispensationalists. This movement involves individuals who claim to be endowed with much scriptural intelligence such that they may decide which era particular scriptural instructions and directives apply to. For them, James 5:14-16 is entirely Jewish. As such, nothing in the text should be expected to manifest in the Christian era. This view appears to draw support from the opening verse of the Book of James “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greetings...” However, the authors doubt the authenticity of this viewpoint. This is because similar introductory statements can be observed in many books of the New Testament. For example, the Book of Romans begins with “to all who are in Rome...(1:7).” Other examples include 1 Cor 1:2 “To the church of God which is at Corinth...;” Gal 1:2 “To the churches of Galatia;” and Eph 1:1 “To the saints who are in Ephesus...” Since these books have been generally understood by the Christian community to apply to entire Christendom, it is likely that similar implication is made in the book of James.

### The Contextual Meaning of James 5:14-16

The historical-grammatical hermeneutical method has been used to determine the context of the passage under study. Known classically as the grammatico-historical method, this method attempts to “discover the Biblical author’s original intended meaning in the text (Elwell, 1984).” By employing this method in the current study, the authors intend to search for the simplest, “direct, and ordinary meaning of phrases and sentences” used by James, with a careful inquiry “into the circumstances under which he wrote, the manners and customs of his age, and the purpose or object which he had in view (Terry, 1890: 101, 70).”

<sup>14</sup>Is any among you sick? 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

<sup>15</sup>And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

<sup>16</sup>Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

James 5:14-16 (NKJV)

*James 5:14*

#### Is any among you sick?

The main word of emphasis is sick (Greek ἀσθενεῖ). It is the present active indicative of ἀσθενέω, old verb, meaning “to be feeble, weak (Mounce, 2006: 780).” It has been variously translated as “sick (cf. Matthew 10:8 “heal the sick.”),” “invalid (cf. John 5:7).” Thus it is “used both of physical weakness and of moral/spiritual weakness (Mounce, 2006: 780).”

#### Let him call for elders

The word of emphasis here is elders (Greek πρεσβυτέρους). It means “older” or “leadership in the church.” It is likely that the plural usage here refers to the “elders of the church,” as in other usages in the New Testament (cf. Acts 20:17 “called for the elders of the church;” Acts 15:6 “the apostles and elders came together;” Acts 15:22 “it pleased the apostles and the elders with the whole church..;” Acts 21:18 “...all the elders were present;” and Philippians 1:1 “with the bishops.”

#### Let them pray over him

The word of emphasis here is “pray” (Greek *proseuzasthosan* προσευξάσθωσαν). It is the first aorist middle imperative of προσευχομαι (*proseugomai*o pray). This form of the verb clearly is a directive to the

elders to pray for the sick—i.e. the weak or the one lacking strength.

### **Anointing him with oil**

The Greek ἀλείφαντες (**aleiphantes**) is the first aorist active participle of ἀλείφω (**aleipho**), old verb, meaning “to anoint.” This is used with the instrumental case of ἔλαιον (**elaion** oil). Same usage of ἀλείφω ἔλαιον (**aleipho elaion**) may be seen in Mark 6:13. Therefore, the usage of the term ἀλείφαντες (**aleiphantes**) with the instrumental case ἔλαιον (**elaion**) in Mark 6:13 and here would seem to indicate that James stress both the symbolic value of oil, probably olive oil, and the worth of prayer.

*James 5:15*

### **And the prayer of faith will save the sick**

The word of emphasis is “shall save” (Greek σώσει **sosei**). It is the future active of the verb σώζω, meaning “to save” “to rescue,” or “to heal.” σώζω (**Sozo**) is used in the context of κάμνοντα (**kaimnonta**) from κάκως (**kaikos**), meaning “the sick-physical illness or moral wrong (Mounce, 2006: 650).” Κάμνοντα (**Kamnonta**) is used again in Heb 12:3 to suggest a weakness that results from faltering or losing courage. Though σώζω (**sozo**) is used for “being spiritually saved from sin,” it is probable that James intends healing for spiritual weariness (Mounce, 2006: 325). Physical healing may be secondary. This would seem to be in agreement with other uses of this verb in the Gospels and Acts (Matt 9:21-22; Luke 8:26-38; and Acts 4:9). Hence the likely rendition in English would be “and the prayer of faith shall make well the weary.”

### **The Lord shall raise him up**

Ἐγερῆ (**Egyere**) is the future active of ἐγείρω (**egeiro**), meaning “to waken, lift up, and stimulate (Mounce, 2006: 558).” Equally important is the usage of Κύριος (**Kurios**) meaning “master, lord, sir” as well as “Lord.” James seem to indicate that the act of lifting up the weary is the sole responsibility of the Master—i.e. God.

### **And if he has committed sins**

Πεποικώς [**Pepoiekos**], meaning “to set before, commit,” is the periphrastic perfect active subjunctive (unusual idiom) with κἂν [**kav**] (crasis κἂν) in condition of third class. It would serve to denote conditional case meaning ‘if, assuming, or supposing that he has committed sins’ as many sick people have (cf. Mark 2:5 “Son your sins have been forgiven you;” John 5:14 “sin no more;” John 9:2 “who sinned, this man or his parents...?). The word for sin ἁμαρτίας [**amartias**] in this passage is very significant. It is from the verb ἁμαρτάνω

[**amaptano**], meaning “missing the mark, losing, or falling short of a goal (particularly a spiritual one) (Mounce, 2006: 656).” According to Mounce (2006: 656), ἁμαρτάνω [**amartano**] “generally refers to sins or sinning against oneself or another person.”

### **It shall be forgiven him**

Ἀφεθήσεται [**Aphethesetai**] is the future passive of ἀφήμι [**aphiemi**], meaning “forgive, leave, abandon (Mounce, 2006: 266).” It appears to describe a healing of the wearied that is wrought by a change of heart and turning to God through Christ.

*James 5:16*

### **Confess therefore your sins one to another**

The word of emphasis is “confess” (Greek ἐξομολογεῖσθε [**ezomologeisthe**]). It is the present middle (indirect) of ἐξομολογέω [**ezomologeō**], meaning “to confess, profess, praise (Mounce, 2006: 131).” The indirect usage of the verb may have assumed confession of sin to God. But it would be more likely that James intended public confession of certain sins to one another in their meetings.

### **Pray for one another**

The present middle imperative εὐχεσθε [**eugesthe**] of προσευχομαι [**proseuchomai**] (to pray) would seem to underscore same action as in the instance of confession. Yet this statement suggests a sort of injunction on the recipients of James’ message—the injunction to pray.

### **That ye may be healed**

This statement is a purpose clause with ὅπως [**opos**], meaning ‘that,’ and ἰαθήτε [**iathete**], the first aorist passive subjunctive of ἰάομαι [**iaomai**], meaning ‘to heal (Mounce 2006: 324).’ Though ἰάομαι [**iaomai**] may be used both in reference to physical and spiritual healing, it is probable to think of spiritual healing in this context (cf. Matthew 13:15 “so that I should heal them;” 1 Peter 2:24 “by whose stripes you were healed;” and Hebrews 12:13 “but rather be healed”).

### **The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much**

The word of emphasis is ἰσχύει [**ischuei**]. It is the present active indicative of ἰσχύς [**ischus**], meaning “strength, power, might (Mounce, 2006: 688). Its usage in this statement would serve to mean the prayers said by God’s people, who have confessed their sins, have much power.

## Implications

Five inferences could be made from the historical-grammatical study of the text. First, the sick refers basically to those who are spiritually weak or lacking spiritual strength. Such weakness may be caused by disease, affliction, hunger, etc. Though ἀσθενεῖ[*asthenei*] may refer to the 'sick' as well as the 'infirm,' it appears that James intends the basic meaning here (as in other New Testament usages: Matt 26:41; Acts 20:35; 1 Cor 8:9-12; 15:43; and Rom 6:19; 14:1). This idea seems to be supported by James' use of another Greek word κάμνοντα [*kamnonta*]. Since κάμνοντα[*kamnonta*] basically means 'weak or moral wrong,' it is correct to think of the sick in this context as those Christians lacking spiritual strength due to spiritual or moral wrong or in the midst of suffering (which may be caused by diseases, persecutions, hunger, etc.). This would appear to set aside the view that ἀσθενεῖ[*asthenei*] refers only to persons on the brink of death as in extreme unction.

Second, the elders who are to be called refer to the overseers or leaders of the faith community and not to some special class of individuals in the same community who possess the gift of healing or some special prowess for caring for the sick. Such a care for the sick would seem to be part of the activities of the elders (cf. 1 Thess 5:14 "...comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak...").

Third, James appears to direct the use of oil as a common practice of "bestowing honor, refreshment and grooming (Hayden, 1981: 264)." Though oil had a medicinal value in the ancient world, it is probable from the context that James seemed not to refer to its medicinal value. He might have instructed a call for the physician rather than the elders of the church. The use of oil would, therefore, suggest a symbolic use of it as a means of refreshing the spiritually weak. In the situation of the rubbing of the oil, Trench (1950: 136) has argued against the ceremonial/ritual that some associate with the application of James message. He claims the "word 'anoint' is *aleipsantes* ('rub with oil') not *chrio* ('ceremonially anoint'). The former is the 'mundane' word and the latter is 'the sacred and religious word.'" This would serve to mean that James intended the "common" use of oil in this context (Hayden: 1981: 264).

Fourth, the healing of the spiritually weak is the sole discretion of God. This point would be appreciated when one thinks of the cause of the weakness as discouragement from a decrease in faith in God. In such situation, it is only God who can uplift or raise the individual again. Hence it does not appear from the context of James 5:14-16 that the prayers of the elders said over the spiritually weak will automatically yield results. Rather, such prayers could be understood as a humble appeal to God to raise or increase the faith of the spiritually despondent. This notion may be further supported by the promise that God shall forgive the sin

also when they are confessed. That is if the cause of the spiritual weakness is sin, God will forgive.

Fifth, James seems to urge those lacking spiritual strength to confess some types of sins (especially those that are done against others) to one another as in public confession for the purpose of corporate and individual well-being. This could mean that persons lacking spiritual strength are to confess their sins to one another in the event that those sins causing the spiritual weakness are not solely between God and them but between others and them. It seems the general meaning of ἁμαρτίας[*amartias*] is meant here. Blue (1988: 835) is of the view that "a mutual concern for one another is the way to combat discouragement and downfall. The cure is in personal confession and prayerful concern. The healing (*that you may be healed*) is not bodily healing but healing of the soul (*iathete*)..."

## CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, one may understand the context of James 5:14-16: the renewing of spiritual strength in the midst of suffering. This suffering may be caused by diseases, persecutions, trials, interpersonal conflicts, and sin (both against God and other human beings). In such situations, James offers directives by which the spiritually weak may gain renewal and restoration. The context, therefore, may be understood primarily as directives for the spiritual restoration of the spiritually weak or wearied.

In this vein, James 5:14-16 would suggest five (5) major implications for the present-day Christian (especially in Africa) involved in healing ministries. These are: the sick refers basically to those who are spiritually weak or lacking spiritual strength; the elders who are to be called refer to the overseers or leaders of the faith community and not to some special class of individuals in the same community who possess the gift of healing or some special prowess for caring for the sick; the use of oil would suggest a symbolic use of it as a means of refreshing the spiritually weak; the healing of the spiritually weak is the sole discretion of God; and persons lacking spiritual strength are to confess their sins to God (in the event of direct sins against God) and to one another (in the event that those sins causing the spiritual weakness are against others).

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