

Prayer Cloths: Superstitious or Spiritual?

By
D. Patrick Ramsey

I once received in the mail from a church a letter and a prayer cloth (a small piece of ribbon with Acts 19:11-12 inscribed on it). The letter informed me that this cloth had been "prayed over by prayer warriors" and that they were "believing God for His anointing to reside with this prayer cloth". I was encouraged to extend my faith and use this prayer as a point of faith to believe for my healing or deliverance, or for that of a loved one. They suggested that it could be placed in someone's vehicle, under a mattress or in the opening of a wall of a building.

My initial reaction upon reading this letter was that this is superstition. How could they think that their prayers could cause the power of God to dwell with a ribbon? And that one could tap into this power and have it heal whomever by simply believing in God and placing the ribbon in the appropriate place? This is superstition in the name of Christ!

It is all too possible that my initial reaction was well off the mark and the letter did seek to provide a biblical argument for its use of the prayer cloth. So like a good Berean (Acts 17:11), I will examine this letter in the light of Scripture to see if it is true or not.

The letter appealed to Acts 19:11-12 which says, "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". The letter then said, "I believe that the God who never changes wants to do the same thing still today".

In response, let me begin by pinpointing the precise issue we need to address. It is not a matter of whether we believe or don't believe that God desires to use prayer cloths. Our personal beliefs about God's wishes are irrelevant. The fact that I believe something does not make it true. I may believe in Santa Claus but that does not make him true. So the truth that many churches believe that God uses prayer cloths does not mean that He does. Also, the issue is not about God's ability to heal people through the use of prayer cloths. No true Christian would dispute that He could. The question we need to ask is this: "Does the Bible tell us that God will use prayer cloths to heal people today?"

The letter's answer to this question can be stated thus: Acts 19 tells us that God used cloths to heal people. God never changes. Therefore, God still wants to use cloths to heal people.

One problem with this answer is that it fails to properly distinguish between the unchangeable character of God from the acts of God in history. In other words, who God is must be distinguished from what God does.

God is righteous. That never changes. God's acts are always righteous. That never changes either. What can and does change are the *particular* acts. For example, a husband has an undying love for his wife, which he expresses in a multitude of ways. One expression may be in the form of a trip to Hawaii. Now that expression of an unchangeable love does not imply that

the husband will continually buy tickets to Hawaii! Similarly, the varied acts of God in history are all a reflection of his unchanging character but they do not imply that he must repeat them.

God once destroyed the world by a flood, parted the Red Sea, and forsook His only Son on the cross. These acts do not teach us that God still desires to destroy the world by a flood or part the Red Sea or forsake His Son. Likewise, the fact that God once used Paul's handkerchief to heal people does not imply He still desires to do the same today.

A second problem is that it assumes what God did through Paul, He will do through Christians. Paul was a Christian, but he was a unique Christian in that he was an Apostle. God wrote Scripture through Paul, but that does not mean that God will write Scripture through me. The miracles that Paul and the other Apostles performed were designed to testify that they had been sent from God to authoritatively and infallibly speak for Him (Heb. 2:3-4). Hence, Paul called them 'signs of an apostle' (2 Cor. 12:12). Thus, unless you claim to be an apostle, you cannot properly appeal to this text to support your claim to be able to do this miracle. And if someone does make such a claim we know he is lying because Paul said that he was the last apostle (1 Cor. 15:8).

Furthermore, one could not even use this text to say that the other apostles performed these miracles. This text simply recounts for us what God did through Paul while he was in Ephesus. There is nothing that suggests that we should regard this event as normative. Therefore, Acts 19:11-12 does not justify the use of prayer cloths. It doesn't even come close!

A third problem is that Luke describes the miracles that God worked through Paul in Ephesus as 'unusual' or 'extraordinary' (see verse 11). This would indicate that these particular miracles were not the normal ones he performed and thus not to be expected at other times.

The final problem that I will mention is that the use of prayer cloths today does not correspond to what happened in Acts 19:11-12. Here are some of the differences. First, the objects used. Acts 19 speaks of Paul's sweat cloth (the handkerchief) and the apron he wore while making tents. I was sent a small piece of ribbon not Paul's sweatband. Second, the role of prayer. In Acts 19 we are told that God worked these miracles by the hands of Paul. There is no mention of Paul praying with other people asking God to have His power reside with a cloth. Third, immediate healing. Acts 19 says that the handkerchiefs and aprons were brought to the sick and the diseases left them. If God is still working as He did in Acts 19 then I should be able to take this cloth to the hospital and heal people right now.

Consequently, the practice of prayer cloths cannot be supported by Acts 19:11-12; nor do I believe that it can be supported by any other passage. Lack of biblical support, however, is not the only serious problem. The common practice of prayer cloths turns the power and might of God into magic and superstition.

There was no inherent power in Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons. Acts 19:11-12 does not say that God's anointing resided with or in them. The same holds true for Moses' staff that was used to part the Red Sea and the mud Jesus used to heal a blind man. These material objects were

simply the means by which God demonstrated His mighty power. They did not contain God's power. To believe that they did or that they can today is to believe in superstition and magic.

Consider the following parallel example. With respect to the Lord's Supper, the Roman Catholic Church believes that when the priest says "*Hoc est corpus meum*", the bread changes into the body of Christ. Once this change takes place, the grace of God resides in the bread and he who eats automatically receives the grace and power of God. It is as if the priest performs an act of magic. (Interestingly, the phrase "hocus pocus" is derived from the aforementioned Latin phrase that the priest utters).

The Protestant Reformers rightly denounced the Roman Catholic mass as superstitious idolatry. And if the Reformers were alive today, I dare say they would place the same censure upon the use of prayer cloths. For there is no essential difference between these two practices. Both teach that man can cause God's power to reside in or with a physical object, which then is used to transfer that power to an individual. The only differences between them are superficial. Instead of bread, a cloth is used. Instead of "*Hoc est corpus meum*", prayer is used. Instead of eating, placement of the cloth is used.

Therefore, I must conclude that my initial reaction to the use of prayer cloths was correct. It is nothing but the practice of superstition in the name of Christ.