



SACRAMENT OF HEALING GRACE

By Anthony Chvala-Smith

“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.” —James 5:14 NRSV

These words from James are precious to the Community of Christ. We have traditionally interpreted them as authorizing the sacrament we call “administration to the sick.” From the vantage point of congregational life, this rite, in which elders anoint a person with oil in the name of Christ and seek God’s blessing, is possibly the most frequently celebrated sacrament of the church.

For us, no sacrament is more closely bound to the human condition and God’s yearning to meet us in the tangle of life. Administration is the sacrament of emergency rooms, hospital rooms, and living rooms; of camps, reunions, and retreats; of pastors’ studies, inner-city streets, and even prisons; of bad news from the doctor, of phone calls at 2 a.m., and of life’s final moments.

This rite has become for us the sacrament of desperate choices, of unexpected turns, of broken hearts and dreams, of endings and beginnings, of spiritual deserts, of renewed vision. With the warm flesh of human hands, this sacrament clothes that most breathtaking of all promises: that nothing—not even suffering and death—shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Romans 8:38–39). It is for good reason that administration is so dear to us.

Administration as Sacrament

We use the term “sacrament” to describe this and seven other sacred actions celebrated in the Community of Christ. Sacraments, by a classic definition borrowed from Christian tradition, are visible signs of divine grace. As signs, sacraments signal the real presence of something greater in our midst. But they are more than signs; they are also symbols. As theologian Paul Tillich never tired of saying, symbols don’t just point, but participate in the very reality they symbolize. Theologically speaking, a symbol is not “just a symbol,”

but something we really can't dispense with. So these special symbols, rooted in the ministry of Jesus, are a unique means of grace by which God empowers lives.

Administration originates in Jesus' healing ministry. To celebrate this sacrament then is partly an act of memory. But administration is more than mere remembering. In this sacrament the church is not just saying that once upon a time a man named Jesus did something like this to heal people and we are copying his example. Rather, we are declaring that the one who did this then is present now, still acting among us and through us. Administration thus makes visible the foundational Christian claim: Christ is risen! When we celebrate this sacrament, we affirm that we live in a world that can never finally be seen as God-less or hope-less.

Administration re-presents the mystery of the Incarnation. The Word who was with God, and was God, became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14). The Word did not become a theory, or even a theology, but a real human being who entered fully into the joy and

misery of human existence. Christianity is not a spiritualized faith, but is intensely this-worldly, claiming the real value of created things in the purposes of God. Divine grace is given not in spite of but in the very stuff of creation: in olive oil, in human hands and words, in tears, and in the fragile beauty of human community.

Administration as Prayer

At its heart administration is a form of prayer. James 5 makes this quite clear. When this fact is neglected, we risk forgetting that as prayer this sacrament should be informed by Jesus' instructions on prayer, exemplified in the archetypal prayer he taught his disciples. As in the Lord's Prayer, so the sacrament of administration ought first to hallow God's name, to pray for the kingdom, and that God's will be done here.

Jesus was what he prayed: fully submitted to God. Administration as prayer calls us to this attitude of yielding. It is never more crucial than in this sacrament to remember that God is not a vending machine.

Administration demands our deepest theological thought, so that it will not be treated as magic or a subtle way to manipulate God into giving us what we want.

However, yielding to God is misconstrued if treated as “what will be will be.” The theologian Karl Barth once observed that “to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” Prayer is vital power, not because we know what we’re doing when we pray, but because the Holy Spirit is the very life of our own feeble prayers (Romans 8:26–27). Because the God of Jesus Christ is responsive to human requests, prayer—especially the prayer of administration—can help change the future.

God is neither impassive toward the cries of our hearts nor powerlessly bound by the cold regularities of the universe. Those regularities (which we sometimes call “laws”) are signs of God’s faithfulness. But the faithful God is also the living God, who is sovereignly free: free to be affected by our awkward prayers.*

But healing does not always occur, which raises the question of unanswered prayer. My Grandma and Grandpa Smith, both faithful members of the church, spent the last twenty years of their lives battling illness. They called for the elders often—sometimes weekly—and in this way confessed their faith to the end. But neither of them was healed in the usual sense of the term.

Our experience often presents us with a paradox: the failure to be healed in one way may open the doors to other kinds of healing. This was true during a particularly rough time in my own life. What I needed was not the healing I thought I wanted, but being sustained in the hard business of facing the shadowy sides of myself. I sought release from personal suffering; but administration brought me again and again to a cross I was not otherwise brave enough to seek. Only years later could I see the narrowness of my self-interest and the breadth of God's wisdom.

Sometimes prayer in general, and administration in particular, brings Easter; sometimes it helps us cope with our Gethsemanies; and

sometimes it leads us only to ordinary time: long stretches of silence and waiting with no parties on the horizon. But always it brings grace.

Administration as Symbol of God's Reign

Jesus' healings were not isolated examples of divine benevolence. They were to the coming of the kingdom of God what the first light of dawn is to the brilliance of mid-day. We yearn for, work for, and pray for what is not yet: the full coming of God's peaceable reign on earth. This is the real horizon against which all of the ministries of the church find their proper place. In the sacrament of administration we see already the contours of this inclusive kingdom: this sacrament excludes no one, for there is no copyright on healing and no "members only" seating.

God's will is nothing short of the transformation of all things. In the poetic imagery of John's Apocalypse, God yearns to wipe away every tear (Revelation 7:17) and to put an end to all that injures, distorts, and maims the lives of created things (21:4). In Jesus Christ, the

current of all history flows toward New Creation. If this is so, then the sacrament of administration is not only a sign of the healing grace of God, but a symbol of the hoped-for future. The hands, the oil, and our halting attempts to pray for well-being are themselves a promissory note of what will one day come to pass: the healing of all creation.

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* On this point, see Karl Barth, *Prayer: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Westminster John Knox, 2002), 1–21.