WORKING PAPER 009

The Healing Hand Revisited

Sidney Weltmer, Laying on of Hands, and the Search for a Measurable Mechanism of Healing

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Independent working paper. This paper presents developing theological propositions, historical inquiry, research questions, and interdisciplinary hypotheses. It has not undergone peer review.

Abstract

In 1897, Sidney Abram Weltmer founded a healing school in Nevada, Missouri, built around a question that still fascinates me more than a century later: Can one human being participate in the healing of another through the laying on of hands? Weltmer combined touch, suggestion, expectation, prayer, and what he called magnetic healing. His claims were ambitious, and the historical record does not give us the kind of controlled evidence we would need today to say that a healing force actually passed from one person's hands into another person's body. But I do not think that means the question should have died with his era. Christian Scripture gives us an even older reason to ask it. Jesus repeatedly touched the sick. Paul prayed and laid hands on the sick. Mark 16:18 says believers will "lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." What if laying on of hands is more than a symbol? What, if anything, happens between two human beings during intentional healing? Today we can measure brain activity, heart-rate variability, nervous-system responses, hormones, temperature, electrical activity, electromagnetic fields, and even two brains at the same time. This paper asks whether we can use those tools to reopen an old question without deciding the answer in advance. Maybe the effect is expectation. Maybe it is touch. Maybe two nervous systems become synchronized. Maybe imagination and belief interact between healer and recipient. Maybe there is a measurable physical signal. And within a Christian framework, maybe the hand is not the source at all, but a point of contact through which God heals. These possibilities do not have to be collapsed into one explanation. We can begin separating them and asking better questions.

Author's Note

This paper belongs to a larger question I keep returning to: What have we stopped investigating simply because the language surrounding it became unfashionable? I am interested in the places where psychology, neuroscience, the body, Christian theology, and experiences of healing seem to touch one another - especially when an older question may now be measurable in ways it was not before.

That is what drew me to Sidney Weltmer. I am not interested in treating every healing story from his institute as verified fact. I am interested in the question he was willing to ask. Weltmer believed healing through the hand could be learned, practiced, observed, and improved. He did not have EEG, fNIRS, heart-rate variability monitors, thermal imaging, sensitive electromagnetic instruments, or modern controlled trial designs. We do. So if something measurable really does

happen between two people during intentional laying on of hands, we are in a much better position to look for it.

A Healing Question We Left Behind

Sidney Abram Weltmer (1858-1930) was a preacher, teacher, author, and healing practitioner. Historical records from the State Historical Society of Missouri show that he founded the American School of Magnetic Healing in Nevada, Missouri, in 1897. His work involved laying on of hands together with suggestion, and the school later became the Weltmer Institute of Suggestive Therapeutics.

In his 1922 book The Healing Hand, Weltmer described a three-part method involving suggestion through the hand, suggestion through spoken and written words, and what he called telepathy. He wrote about prayer, thought, consciousness, magnetism, nerve centers, suggestion, and the mental condition of both the healer and the person receiving healing. His vocabulary belongs to another era, but underneath it I hear questions that still sound surprisingly current: Can one person's internal state affect another person's body? Does expectation matter? Does touch matter? Does the healer's mental image matter? Is there something physically measurable moving between them?

The important historical fact is not that Weltmer proved his theory. He did not leave us modern controlled evidence capable of doing that. The important fact is that people built an institution around this question, practiced it, taught it, reported results, and tried to understand how it worked. The conversation did not necessarily end because the question was answered. In many ways, science changed its categories and the question moved to the margins. I want to bring it back.

The Biblical Question: What Happens When We Lay Hands on the Sick?

My interest in this is not based on Weltmer alone. Scripture repeatedly places hands, touch, prayer, and the body inside stories of healing. Mark 16:18 says believers "will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover" (NKJV). There is an important textual discussion around the longer ending of Mark, and I do not want to hide that. Many textual scholars believe Mark 16:9-20 was not part of the earliest recoverable form of the Gospel, while others defend its antiquity and authenticity.

But laying on of hands does not stand or fall on that verse. Luke 4:40 describes Jesus laying His hands on the sick and healing them. Acts 28:8 describes Paul praying, laying his hands on Publius's father, and healing him. James 5 places prayer for the sick within an embodied community and includes anointing with oil. Biblical healing is spiritual, but it is not strangely detached from the body. There are hands. There is touch. There are spoken words. There is oil. There are people physically present with one another.

That leaves me with a deceptively simple question: What if laying on of hands is not merely symbolic? If Scripture repeatedly describes an embodied act alongside healing, what happens in the body when that act occurs?

Can Human Hands Actually Facilitate Healing?

I want to state the question plainly: Under particular conditions, can one human being facilitate measurable healing in another person through intentional touch or laying on of hands? And if the answer is yes, what is actually producing the effect?

We already know that touch is not biologically meaningless. Research has examined how human touch and interpersonal interaction relate to stress hormones, autonomic regulation, pain, emotion, and social neurobiology. A 2019 review identified dozens of studies examining neurophysiological effects of touch and gaze. More recently, hyperscanning research has allowed scientists to measure two brains at the same time during interaction. Studies have found interpersonal neural synchronization - measurable coordination between people's neural activity - during certain kinds of social interaction. That does not prove that laying on of hands heals disease. But it tells us something important: two people in relationship are not necessarily functioning as two completely isolated biological systems.

That opens the door to a better question than "Is healing energy real?" We can ask what changes in the practitioner, what changes in the recipient, whether those changes become coordinated, and whether that coordination predicts an outcome.

We Need to Separate the Possibilities

One reason this subject becomes difficult is that very different explanations are often thrown into the same bucket. If someone feels better after being prayed for and touched, one person may call it divine healing and another may call it placebo. But both answers can be too fast. We need to separate the pieces.

One possibility is expectation: the recipient believes healing will happen, and that expectation changes pain, stress, attention, perception, or physiology. Another is ordinary therapeutic touch: warmth, pressure, safety, attention, and connection affect the nervous system. Another is interpersonal synchronization: the practitioner and recipient begin to coordinate physiologically or neurologically in ways that influence the encounter.

Then there is the question of imagination. What if the practitioner is holding a vivid internal picture of the person as healed, restored, calm, moving freely, or whole? What if the recipient is simultaneously receptive and expectant? Could those internal states become part of a measurable two-person system? This connects directly to my broader proposition that imagination may function as a kind of technology - an internal representational system capable of producing downstream effects in emotion, physiology, attention, and behavior.

There is also a direct physical-transfer hypothesis. The human body is bioelectrical. The heart, brain, nerves, and muscles all involve electrical activity, and the body produces weak electromagnetic fields. But we do not currently have established evidence that a healer intentionally sends a disease-healing electrical impulse through the hands. That distinction matters. It is not an established fact. It is a testable question.

And finally, within Christian theology, there is another possibility altogether: perhaps the practitioner is not the source of healing. Perhaps the hand is an embodied point of contact while

the source is God. Science may be able to measure what happens in the two bodies without being able to put God inside an experimental instrument. That does not make measurement useless. It simply means mechanism and ultimate source are not automatically the same question.

If Something Passes Through the Hand, Can We Measure It?

This is where I think modern technology makes the old healing-hand question especially interesting. If something physically measurable changes at the practitioner's hand during intentional healing, we should be able to look for a signature. Does electrical activity change? Does temperature change? Is there a detectable electromagnetic pattern? Does anything differ from ordinary touch, sham healing, or simply resting a hand on another person without healing intention?

And timing matters. If a signal changes in the practitioner's body first, followed by a predictable change in the recipient, that would be more interesting than finding two unrelated changes after the fact. Researchers could also test what happens when contact is removed, distance is introduced, or physical conditions such as insulation or grounding are changed. If a proposed mechanism is genuinely electrical or electromagnetic, manipulating the physical pathway should matter in some reproducible way.

If no such signal appears but recipients still show measurable improvement, the question does not have to end. It simply shifts. Maybe touch is working through the nervous system. Maybe expectation matters more than transfer. Maybe interpersonal synchrony is involved. Maybe the effect is not captured by the instrument we chose. A negative result should narrow the question, not force us into pretending we have answered every possible version of it.

What If Two People Become a Healing System?

Weltmer's focus on the mental condition of both healer and recipient is especially interesting to me because it turns healing into a two-person question. Suppose the practitioner forms a vivid internal representation of restoration while the recipient is attentive, expectant, and physically connected through touch. What happens between them?

We do not have to describe this vaguely. We can measure both people at once. EEG or fNIRS could look at neural activity. ECG and heart-rate variability could track autonomic changes. Respiration, electrodermal activity, skin temperature, muscle activity, and subjective imagery could be recorded at the same time. We could ask whether the two people become more synchronized during healing intention than during ordinary touch. We could ask whether stronger synchrony predicts greater improvement. We could ask whether the practitioner's imagery vividness matters.

That question fascinates me: Does what one person is holding internally become measurable in the shared system between two people? Weltmer called part of his method "suggestion through the hand." Maybe that phrase bundled together several processes because he did not have the tools to separate them. We do.

How I Would Begin Studying It

I would not begin by trying to prove miraculous cures. I would begin with something measurable, ethical, and controlled: experimentally induced pain, short-term stress reactivity, or another outcome researchers can safely observe in a laboratory.

Participants could be randomly assigned to several conditions: intentional laying on of hands by an experienced practitioner; identical touch without healing intention; a sham practitioner presented with the same healing framing; healing intention without physical contact; an expectancy condition without practitioner healing intention; and a neutral control. Before the encounter, we would measure what recipients expect to happen. We would also measure the practitioner's expectation and the vividness of any healing imagery.

During the encounter, we could record EEG or fNIRS from both people, heart-rate variability, respiration, electrodermal activity, temperature, muscle activity, and symptom or pain ratings. Depending on the question, endocrine or inflammatory markers could be added. Sensitive electromagnetic instruments could specifically test the physical-transfer hypothesis.

Then I would want to know more than whether someone said, "I feel better." Which condition produced the change? When did it begin? Did it exceed a control condition in which expectation was similar? Did the practitioner's and recipient's nervous systems become more synchronized? Did a measurable signal precede the recipient's change? Those are the questions that begin moving the conversation from testimony alone toward testable mechanism.

How Would We Know It Was More Than Placebo?

Placebo is not a meaningless explanation. Expectation itself can produce real biological effects. But if we want to know whether something else is happening, the study has to be designed so the explanations can be pulled apart.

If people improve whenever they believe they are receiving healing, regardless of who touches them or what the practitioner is doing, expectation becomes a strong explanation. If experienced practitioners produce greater effects than expectancy-matched sham practitioners while recipients cannot tell which condition they received, then recipient expectation alone is no longer enough to explain the difference. If neural or autonomic synchrony predicts improvement even after expectancy is accounted for, synchrony becomes more interesting. If a physical signal reliably appears in the practitioner, comes before a recipient response, predicts the outcome, and can be altered experimentally, then a physical-transfer mechanism becomes more plausible.

This is why I do not think the right question is simply "healing or placebo?" The better question is: What parts of the encounter are actually carrying the effect?

What Science Can Measure - and What It Cannot

If I begin from the Christian belief that God heals, I still do not have to be afraid of mechanism. Discovering that touch changes the nervous system would not tell me that God is absent. Discovering interpersonal neural synchrony would not tell me that prayer is merely biology.

And discovering an expectancy effect would not automatically make the entire encounter imaginary. Human beings are embodied. If something affects us, I would expect some part of that effect to become visible in the body.

Theology asks whether God has given human beings an embodied role in ministering healing. Science asks what reliably happens when people engage in that practice. Those questions can sit beside one another without one pretending to be the other.

Why Bring Weltmer Back Into the Conversation?

Weltmer interests me because he stood inside a question that modern disciplines later separated into different rooms. He was talking about the hand and the body, but also the mind. He was talking about suggestion, but also prayer. He was interested in expectation, thought, relationship, and healing at the same time.

Some of his explanations may fail under modern testing. Some may turn out to describe ordinary mechanisms in old language. Some effects may be explained almost entirely by expectation or touch. And it is possible that careful measurement could leave us with findings that are harder to explain. I do not want to canonize Weltmer's conclusions. I want to recover the courage of the question and give it better tools.

Primary Research Questions

1. Does intentional laying on of hands produce measurable effects beyond ordinary touch and expectancy-matched placebo?

2. What changes in the recipient - pain, stress physiology, autonomic regulation, brain activity, hormones, immune markers, or functioning - during and after intentional healing?

3. Do experienced healing practitioners produce different effects from untrained people when touch, time, attention, and recipient expectation are held as constant as possible?

4. Does healing intention change anything measurable at the practitioner's hands, including electrical, electromagnetic, or thermal activity?

5. If a physical signal appears, does it occur before and predict a change in the recipient?

6. Do the practitioner and recipient become more neurologically or physiologically synchronized during intentional healing than during control conditions?

7. Does that synchrony predict improvement even after recipient expectation is taken into account?

8. Does the practitioner's internal image or expectation of healing predict synchrony or outcome?

9. Does anything important change when physical contact is removed but healing intention remains?

10. If a physical-transfer mechanism is proposed, can the effect be changed by manipulating the physical pathway?

11. How do we distinguish the effects of touch, expectation, relationship, imagery, prayer, practitioner intention, and any measurable physical transfer?

12. If ordinary biological mechanisms are found, how should Christian theology understand them within the practice of laying on of hands?

The Question I Am Carrying Forward

Sidney Weltmer did not leave us proof that the human hand transmits a healing force. What he left us was a question. Scripture leaves me with a related question that is even harder to ignore: What does it mean, in an embodied human being, to lay hands on the sick and see them recover?

A century after The Healing Hand, we can ask that question with tools Weltmer could not have imagined. We can separate touch from intention, expectation from practitioner effects, synchrony from placebo, and physical transfer from metaphor. We can watch two nervous systems at the same time. We can ask whether imagination remains private or becomes part of a measurable interpersonal process.

Maybe the healing hand will eventually be explained through mechanisms already emerging in social neuroscience. Maybe some claims will not survive careful testing. Maybe we will find effects that are real but ordinary. Maybe something will remain that our current explanations do not fully account for.

But I do not think the question itself is too strange to investigate anymore. The question I want to carry forward is this: Do human beings possess an embodied capacity to facilitate healing through the laying on of hands, and if they do, what exactly happens between the person who lays on the hand and the person who receives it - physically, neurologically, psychologically, relationally, and spiritually?

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