



"The observance of the divine laws constitutes the most effective preventative medicine against disease."

—Rabbi Musk

**13-Apr-18**

## **The Anointed Cloth and Healing**

Despite the many millions who profess to be [Christians](#) in [this world](#), throughout most of its existence, the church of [God](#) has been small and scattered. Jesus calls His disciples a "little flock" in [Luke 12:32](#), and though the early numbers of converts promised large congregations (see [Acts 2:41](#), 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 9:31; etc.), the later epistles tell a story of many [falling away](#), having listened to [false teachers](#) and accepted false doctrines (see, for instance, [Galatians 1:6-7](#); [II Timothy 2:17-18](#); [I John 2:18-19](#); [II John 7](#); [Jude 3-4](#); etc.). Paul calls the elect "a remnant" in [Romans 11:5](#). By the time the apostle John died at the end of the first century, the [true church](#), a shadow of its former self, had been eclipsed by a more prominent church made up of those who had followed the false teachers into various apostasies.

Even during its heyday, the first-century church was a tiny organization scattered over a wide world. Only a few apostles and evangelists, along with a number of elders, served God's people from Egypt to Jerusalem to Babylon to Ephesus to Rome and beyond. Many members congregated in private homes for [Sabbath](#) services, and perhaps once every few years, an apostle like Paul or [Barnabas](#) would visit to teach and preach for a short time before heading off to the next small congregation in a nearby city. Sound familiar?

For situations like this, which were the norm rather than the exception throughout history, apostles like Paul conceived of a means by which they could anoint the sick from long distance. [Acts 19:11-12](#) records the sole mention of this practice:

Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.

Paul's miraculous healings by this means have often been compared to Jesus healing the woman with the twelve-year flow of blood when she touched the hem of his garment ([Mark 5:25-29](#); see also [Matthew 14:36](#)) and to the sick being healed after the apostle Peter's shadow passed over them ([Acts 5:15](#)).

It is from this passage that the present-day church has derived its authority to send anointed cloths to distant members who lack a nearby elder to anoint them personally for their illnesses. The context does not inform us of how this was done or even if it was a customary practice. We find only the bare fact that cloths were taken from Paul to the sick and demon-possessed, and they were subsequently healed. The incident set a precedent for today's practice.

The two items used in these healings are certainly strange when understood correctly. The first item, "handkerchiefs," translates a Latin loan-word, *soudarion*, which indicates a cloth used for wiping sweat from the face! The second, "aprons," *simikinthion*, another loan-word from Latin, refers to a workman's apron, and this makes sense because Paul made a living as a tentmaker and leatherworker ([Acts 18:3](#)). These were indeed "unusual miracles."

This use of cloths in healing the sick has been combined with the instructions given to the church about anointing, which are found in [James 5:14](#):

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the

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name of the Lord. 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.

In the case of a long-distance anointing, then, an elder prays for the healing of the ill individual in the name of [Jesus Christ](#), anointing a small square of cloth with olive oil as he does so. Along with a letter of explanation and instruction, he sends the anointed cloth through the mail to the sick person. Once the ailing person receives it, he or she also prays in faith to God for healing, placing the anointed cloth on his or her forehead. God does the rest according to His will for the individual.

No superstition or any kind of hocus-pocus is involved in this simple ritual. There is no "magic" in the cloth or the oil or even the prayer. The oil does represent God's Holy Spirit, but it is just a symbol of God's power to effect His will in the individual.

Our following these instructions is predicated on faith in God for healing (for example, see [Matthew 8:13; 9:29](#)). He promises in [Exodus 15:26](#), "I am the LORD who heals you," if we are diligent in keeping His ways. One of the great benefits of being His people is that He "forgives all of [our] iniquities, [and] heals all [our] diseases" ([Psalm 103:3](#)). [Isaiah 53:5](#) declares, "By His stripes we are healed" (see [I Peter 2:24](#)), which certainly applies spiritually as well as physically.

In [Matthew 10:8](#), Jesus commands His disciples, "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (see also [Mark 16:18; Luke 9:2; 10:9](#)). He repeats several times in His [Passover](#) address to His disciples, "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do" ([John 14:13](#); see [John 15:16; 16:23-27; Matthew 21:22](#)). Although we must all die one day ([Hebrews 9:27](#)), He wants us to live abundant lives ([John 10:10](#)), so we can trust that He will do what is best for us when we become ill.

It is always preferred that an individual be anointed personally by an elder of the church, but as often happens these days, one may not be readily available. The anointed cloth is an expedient way to follow the instructions in James 5 and bring our requests for healing before the Father through Jesus

Christ. By it, we show Him our fervent desire, not only to be made well, but also to perform what He has commanded.

God has honored this practice thousands of times over the past several decades through the healing of many ailing and diseased members of His church. In this way, He takes care of His small and scattered flock.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[Faith and Healing \(Part One\)](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

A group of Ukrainian Jews applied foresight and sacrifice to escape from the impending onslaught of the Nazis, saving themselves from certain destruction. If we as Christians fail to dress and keep, cultivating, embellishing, and improving what has been entrusted to us (including our bodies and health), we are equivalent to a destroyer. Fighting the forces of decay - a continuous struggle of overcoming planned for us by almighty God - requires constant, life-long work and vigilance. We should never delude ourselves that we are "innocent victims" of our own sins or destructive habits. We have a sobering responsibility to analyze our health needs, continually adjusting and changing as we learn, faithfully maintaining the temple of God's Spirit.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[Faith—What Is It?](#)**

by Pat Higgins

How important is faith? What is the faith God requires us to have? Pat Higgins explains that faith is simple in concept, but difficult to display in our lives. Nevertheless, we must exercise this gift of God to pass the tests that are sure to precede the return of Christ.

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