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Θεραπεία and שְׁלוֹמַתּוֹ a Biblical View of Wholistic Mission

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Abstract: Two words describe Jesus' mission like no other: Θεραπεία and שְׁלוֹמַתּוֹ. By deliberately focusing on these concepts from Jesus' ministry, missionaries can address the traumas that Native North Americans have experienced.

Serving among Native Americans, the first thing I noticed in my missionary life is the high degree of trauma and socially maladaptive behaviors the people I encountered have experienced. Certainly, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol addiction/overconsumption, and sexual violence are common to all human societies. Sadly, rates of these pathologies are higher among Native Americans than any other ethnic group in the US.¹ Much of the time the addictions are tied to trauma, a person was sexually or physically abused as a child, and self-medicates with alcohol; they then abuse their own children, and the cycle continues. Can a pastor or missionary simply talk about law/gospel without addressing these glaring realities? I hope to make the case that not only should that never be the ideal, but that the Gospel of Jesus Christ actually addresses these situations with two words that characterized His ministry: *healing* and *shalom*.

“And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (Mt 4:23). A key component to Jesus' ministry was healing (Θεραπεία). In its transliterated form, *therapy*, this word has been co-opted by our culture to focus almost entirely on feelings. Despite the dangers associated with a theology that veers toward Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,² healing is an area of ministry that missionaries to Native North Americans are compelled to address. To ignore the plight of people traumatized, abused, or acting as abusers, would be to become (in Harrower's words) “an antirealist.”³



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But what does “healing” mean exactly? We cannot presume to heal diseases in the same way that our Lord Jesus did. We are not granted the same divine attributes as He has. Neither can we expect a perfected, once for all healing of unhealthy patterns, (e.g., a sudden and complete cessation of substance abuse).⁴ Our ministry of healing is much more like a beginning than an end, much more like a journey than a destination.

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We invite people to “share their story” of past traumatic events. We then respond as a group in appropriate ways that speak words of healing, forgiveness, and affirmation. We do not try to fix problems, rather address them forthrightly and have other people experience the event through listening. This very basic human interaction has proved helpful for both perpetrator and victim (often they can be the selfsame person). The participants start to recognize the unhealthy patterns in their lives and are made aware of how they are perpetuating cycles of abuse.

Again, this does not mean that suddenly behaviors change, or patterns cease. Although this can be frustrating to people who want concrete results, viewing healing as a process rather than a quick (or quack) cure is more faithful to our theological expression than our human need for success and outcomes (most often tied to funding). In *The Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther’s twenty-first thesis reads: “The ‘theologian of glory’ calls the bad good and the good bad. The ‘theologian of the cross’ says what a thing is.”⁵ It takes only a short time of observation to see “what a thing is” in the lives of human beings. Old patterns die hard, and toxic behaviors do not in a flash disappear. A biblical view of sanctification would also militate against an expectation of sudden and decisive change. “We are never without sin because we carry our flesh around our neck.”⁶ This assertion is an accurate reflection of the Scriptures, seen clearly in Romans 7:18–20, Psalm 14:3, and Psalm 143:2.

In spite of the lack of sudden progress or even visible gains, we are promised shalom. I have chosen not to translate this word since it has an even wider semantic domain than Θεραπεύω and is probably best left in the original to convey the multi-faceted prongs of meaning. Brown, Driver, and Briggs have seven entries to define the word with shades of meaning even in a single entry.⁷ Although the New Testament does not use this word (even in a transliterated form), it is no less a part of Jesus’ ministry as the referent of εἰρήνη (cf. Jn 14:27; 20:19) is certainly εἰρήνη.⁸ Romans 5:1 tells that we already have peace with God, and yet perfection of this wholeness, soundness, welfare (and to add a neologism, “wellness”) awaits the return of our Lord. But shalom is what Jesus offers (Jn 14:27), and that is why I am calling the effort to address cyclical abuse patterns a healing ministry, not simply a twelve-step group or

recovery program. As Harrower writes: “shalom, the opposite of horrors, is tied to what it is to be made as persons in the image of an intrinsically personal and interpersonal Trinitarian God.”⁹ In incorporating the concept and the promise of shalom we recognize that only Jesus can heal the deepest wounds of the heart and soul.¹⁰

Pietsch reminds us that, “for Luther theology and pastoral care are so closely intermeshed that one without the other is unthinkable.”¹¹ Hence the focus on these words as they inform and shape our practice. The forgiveness of sins is also present in these words since there can be no healing and no shalom without forgiveness.¹² So little of mission outreach to Native Americans has been successful.¹³ Could one reason be that we have avoided the traumas of people’s lives and not sufficiently shown them the shalom offered through faith in Christ? Focusing on these words is not intended to produce a solution to all the issues in mission to Native Americans, but it is intended to reorient our efforts to address the most salient issues of our hearers’ lives.

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As it happens shalom is very similar to a Navajo word, *hózhó*. This word also has a wide semantic domain that includes peace, joy, and harmony.¹⁴ It is also a significant word in Navajo religious practices, providing the missionary with a bridge from pre-Christian revelation, to a fuller revelation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The ideas of harmony, wholeness, and welfare are also included in what I like to think of as the teleological goal of a human being according to the Small Catechism: “that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”¹⁵

But all this focus on words and their meanings is *not* mental exercise for the intellectually bored. Bringing healing and shalom to bear in the lives of traumatized people is fulfilling the calling that Jesus has given us. Permit me to share a personal text I received a few weeks ago: “God has blessed me with a beautiful family including you, with prayers, song and scripture. . . . And being blessed with the Holy Spirit. . . . AND MOST OF ALL BEING SOBER. YAY!!!”¹⁶ In plain words, this is what a ministry of healing and shalom looks like in the lives of our hearers, and this is why it is pertinent in mission to Native North American people.

Endnotes

¹ Anecdotally: “Read almost any newspaper that serves a significant Indian population, and there is close to 100 percent chance you will find stories of tragedy.” H. Arthur and George McPeck, *The Grieving Indian: An Ojibwe elder shares his discovery of help and hope* (Indian Life Books: Winnipeg, 1991), 28. More empirically: https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/topics/tribal_affairs/ai-an-data-handout.pdf, accessed February 8, 2021.

² First introduced by Smith and Lindquist Denton in their 2005 book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2005). This term has become shorthand to characterize much of American theology and practice in all stripes of Christianity (including Lutheranism). Space does not permit a word study on $\theta\epsilon\rho\alpha\pi\epsilon\upsilon\omega$, but suffice to say, it means more than just physical healing.

³ Scott Harrower, *God of All Comfort: A Trinitarian Response to the Horrors of This World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 46. “Responses to horrors often feel inadequate: ‘What do you say in the face of horror?’ Answers must be offered because these are aspects of our existence. If we ignore these problems, we will be antirealists.”

⁴ Here I am reminded of Luther’s words: “This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.” Martin Luther, “Defense and Explanation of All the Articles,” in *Luther’s Works: Vol. 32 Career of the Reformer II*, ed. George W. Forell and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958), 24.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Anchor: Garden City, NY, 1961), 503.

⁶ Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism” in *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 2000), 438.

⁷ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament 6th ed.* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1966), 1022–23.

⁸ “The peace of Jesus is a gift that pertains to man’s salvation. Barrett, p. 391 points out that already in many OT passages ‘peace’ had acquired more than conventional meaning, for example as a special gift of the Lord in Ps 29:11; Isa 57:19.” Raymond Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John (xiii–xxi)* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 653.

⁹ Harrower, *God of All Comfort*, 12.

¹⁰ A further discussion beyond the scope of this essay relates the idea of $\delta\lambda\psi$ to $\tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\omega$ (cf. Zec 6:13) only in a context of a faithful covenantal relationship can shalom (or *harmony* as the NIV has it here) exist between persons and between God and man. Also of note is that when Jesus healed the leper in Mark 1:40–44 He not only healed the disease but restored the man to the community.

¹¹ Stephen Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort: Martin Luther’s Letters to the Depressed and Their Significance for Pastoral Care Today* (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2016), 20.

¹² Cf. Mark 2:5–12.

¹³ For the early LCMS attempts, see James Kaiser, “Wilhelm Loehe and the Chippewa Outreach at Frankenmuth” *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 1 (May 2014): 73–82.

¹⁴ Robert W. Young and William Morgan Sr., *The Navajo Language: A Grammar and Colloquial Dictionary* (Albuquerque: UNM Press, 1987), 462.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008), 16.

¹⁶ Personal correspondence from congregation member of Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, Navajo, NM.