
F. The Church's Ministry of Healing



The healing of persons has long been considered part of the church's pastoral and diaconal calling. For Lutherans, the ministry of healing is grounded in the Word, sacraments and prayer. Some churches have focused on healing through prayer and exorcism, whereas others view these practices with suspicion. Most churches are involved in healing through various diaconal ministries. What have been the experiences in our churches, and what can we learn from each other? How is individual healing related to wider social issues? What is the difference between healing and curing? How should we as churches be addressing particular healing challenges in our world today?

This topic is certainly not new to the church, but it is one to which many Lutheran churches have been slow or reluctant to respond. Many churches, and the members within them, have had significant experiences with healing and healing ministries that have not been shared with others. This focus provides a real opportunity for us to discover elements of the Christian faith which have been ignored in mainstream churches for too long. This includes neglected aspects of our own tradition as Lutherans.

How does your church tend to view healing ministries?

A brief sketch of the healing ministry of the church

From the very beginning, healing has been part and parcel of the proclamation of the gospel:

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, ... curing every disease and every sickness (Mt 9:35).

Jesus sent his disciples to do likewise. He gave “them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases,” and actually “sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Lk 9:1–2; also see Lk 10:9). This was a mandate that the risen Christ reconfirmed (Mk 16:18).

As recorded in Acts, the apostles paid heed to this command to heal. Peter heals a man lame from birth who lay at the entrance to the temple (Acts 3:1–8), and at Lydda, he heals Aeneas who was

How are Lutherans responding to popular healing cults today?

paralyzed (Acts 9:32–35). Peter also raises the dead Tabitha at Joppa (Acts 9:36–41). Ananias heals Paul from his blindness at Damascus (Acts 9:17–19). At Lystra, Paul himself heals a man unable to walk (Acts 14:8–11), and on the island of Malta, the sick father of Publius (Acts 28:8–9). Paul also raises a dead person, the young Eutychus at Troas (Acts 20:9–12). These are only some of the examples of healing in the ministry of the apostles. Beyond this, there are several collective accounts of similar activities,¹ as well as the reference in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 to healing as a charismatic gift.

It is striking to realize how important the ministry of healing was in the writings of the Church Fathers. They repeatedly addressed the matter of healing in ways that reflected their argument with what was then the very popular healing cult of Asclepius, who was revered as “the savior” throughout the Hellenistic world. In confrontation with this cult, the Early Church had to articulate what was distinctive about Christ. The church confessed Christ as “the Savior of the world” in order to indicate that Christ actually overcame even death itself. In light of this, the conclusion of church historian Adolf von Harnack is not surprising, when he stated that “only” by proclaiming the gospel “as the gospel of the Savior and of salvific healing, in the comprehensive sense in which this was understood by the Early Church,” will Christianity remain faithful to its roots.²

Although the concern for actual healing abated slowly but steadily in the following centuries, the church became increasingly concerned with caring for those who were sick or in need. The biblical model for this are the seven deacons (see Acts 6:1–6), who were installed by the Apostles at Jerusalem specifically to take care of the needs of the widows who were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The parable of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31–46) also

served as a decisive call to such activity: “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).

Remarkable among the early initiatives was the *Basilias*, an institution famous for the care of those who were poor, sick, homeless, orphaned or widowed. Founded by Bishop Basil the Great in the fourth century at Cesarea, it became the model on the basis of which many similar establishments were built by many cities in the Christian world throughout the Middle Ages. Numerous religious orders were organized to staff these institutions and to care for the people. Besides this, special donations were solicited, which was to become a practice of special importance in the churches of the Reformation.

In the nineteenth century, the diaconal movement developed with numerous programs and institutions to care for those adversely affected by the Industrial Revolution. They often were inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), as was the medical missions movement which came into existence around the same time. When medicine became a more scientific art, it was Protestant missions, in close cooperation with dedicated, pious physicians and other people of good will, who developed the concept of medical missions, literally for “the Healing of the Nations.”³ While diaconal institutions represented the healing ministry of the church, it was the medical missions, especially in the beginning, that re-emphasized the actual physical aspect of healing. This was due to the fact that medicine had reached the point of being able to eradicate infectious diseases, such as malaria, diphtheria, smallpox and leprosy by identifying the disease-causing organisms that later led to the discovery of new, potent drugs and the development of safe, painless surgery.

Today healing has, once again, come to the fore in churches. While some

churches have experienced prayer-healing movements, others have studied questions of the healing ministry in great detail, providing local congregations and health professions with resources, guidelines, material and many possibilities for action.⁴ For some Lutheran churches, especially in the South, involvement in non-medical, liturgical healing activities has become a major concern, such as the Malagasy Lutheran Church’s long-established Shepherd Ministry.⁵

Through what institutional forms is this healing ministry expressed in your church?

Luther, Lutheranism and healing

In a personal, highly disclosive letter to his wife, Luther once wrote:

Master Philip truly had been dead, and really like Lazarus has risen from death. God, the dear father listens to our prayers. This we see and touch, yet we still do not believe it. No one should say Amen to such disgraceful unbelief of ours.⁶

When in the summer of 1540 his dear colleague and friend Philip Melanchthon fell seriously ill and was feared to die, Luther was called to his bedside where he found him in a comatose state. While Luther prayed, Melanchthon regained consciousness. Luther later referred to this: “We have prayed ... people back to life, [like] Philip at Weimar, whose eyes were broken already.”⁷

In his letters of spiritual counsel, Luther appears to have been far more familiar with praying for healing and exorcism than is commonly known. For him such prayer was always understood as the prayer of the church. When asked how to deal with “a mad person,” Luther recommended:

Pray fervently and oppose Satan with your faith, no matter how stubbornly he resists. About ten years ago we had an experience in this neighborhood with a very wicked demon, but we succeeded in subduing him by perseverance and by unceasing prayer and unquestioning faith. The same will happen among you if you continue in Christ's name to despise that derisive and arrogant spirit and do not cease praying. By this means I have restrained many similar spirits in different places, for the prayer of the Church prevails at last.⁸

Share some of these healing experiences from your church. What issues do they raise?

How close this is to the experience of many churches of the Lutheran communion, especially in countries of the South. For them, as for Luther, many diseases have not only material but also spiritual causes, and thus need to be treated accordingly.

The Reformers also referred to healing in relation to the church's more conventional teachings. For example, Luther occasionally referred to confession and the Lord's Supper as "healing medicines." Melancthon employed the term "healing" when speaking about "soothing the doubts of troubled consciousness" or "mending the church community" that threatened to break apart. More than a generation later, the authors of the Formula of Concord used "healing" to refer to the "regeneration and renovation" of fallen humanity through the Holy Spirit. Regarding the church:

Until the Last Day, the Holy Spirit remains with the holy community, or Christian people. Through it he [God] gathers us, using it to teach and proclaim the Word⁹

Little of this has played a significant role in the subsequent development of

Lutheran theology, at least until recently. This has also led to an inadequate understanding of the natural world and the corporeality of life, despite what the confessional writings clearly state:

We believe, teach and confess that ... God not only created the body and soul of Adam and Eve ..., but also our bodies and souls ... and God still acknowledges them as his handiwork Furthermore, the Son of God assumed into the unity of his person this same human nature, though without sin, and thus took on himself not alien flesh, but our own, and according to our flesh has truly become our brother. ... Thus Christ has redeemed our nature as his creation, sanctifies it as his creation, quickens it from the dead as his creation, and adorns it gloriously as his creation.¹⁰

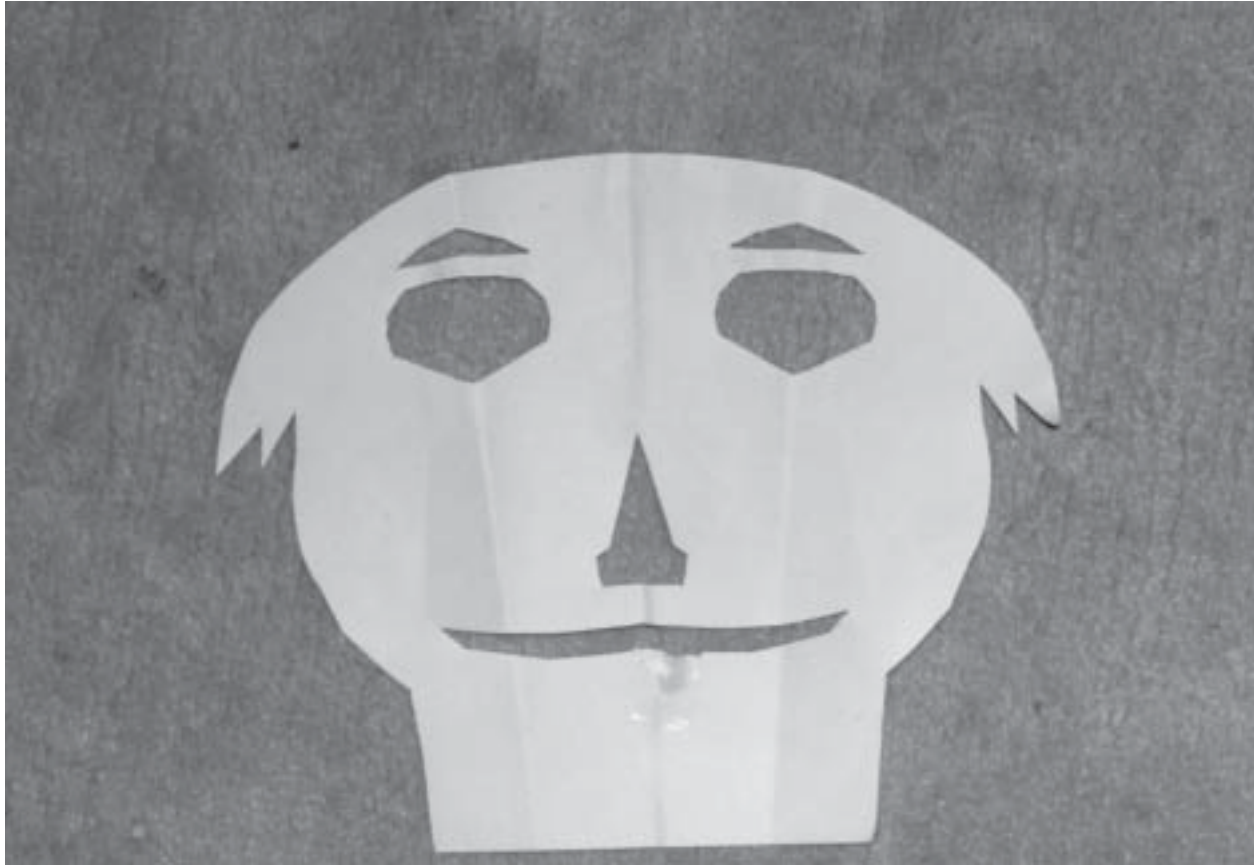
Dietrich Bonhoeffer once analyzed this atrophy of Lutheran theology:

Before the light of grace everything human and natural sank into the night of sin, and now no one dared to consider the relative differences within the human and the natural, for fear that by their so doing grace as grace might be diminished. ... Christ Himself entered into the natural life, and it is only through the incarnation of Christ that the natural life becomes the penultimate which is directed towards the ultimate.¹¹

It is time for this atrophy to be redressed. Healing always has a bodily dimension. Even healing that is mental or spiritual, such as the healing of mind or of memories, is a healing that affects corporeal, embodied beings.

Healing as power encounter

Obviously healing is not a Christian prerogative. In all cultures and at all times,



people who suffered from diseases have regained health and strength. Among those who became well again, some experienced this in very ordinary ways over an extended period of time or due to well-established remedies. For others, the healing occurred quite suddenly, in ways not explainable, and thus was spoken of as “miraculous.” Regarding such miraculous claims, Origen wrote in the third century:

Were I to ... admit, that a demon, Asclepius by name, has the power to heal physical illness, then I could remark to those who are astounded ... by this healing, that this power to heal the sick is neither good nor evil, that it is a thing which is bestowed not only upon the righteous, but upon the godless as well. ... Nothing divine is revealed in the power to heal the sick in and of itself.¹²

Healings by themselves do not prove Christ’s authority. Even the healings of Jesus were doubted (*cf.* Mt 12:22ff.). For

example, the Pharisees questioned their revelatory quality: “It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons,” (verse 24) to which Jesus replied, “If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out?” (verse 27).

Because healings are ambiguous, they raise significant and uneasy challenges for churches and their theology. Is healing a natural phenomenon, which can be stimulated by means that are not only medical? Or, is healing the outcome of a power encounter, a victorious fight with demons and evil spirits, “in the name of Jesus!” as J. C. Blumhardt did in the nineteenth century, and as is done in many churches today?

It may be misleading to pose this as an “either/or” question. Looking to Luther for guidance, we find a surprisingly sober-minded, pragmatic answer. Luther demands first a proper diagnosis in order to discern carefully the specific disease in question. Then he encourages one to act accordingly.

If the physicians are at a loss to find a remedy, you may be sure that this is not a case of ordinary [disease]. It must, rather, be an affliction that comes from the devil, and must be counteracted by the power of Christ and with the prayer of faith. This is what we do, and what we have been accustomed to do, for a cabinet maker here was similarly afflicted with madness and we cured him by prayer in Christ's name.¹³

Many people throughout the centuries, within and beyond Christianity, have experienced and continue to experience healing as the victorious outcome of a battle of a life-granting, life-preserving power over life-threatening forces.

What does Lutheran theology have to say about this? How do local congregations and churches handle this? Do they foster such an understanding? Do they ignore it? Do they address it and help their members to come to terms with it in light of the gospel?

Perceiving healing as the outcome of a power encounter also demands an ability to discern the spirits. How and where is this to be gained? Where in the life and teaching of Lutheran churches do we find help for this? Are churches prepared to tackle the issue of good and evil spirits, which is not easily compatible with enlightened, scientific and secular understandings and medical practices? How might churches have more mutual exchanges on matters like this, without compromising the people involved?

Healing, curing and mending

One common attempt to respond to the above dilemma is with the motto: Humans cure—God heals. “Healing” here is seen as the work of the only true and liv-

ing God while “curing” describes what human activity seeks to achieve. But is this distinction really helpful? While its intention is to indicate that any healing is a gift of God, such a differentiation is highly problematic because it separates that which actually is one process. Why disgrace the natural healing process and demean the efforts of those seriously concerned with restoring health to people for the sake of a theological argument which only confirms the atrophy discussed above?

Luther's position was quite different. When explaining the First Article in his Small Catechism he bluntly declared:

I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me **and still sustains** my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind ...¹⁴

For him there was no doubt that the living God uses the healing potential inherent in biological life to sustain life. How then can there be a sharp distinction between healing and curing? When Christians confess that God has created the world and all that is therein, they are acknowledging God's ongoing creation. Therefore, the only distinction that should matter is that between “healing” as God's unique work and all the “treatments” applied by humans as responsible efforts to help healing come about.

This opens up a new approach toward the various healing arts, all of which will be welcomed as agents to enable healing, be they scientific, natural, spiritual, herbal, alternative or indigenous. At the same time their claims have to be tested sympathetically yet critically by those who are genuinely and solely committed to the ministry of healing. We must see to it that that these means do not lead to death, but toward life abundantly (*cf.* Jn 10:10).

Healing and salvation

If the healing ministry of the church is understood as a commitment to bring about life abundantly, then this must be seen in relation to the wider aspects of life. As we have come to realize in recent years, it is often the broader context of individuals and their communities which needs to be healed. This requires awareness of the overall socio-economic conditions, the ecological context and sensitivity for how culture and gender are involved.

Discuss examples of how these wider factors, many of which are the foci of other Village Group discussions, contribute to health or illness.

Approaching healing in this way can bridge the gap between gospel proclamation and Christian service in the world, because in such an all-encompassing perspective of healing such a divide no longer holds. The healing ministry implies an inherent critique of both the church's proclamation and action. Any theology and preaching, however eloquent and entertaining, which is very "spiritual" but not geared toward bringing about palpable changes for the better, has to be questioned as to its appropriateness. Likewise, service can and should be seen by the church as a means of carrying out the church's witness in society. Thus, healing becomes a critical, challenging touchstone for the credibility of the church's whole ministry.

Do you agree with this? What would be the implications for how churches structure the work of proclamation and of service? What problems does this raise?

Living out the ministry of healing is more than pious words or social activ-

ism. It is simply following the footsteps of Jesus Christ and in so doing, learning to see with his eyes. The simple fact that Jesus *healed* clearly indicates that to him salvation had a bodily dimension, albeit without equating healing with salvation.

We are addressed by the Word of God as embodied persons. The Creator cared wholly for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:7ff.). When they strayed, the Creator did not lose sight of their bodily needs and wants. Clothes were provided for the naked (Gen 3:21). Later, the rules for a good life were revealed in the Torah, setting into motion the history of salvation. God became incarnate in Jesus Christ and through him continued to live out the compassionate care for humanity by healing those who were ill, by feeding the hungry (Mt 9:10ff.; 14:13ff.; Mk 6:31ff.; Jn 6:1ff.), by listening to those who cried (Mt 15:21; Mk 10:13ff. and 46ff) and by comforting those who wept (Jn 11:33). Jesus really did care for people and their well-being, and took seriously their corporeality. In so doing he reinstated the God-likeness to them (Gen 1:26f.), he "healed" the rift between God and humanity.¹⁵

This of course did not mean that Jesus worshiped the body. At times he showed a certain disregard for it.

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire (Mt 18:8).

What matters and makes life worth living is not a perfect body but the way in which we enable others to live and stay alive. It is in this way that Jesus' healing miracles are significant.

To bring about life and life in abundance, sometimes occurs at the expense of the body, or even at the expense of an individual life. Jesus' death is the strongest point in case (see Jn 15:13). The

early Christians actually understood Jesus' passion and cross in this way by quoting from Isaiah 53:4: "He took our in-

How does this critique the perfect body ideologies of our times? How does this challenge all dehumanizing and exploitative structures, relationships, or practices?

firmities and bore our diseases" (Mt 8:17). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross...by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24).

The cross makes us aware that the healing ministry of the church cannot consist of simply working to prolong life or to promote body concepts that favor strong, not mutilated, perfectly healthy bodies (and most probably those that are young and beautiful). Instead, the very task of this ministry is to reinstate the "God-likeness" to all men and women, children and adults, rich and the poor, the healthy and sick. It is to enable as many people as possible to live their lives in such a way that others can recognize the image of the living God in them, and that so that they may live and remain truly human until death.

To live the church's healing ministry means to witness to the corporeality of salvation. As the early African theologian Tertullian reminded his contemporaries, "The body is the pivot of salvation."¹⁶ But in seeking to bring about healing, we

Does this mean that healing efforts are not worth pursuing? That these efforts fail far more often than they accomplish their goal? What should the LWF be saying about the church's ministry of healing?

realize that we can never guarantee the results, neither in hospitals, churches, nor even in prayer circles. We become aware of the discrepancy between the enormous claim and the actual outcome of so many well-intended efforts. Very often healing does not take place in spite of all endeavors.

Rather than ignoring this dilemma, we must consciously face it, and thereby rise to our calling. Christians are asked sober mindedly and critically to distinguish between what really can be done here and now, always provisionally, and what cannot be achieved despite all good efforts. While continual defeat might well frustrate us, as Christians we can face this because we know for certain "that in hope we were saved" (Rom 8:24). Such "hope does not disappoint us" (Rom 5:5).

In this way we realize that healing is not synonymous with salvation. Salvation always transcends the realm of the empirical. As Christians our call is to bear witness to the redeeming power of faith in Christ, not to prove or demonstrate it. The church simply cannot claim to have control over healing as a demonstrative sign of God's presence and supreme power. To do so would be to deny Christian existence as life between the "here and now" and the "not yet" of salvation, and to turn into a healing sect. If the church does not bear this tension, it no longer bears witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Healing sometimes may be part and parcel of a salvific experience, but it is never at the will and disposal of the church. It is at God's disposal alone.

Notes

¹ See Acts 5:15–16; 8:6–7; 19:11–12; 28:9. Other references to “wonders and signs” of the apostles are found in Acts 2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3.

² Adolf v. Harnack, *Medizinisches aus der ältesten Kirchengeschichte* (Leipzig, 1892), p. 111. See also Adolf v. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), esp. pp. 101–146.

³ J. Rutter Williamson and James S. Dennis, *The Healing of the Nations—A Treatise on Medical Missions, Statement and Appeal* (New York/London, 1899). For a comprehensive treatment see Christoffer H. Grundmann, *Gesandt zu heilen! Aufkommen und Entwicklung der ärztlichen Mission im neunzehnten Jahrhundert, Missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen Bd. 26* (Guetersloh: Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1992) [*Sent to heal! Emergence and Development of Medical Missions in the Nineteenth Century*, American edition in print]; Christoffer H. Grundmann, “Proclaiming the Gospel by healing the sick?—Historical and Theological Annotations on Medical Missions,” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 14, no. 3 (July 1990), pp. 121–126.

⁴ For example, it is expected that in 2003 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will adopt a major social statement on health and healing.

⁵ See for instance, Peder Olsen, *Healing through Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962), esp. pp. 26ff.; Larry Christensen, *The Charismatic Revival Among Lutherans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, Publishing House, 1976). For the activities of the Lutheran churches in America see *Anointing and Healing* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Church in America, 1962); Ralph E. Peterson,

A Study of the Healing Church and its Ministry: The Health Care Apostolate (New York: Lutheran Church in America, 1982); *Our Ministry of Healing—Health and Health Care Today* (Chicago: ELCA, 2001). About the Lutheran Church in Madagascar see: Peri Rasolondraibe, “Healing Ministry in Madagascar,” in *Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry*, vol. 9 (Fall 1989), pp. 344–350. Other Lutheran initiatives are documented in *Health and Healing—The Report of the Makumira Consultation on the Healing Ministry of the Church* (Arusha: Medical Board of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, 1967); *Report of the Umpumulo Consultation on the Healing Ministry of the Church* (Mapumulo, South Africa, 1967). For a fairly comprehensive overview see Christoffer H. Grundmann, “Healing—A Challenge to Church and Theology,” in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XC, Nos. 356/357 (Jan./April 2001), pp. 26–40.

⁶ Weimar, July 2nd, 1540, in G. G. Krodel (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 50 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 208f.

⁷ Otto Clemen, *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, vol. 8 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1930), p. 293, #5407.

⁸ Letter to Pastor B. Wurzelmann, Nov. 2nd, 1535, in Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *Luther’s Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), p. 42.

⁹ “The Large Catechism,” in Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 417. See also p. 460.

¹⁰ “Formula of Concord, Part I, Epitome, Article I, Original Sin,” in *The Book of Concord*, *op. cit.* (note 9), pp. 466f.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Eberhard Bethge (ed.) (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 144f.

¹² Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III, 25.

¹³ Letter to Severin Schulze, June 1st, 1545, in *Luther's Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 52.

¹⁴ *The Book of Concord*, *op. cit.* (note 9) p. 345; italics added.

¹⁵ Solida Declaratio I (De peccato originis / Original Sin), par. 14, in *The Book of Concord*, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 511.

¹⁶ E. Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection* (London: SPCK, 1960), p. 26.