

Simon Reed

Followers of the Way

ancient discipleship
for modern christians



Followers of the Way

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Introduction

It was the year of the floods. Large areas of south-west England were underwater after weeks of rain, but in Scotland the rain had fallen as snow and the mountains were plastered in white. We were climbing Ben Lawers, which, at just under 4,000 feet, is Scotland's tenth highest mountain. The clouds had closed in and we only knew we were on the top when we couldn't climb any higher. The summit marker was buried under feet of snow and we carved out a hollow to drink tea and eat Snickers. The cold wind had already blown snow over our tracks, so we took a compass bearing to follow the easiest way down again. And that's where it got interesting.

In a white-out, white cloud meets white snow and sometimes you can barely even see your feet. As we ploughed on down, I felt the angle getting steeper than I was expecting. Suddenly someone shouted, 'There's a drop in front!' A moment later came a second shout: 'It drops off on both sides!'

We stopped immediately. One of our number switched on his GPS navigation device to fix our position. Two of us – traditional navigators – scrutinised the map to see where we had gone wrong. Quickly we spotted it, a tiny feature on the map, but clearly showing two small cliffs shaped like an arrowhead just off the left side of the ridge. We had walked to the edge and stopped just before we reached the drop. A moment later, and to our great relief and satisfaction, the GPS confirmed our old-fashioned map reading. Even with a compass, in the poor visibility we had veered slightly off course. The solution was simple – backtrack up and left and get back on the ridge top. Within minutes we were back on course and another great day in the hills was heading for a safe conclusion.

I love living in a world city, but at least once a year I go away to spend time in the mountains. Some people think we're crazy, but it's actually safer than crossing the road, and much depends on knowing what you're doing. One of the essential skills is navigation – knowing where you're going, how to get there, how much progress you're making and how to get back on track if you get lost. I wonder how many of us can apply the same set of skills and knowledge to being a Christian. Do we know exactly where we're trying to get to and how to get there? Do we know what we mean by following Jesus, and do we have any way of knowing whether or not we're making progress?

In 2013 I wrote a book called *Creating Community: Ancient ways for modern churches*.¹ I wrote about my experiences as a church leader in trying to help people to connect more deeply with God and to connect God with every part of life. I explained how my immersion in Celtic Christian spirituality, through my membership of the international Community of Aidan and Hilda, led me to insights that were known and practised in the early church but which seem to have been forgotten for over a thousand years. In particular I described how living by a Way of Life, being accompanied by a soul friend and sharing in a rhythm of prayer revolutionised my understanding of how we live as disciples of Christ and create deep and lasting Christian community.

The impact of the book amazed me. People wrote and told me that some of what they learned from the book was life-changing. People started calling me to speak about it in various places in the UK and abroad. As I have travelled and read and reflected, while still grappling with the challenge of leading a small church that is desperately trying to grow, I have been struck by just how many Christians are wrestling with the fundamental questions of what it actually means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and how you go about it in a sustainable, lifelong way. More than ever, I believe our spiritual ancestors had vital insights that we urgently need to rediscover. That's what this book is about. It will be a lifelong journey, but it will also be a life-giving journey. It's time we got started.

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Waymark 6: Heal whatever is broken

Jesus said, 'The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19). Paul wrote that 'through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1:20). St Irenaeus (second century) said, 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.' In the name of Christ and through his power we pursue wholeness in body, mind and spirit for ourselves and for others. We seek to be peace makers between estranged individuals and in divided communities. We also pray for the 'healing of the land' in places polluted by human sinfulness (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Healing is a controversial subject. I have personally seen people healed from cancer and heroin addiction as a result of prayer. Yet our daughter, Emma, was born with profound and multiple handicaps. She died when she was five years old and we will carry the pain of that for the rest of our lives. We all live between the now and the not yet. We are those 'on whom the ends of the ages have come' (1 Corinthians 10:11). We live in the world as it is, what Paul calls 'the present evil age' (Galatians 1:4), but through Jesus we have begun to enter into 'the powers of the age to come' (Hebrews 6:5), the future in which eventually 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). We're not there yet, but we are on our way, and for that reason healing of people, places, relationships and communities is an integral part of this Way of Life.

God is the great healer. One of the fascinating things about our bodies which God has created is that when they are working properly, they self-heal. Physical damage grows back. Antibodies fight disease. Therefore, when we speak about healing we are not talking about something which goes against the grain of creation, but rather is working with it. Perhaps we need to be a little more careful when we talk about ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ – God doesn’t seem to make these kinds of distinctions. Nevertheless, God does involve himself in his creation in ways that go beyond the normal healing processes, ways which we tend to describe as ‘miraculous’. Early on in the journey out of Egypt, God makes polluted water drinkable. He describes himself as *Yahweh-Rapha*, ‘I am the Lord who heals you’ (Exodus 15:26). In the ancient Middle East, the revealing of a name was also a revealing of character and an entering into relationship. God is therefore saying that it’s part of his nature to heal and that we may ask him to do that.

In New Testament Greek, the original language of these writings, the word meaning ‘to save’ or ‘to bring to salvation’, *sōzō*, also equally means ‘to restore to health or make well’. This should not be too much of a surprise. The story of the Bible is the story of the creator God who out of love made all things, and when they became damaged and corrupted immediately set about restoring them. As we saw in the previous chapter, the final scene of the Bible is the new Jerusalem coming down to earth from heaven, where ‘death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away’ (Revelation 21:1–4) and with its tree of life whose leaves are ‘for the healing of the nations’ (Revelation 22:2). Jesus announced the beginning of God’s renewing rule on earth, what the Bible calls ‘the kingdom of God’,³⁸ using very this-worldly language of healing and liberation from the book of Isaiah (Luke 4:16–19, Isaiah 61:1–4). He backed this up by beginning a ministry which very prominently included healing people from all kinds of physical problems and others that were characterised as ‘demonic’, and exercising a rule over nature which caused the stilling of storms and the multiplication of food. Before people ever got to

grapple with the question of what Jesus being ‘the Son of God’ might mean, they would have seen and encountered him as a prophet and as a healer. This is now widely accepted in modern historical studies of Jesus, even by people who are sceptical about Christian faith itself.³⁹

This takes us a vital stage further. Until the explosive growth of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements throughout the 20th century, many Christians regarded healing as something which may well have happened in the Bible and in the lives of some exceptionally gifted or saintly individuals down the centuries, but not something that would be experienced or practised in the mainstream life of the church. There are many reasons for this, but one of them was that we had lost sight of what the Gospels are. It has now been demonstrated that they belong to the form of writing known as ancient biography and this affects how we read them.⁴⁰ Too often, Christians read the Gospels as sources of Jesus’ *teaching*, so when it comes to healing we look at what Jesus *said* about it. Ancient biographies, however, frequently described their subject in order that they might be *imitated* (and remember what we previously said discipleship is all about). That means that what Jesus *did* is just as important as what he said. We can find a trail of teaching which suggests that healing ought to be a normal feature of Christian life and ministry today: Jesus commissioned the twelve (Luke 9:1), then 70 others (Luke 10:1–9), to go out and heal, then told the apostles to pass on to future disciples everything he had taught them (Matthew 28:18–20), by implication including this. But far more immediate than this paper trail is the fact that Jesus himself healed, and as disciples we are called to imitate him.

So, what does this mean in practice? This Way of Life speaks of three different types of healing, that of people (including ourselves), places and communities, and relationships. Let’s look at each of them.

Healing of people

When I first encountered the Christian healing ministry, my biggest problem in getting involved was worrying about what to do if nothing happened. It wasn't so much that I would look stupid (although that was a factor), but concern that someone else who was already unwell would feel totally let down and maybe lose any trust in God they had. There have been lots of books based on the New Testament describing different ways in which we should offer healing to people and there isn't space here to discuss them. Jesus and the apostles clearly had occasions when they were so in tune with the will of God that they could simply declare healing and it happened. That's something for us all to aim for, but it can seem quite daunting when you're just getting started. I find the approach described in James 5:13–18 the most helpful, because it describes healing in the context where most of us will encounter it, that of the local church, and the approach is by means of hands-on prayer. Focusing on prayer reminds us that healing is God's work. In the words of the late John Wimber, who was powerfully used by God both in healing and in teaching others how to practise it,⁴¹ 'No one has a miracle in their pocket.' We offer to pray for people, holding out the hope that God can do extraordinary things, but knowing that in this world, between the now and the not yet, this might result in physical healing but it is not guaranteed. James says that 'the prayer of faith will save the sick' (James 5:15), but recall that the word *sōzō* doesn't just mean physical healing.

Dr Chris Bird was one of the most important people in the life of my church. A university science lecturer, he had already helped found an educational charity, the Basotho Educational Trust, in one of the poorest parts of Africa, and set out a vision for our church which enabled me to begin moving things forward when I arrived there. Barely a year later, and having just passed 40, he was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. One day Chris phoned me up and told me he had been writing down some reflections on his illness. As soon as I read them I asked him if he could share them with the church in a talk.

With the congregation hanging on his every word, Chris explained how, since his diagnosis, he had been prayed for again and again. ‘As I stand here today,’ he said, ‘I have not been cured. I still have cancer. But I have been healed in so many ways.’ And he explained what they were.

I like to think of myself as a practical person. I know that not everyone I pray for will be healed. I’ve had the huge joy of seeing people with life-threatening illnesses get better, and people with deep inner disturbances that we might describe as ‘demons’ be set free. I also prayed with Chris just before he died, and I know personally what it feels like to have one of your own children die. If I concentrate on the doubts and the things I can’t explain, I won’t pray for anyone and no one will get healed. But if I pray for everyone I can, then some of them will get healed, and their lives, and this world, will be a better place. It’s also hugely important to remember that, when Paul was describing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, he said that they are nothing without love (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). Healing is ultimately an expression of love for people who are hurting, damaged or limited in the functions of their bodies or minds. If love is our motive when we offer to pray for them, then they will receive something however the prayer is answered. I have never met anyone who regretted being prayed for, if it was done in love, whether or not they were ever healed. Local churches often practise healing ministry, and there are many other ways of learning how to get involved. Jesus did it and therefore we can do it. It’s part of this Way of Life, so if you haven’t already done so, take the first step to get involved.

Healing of places and communities

When you walk in the glens of the Scottish Highlands, you often pass broken stone walls or low rectangular grass-covered mounds. They are the remains of the croft houses of the people who were forcibly deported in the 18th and 19th centuries as part of the disgraceful episode in British history known as the Highland Clearances. I’ve

seen them so often I barely notice them now. Hallaig is different. The remains of this village can be found on the Hebridean island of Raasay, a short ferry ride over from Skye. In 1746, most of the island was burned in reprisals for the failed Jacobite rebellion, but in June 1854, the village was emptied in a single day by the owner of the island, George Rainy, the merchant son of a church minister, who wanted the land for sheep. The uprooted people ended up in Australia, and their home remains a deserted ruin to this day. Hallaig is the saddest place I have ever visited. It's not just me. I later read the heart-breaking poem about it written by the great Gaelic poet Sorley Maclean, and translated into English by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who described Hallaig as 'a place that haunted me'. The grief of a lost people somehow lingers there.

I've felt a similar sense of profound inner disturbance visiting World War I battlefields in Flanders. My grandfather fought there and I've seen the massive memorial at Tyne Cot Cemetery listing the names of 300 of his regimental comrades who never came back. In just one afternoon, in an area where reminders of the trauma of a century ago can be seen everywhere, I had the uncanny and deeply distressing sensation that I was actually walking on crushed bones, and of feeling what the Bible describes as violently shed blood 'crying out from the ground' (Genesis 4:10). I was conscious even then, despite open borders, of how deeply divided Europe still was, how old wounds were still open and old hatreds still alive. How much more so now?

I suspect many of us may have felt things like this at different times, but not been sure what to make of them. We know that places are important in the Bible: Jesus and others deliberately went and prayed in deserts and on mountains, but there has not been much reflection on why they are important. American writer Belden Lane has explored the healing power of wilderness⁴² and in the Community of Aidan and Hilda we know that there is something very special about Holy Island, where people seem simply to encounter God in unexpected ways. The Old Testament speaks of

the importance of land, which can become cursed and unproductive as a result of human sinfulness (Genesis 3:17–19), and God also promises that when his people turn to him he will ‘heal their land’ (2 Chronicles 7:14) and make it fertile again. In the New Testament, talk of the land is broadened out to embrace the whole earth and so these promises of healing can also be expanded.⁴³

Healing of places can be as simple as responding to the intuitions we have when we are there. If it is a good place, then we could pray a blessing upon it (see Deuteronomy 26:15 as an example). If we sense something hurt, broken, or disturbing in a place then we could ask God to bring healing there, following the example in 2 Chronicles 7. Sometimes we also need to be the answer to our own prayers. Whether a place is literally polluted or littered, or whether it is home to a dysfunctional, damaged and damaging community, there may well be all sorts of practical things we can do to make it cleaner and better. There is also a much deeper dimension in respect of how the past history of a place can affect what is going on now. As you might expect, there are a variety of understandings of how this happens and what we can do about it, but the work and writings of Russ Parker, a member of our Community and also International Ambassador of the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation, offer a good place to start.⁴⁴ For many of us, the first personal application of this part of the Way of Life may be simply to begin learning more about the spirituality of places.

Healing of relationships

This is another area in which different parts of the Way of Life flow into one another. What has already been said about forgiveness and reconciliation in the chapter about living simply all applies here. Here is also the place to remember that Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ (Matthew 5:9). An important way of showing love for others is being prepared to step in and defuse arguments and conflicts between them. Christians are as capable of getting angry as

anyone else, sometimes more so because too many of us refuse to be honest about what we are really feeling, and bottle up our emotions until they explode all over someone else. I have sometimes seen a room full of people sitting in appalled silence as two people shout at each other when if just a couple of them had called for calm it would have taken the heat out of the situation much more quickly.

A final word on forgiveness and reconciliation concerns situations in which any kind of abuse is taking place. As I explained previously, forgiveness is primarily about us and our feelings, whereas reconciliation is about a relationship with someone else. Neither of these things mean that we should tolerate or cover up abusive behaviour. Allowing an abuser to continue to abuse is not loving towards them because they never have to confront their behaviour, and may endanger us if we do not seek protection. Jesus could be very confrontational when someone else's well-being was threatened (e.g. John 7:53–8:11).

Healing of ourselves

Healing starts with us. For all that God calls us into his great mission to heal the world, his greatest desire for each of us is that we are remade in the image of Christ. It's true that we are now defined by the cross and resurrection and not by our past. It is true that in Christ each of us is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), but just like the rest of creation we still live between the now and the not yet. As John puts it, 'We are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this; when he is revealed, we will be like him' (1 John 3:2–3). We are all shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by our experiences in life, and coming to faith in Christ does not automatically erase the past even though it does change our relationship to it. We will all have learned ways of thinking, feeling and acting which are not what Jesus would do. Many of us will also have had painful, even traumatic, experiences which have left us inwardly damaged. When people hurt others, it's so often because

they themselves are hurting. One of the challenges of this Way of Life is to face up honestly to our own need for healing, but we can do so safely because we are in the care of the greatest possible physician of spirit, mind and body. Sometimes prayer and self-help are enough. Sometimes, and a warning indicator is when we see that our reaction to a situation has become more of a problem than the situation itself, we may need the help of a counsellor or psychotherapist.

Too often we have been conditioned into thinking it's weak to ask for help, or that we are not trusting God enough if we need someone else to help us. Here's something I found helpful. We often think of military special forces as being incredibly tough and self-sufficient, pressing on at all costs, and tolerating no weakness. I'm told that in small patrols, if one member is in difficulty, they are trained to tell the others immediately so that the team can help each other before it becomes a dangerous crisis. God wants to heal us. He has given us other people who can help us if we need them. The result of our own healing is greater empathy for others and an increased capacity to share in God's work of healing.