

Chapter 6 Christianity, Modern Medicine and the Whole Person

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Health is a complex concept which means optimal functioning of both body and mind. Today there is a great deal of emphasis on the body. We have body-building machines, jogging programs, health foods, glamour magazines and tennis camps. We try to retain our youth and beauty at considerable cost. Let us suppose in fantasy that we could provide ourselves with the perfect body: Elizabeth Taylor's eyes, Farrah Fawcett's hair, Jimmy Carter's teeth, Arnold Schwartzegger's muscles, Albert Einstein's brain—a perfect set of equipment. Yet if we had nothing to do and life had no meaning, that perfect body would be of little use. We might give our right arm to be happy. Mental, emotional and spiritual health is probably as important as, if not more important than, physical health. It is possible to have part of the body missing or defective and yet to function extremely well.

Health is also complicated because there are two ways of arriving at health: one is prevention of disease, or

what is called preventive medicine. The other is intervention with disease, or what is called therapeutic medicine. There is a tension in our country between the two kinds of medicine, with the balance currently in favor of therapeutic medicine. One-hundred-sixty billion dollars in 1976 was spent on medical care. It is not certain how all those funds were allocated, but of federal funds which were spent for health in that year, 92 per cent was used for the treatment of the sick, 5 per cent was used for environmental protection, 3 per cent was used for research and 1 per cent was spent on problems of lifestyle.¹ Therapeutic medicine is more powerful politically than preventive medicine because sick people have many more pressing problems than well people. And hospitals, drug and supply houses, electronics companies and doctors make money from sick people. It is possible to pay \$50,000 or even more for being sick; most people will not pay that to stay well.

Yet there is compelling evidence that preventive medicine is better than therapeutic medicine. It is much less expensive, and logically it is better to stay healthy than to try to fix the damages. In this talk I will attempt to explore the relationship between preventive medicine and therapeutic medicine in the biblical context and in our modern world, and to correlate those two medical models with Christian principles.

A Christian View of Health

First let us look at the Christian perspective on health. A Christian view of health begins with the origin of disease. The Old Testament teaches that man and woman were created physically perfect, highly intelligent and able to walk with God as one walks with a friend. Man and woman were offered, because they had free will, the option of rejecting fellowship with God. Incredibly, they aligned themselves against God, exposing themselves to pain and death and carrying the rest of the creation into grief, illness and

futility. Consequently, sickness as we know it is due in general to humanity's rebellion against God. Sometimes, in addition, sickness is due to specific errors of individuals themselves. I will not imply that all disease is due to a person's wrongdoing but rather that much illness is due to personal errors and wrong choices and that we must learn how to prevent those kinds of illnesses.

Old Testament Medicine

Old Testament medicine is almost entirely preventive. There is essentially no direction for treatment of disease in the Old Testament (actually, one poultice was recommended) but much direction was given about prevention of disease. The Old Testament Law contained detailed rules about food, sanitation, sexual conduct and work. For example, the kinds of wild and domestic animals, birds and fish that could be eaten were specified. Sanitation rules prescribed the isolation of persons in contact with dead animals or dead people, the isolation of women after childbirth and soldiers after battle, and the disposal of wastes. The concept of quarantine comes from those sanitary laws. Rules for sexual conduct forbade adultery, homosexuality, prostitution and incest. The main rule about work was a required rest of one day in seven. All of those regulations can be shown to have merit in preventing disease or illness. But the most important regulation of all was to love God and keep his commandments, not only laws designed for the maintenance of health, but all of the laws, some of which pertained to religious ceremonies and others which specified proper treatment of neighbors, strangers and the poor. It is clear from the Old Testament record that both Israel's physical health and its national prosperity depended on obedience to God (Deut. 28:1-24). It is worth quoting at length.

And if you obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command

you this day, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways. The LORD will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you undertake; and he will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you. The LORD will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and walk in his ways. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD; and they shall be afraid of you. And the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your ground, within the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. The LORD will open to you his good treasury the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the LORD will make you the head, and not the tail; and you shall tend upward only, and not downward; if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God

or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Cursed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

The LORD will send upon you curses, confusion, and frustration, in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your doings, because you have forsaken me. The LORD will make the pestilence cleave to you until he has consumed you off the land which you are entering to take possession of it. The LORD will smite you with consumption, and with fever, inflammation, and fiery heat, and with drought, and with blasting, and with mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish. And the heavens over your head shall be brass, and the earth under you shall be iron. The LORD will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down upon you until you are destroyed.

New Testament Medicine

When we turn to the New Testament, we find confirmation of Old Testament preventive-medicine teachings, but the therapeutic model is definitely in the foreground. Perhaps that is an implicit criticism of Israel's failure to obey the Law. Jesus healed people with all kinds of disease: epilepsy, blindness, deafness, atrophy of the arm, intractable menstrual bleeding, edema, paralysis and leprosy. On three occasions he raised dead people to life. The healings were in many instances accompanied by faith in Christ. Faith-healing in Christ's day was different from the popular understanding of that phenomenon today. Faith-healing

was a reaching out to Christ for a power that he possessed. It was not based on some inward power of the sick person. Healing was accompanied by a faith in Christ so that a change in the person's lifestyle accompanied the healing. Faith was reconciliation with God and was not "faith in faith."

Jesus' acts of healing proclaimed the kingdom of God as an invasion of the world and demonstrated his credentials as the Son of God. None of Jesus' disciples had the degree of healing power that he exhibited. He was uniquely the great physician.

Any fair evaluation of the record shows that Jesus' healings were not hypnotic or psychosomatic. One cannot consider congenital blindness psychosomatic. One cannot heal leprosy by hypnosis. One cannot raise a child from the dead by the power of suggestion.

One might inquire why Jesus' disciples could heal then, when they cannot heal now. It is not entirely correct to say that they cannot heal now. Some people are healed without adequate explanation today. And Christians affirm that all healing, like all life, is from God. Although there is a new interest in faith-healing, we do not see anything like the success of the first-century Christians. Many biblical scholars believe that, from the biblical record, miracles may not be expected on any continuing basis. "Miraculous events" related to health and healing are clustered around three periods in history: the time of the exodus of Israel from Egypt around 1450 B.C.; the period around 850 B.C. when Elijah and Elisha were prophets in Israel; and during and shortly after the life of Christ. All three periods were times of spiritual crisis.

A most important aspect of Jesus' healing ministry in addition to his gifts of physical healing was the work of emotional and spiritual healing. We see that in Matthew 6:25-34 as well as throughout the Gospels.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your

body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

But Jesus did not merely talk about anxiety, he accomplished an action that revolutionizes our concept of death and our anxiety about death. In Jesus' death and resurrection we find the proof of life after death which he demonstrated in himself and promised to those who have faith in him. The demonstration of life after death and the promise of his continuing fellowship have the potential to relieve the greatest fear of modern men and women, the fear of nonbeing. At the center of anxiety is the fear of death, and the core of that fear is the fear of nonbeing. As the writer of Hebrews says, he came to "deliver those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage" (2:14-15).

Medicine: Middle Ages to the Present

In the centuries after the death of Christ, the truth of

Christ's life and work and the lessons of Old Testament hygiene became confused. Preventive medicine disappeared. The Middle Ages endured widespread plagues. Treatments by physicians were sometimes ridiculous. A treatment for epilepsy was compounded of acid mixed with lime until it turned yellow then saturated with alcohol to which mistletoe, hearts of peonies, elk hoofs and a pulverized skull of an executed malefactor were added. Those ingredients were distilled to dryness, mixed with castor oil, elephant's lice, salt of peony, alcohol, oil of anise and so on. Surely such a medicine would give a person a seizure who had never had one before!

With the Renaissance, Reformation and rebirth of knowledge, simple observations led the way to the modern era of public health. Preventive medicine again became dominant. For example, in 1853 there was a severe outbreak of cholera in London. John Snow mapped the prevalence of cholera in various parts of London and found an eightfold greater infection rate in homes served by one water company compared with another. He reported that nature had devised an experiment "on the grandest scale in that no fewer than 500,000 people of both sexes, of every age and occupation, and of every rank and station from gentle folks down to the very poor were divided into two groups without their choice and in most cases without their knowledge, one group being supplied with water containing the sewage of London and amongst it whatever might have come from the cholera patients, the other group having water quite free from such impurities. To turn this grand experiment to account, all that was required was to learn the supply of water to each individual house where a fatal attack of cholera might occur." John Snow knew little bacteriology, but the history of medicine suggests that the plagues were controlled before either bacteriology developed as a science or antibiotic use came into existence.

A hundred years ago, William Osler listed the plagues that were coming under control during the nineteenth century: anthrax, leprosy, tuberculosis, typhoid, diphtheria, cholera, lockjaw, bubonic plague, yellow fever, smallpox, typhus, rabies, malaria. Those scourges that cost millions of lives are practically unknown to college students today, largely because of the successful application of preventive medicine. At the time those diseases came under control, treatment for them was not available. For example, death from tuberculosis began to decline in 1850, a hundred years before isoniazid and other antituberculous drugs were known. Mortality from scarlet fever, measles and whooping cough was also declining years before modern immunizations and antibiotics were available.

Control of infection has occurred because of simple measures such as isolation of infected persons, clean water, improved housing and nutrition. And we must mention soap and water to wash clothes and wash bodies. When Thomas a Becket was murdered in the Canterbury cathedral in 1170, the vermin crawling out of his clothing had the onlookers bursting out laughing amid their weeping. Six hundred years later, in 1746, George Washington wrote, "Kill no vermin as fleas, lice, ticks, etc., in the sight of others." Describing the education of a French princess in the seventeenth century, a court advisor said, "One had carefully taught the young princess that it was bad manners to scratch when one did it by habit and not by necessity and it was improper to take lice or fleas or other vermin by the neck to kill them in company except in the most intimate circles." A writer in 1804, describing the hot summers on the eastern seaboard, spoke of the vast numbers of Americans who passed through a long life "amidst all these heats, clothed in cloth, flannel, and black fur hats and lying on a featherbed at night drinking nothing but wine and port and eating strong meats three times a day and never allowing water to touch any part of them but their extremities

for a year together.”

But gradually people learned about the bath. On July 31, 1798, a prominent Philadelphia woman named Mrs. Drinker wrote in her diary, “Nancy pulled a string of the showerbath again this evening. She seems better reconciled to it. The water has stood some hours in the yard which alters the property some [i.e., makes it warmer] and she goes under the bath in a single gown and an oilcloth cap.” The following year, Mrs. Drinker herself finally took a bath: “Nancy came here this evening. She and self went into the showerbath. I bore it better than I expected not having been wet all over at once for 28 years past.”²

Thanks to clean water and, recently, somewhat cleaner air, personal hygiene, good diet, immunization, isolation from infectious agents, sewage and garbage disposal, we enjoy a longer, healthier life than any people in history. The preventive medicine model has been very effective. Smallpox may have been eradicated in the late 1970s.

Diseases of Lifestyle

But preventive medicine has exposed a new set of diseases that are called the diseases of lifestyle. In some hospitals, two-thirds of the patients can be found suffering from diseases of lifestyle. The diseases of lifestyle are all preventable, but they are the result of habits too pleasurable or too difficult to break. All will agree that clean water, good food, pleasant-smelling streets and good housing are desirable. Not all agree that abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, drugs, promiscuous indulgence in sex, overeating and driving fast vehicles are desirable. Abuse of alcohol has led to significant disability in 5 per cent of Americans, and in some subsets of the population 50 per cent of the people are partially or seriously disabled by alcohol. Misuse of alcohol leads to brain damage, ruined livers, broken marriages and premature death. Newspaper reports suggest that in 50 per cent of automobile accidents and 30 per cent

of snowmobile accidents alcohol is a factor. People who smoke cigarettes have a death rate 70-120 per cent higher than control groups. Tobacco smoking leads to destroyed lungs and cancer of lip, tongue, larynx, lung and perhaps pancreas. Misuse of food leads to diabetes, shortened life span and a significant risk for surgery and accidents. Misuse of sex is reported to lead to sterility for 50,000 American women a year. Gonorrhea is completely out of control in this country. Syphilis is not under control. The “sexual revolution” has added to the original five venereal diseases at least ten others. Although newspaper reports pay a great deal of attention to airplane disasters, the number of people who die on the highways as a result of automobile accidents generates little concern. More Americans were killed by automobiles during the period of the Vietnam war than died in combat. And all of these diseases of lifestyle are preventable—but physicians are helpless to help people who will not and cannot stop doing the things that are killing them. Consequently, therapeutic medicine is again in the foreground.

Man: Machine or Whole Person

As therapeutic medicine reasserts itself, it fosters a dissociation between the person and the illness. The patient is frequently treated like a mechanical device such as an automobile that needs a fender straightened, a carburetor adjusted, a new set of windshield wipers or some higher octane gasoline. The sick person usually encourages that approach. One woman who came to the emergency room repeatedly with razor slashes on her face and body said: “I got my way of living and you got yours. Just sew me up and let me go.” The fact that there is a “driver” in the human “machine” is usually ignored, yet frequently it is the “driver” rather than his or her “machine” that is at fault. It seems to me to be pointless to keep unbending the fenders when plainly the driver is unwilling or unable to steer properly.

How are people to prevent the diseases of lifestyle? Secular humanism has one suggestion: people need education. The Christian challenges secular humanism by asserting that people are not fully able to respond to education. They are slaves to passions and need to be liberated by the Spirit of God. The two hypotheses can be tested on a population of well-educated people—physicians and nurses in the United States. If the humanist's optimistic view of man is correct, we should find that all physicians and nurses abstain from alcohol, tobacco, drugs, overindulgence in food and promiscuous sex and the use of fast vehicles. The data are to the contrary. There is a higher incidence of alcoholism and drug abuse among physicians than in the normal population. Most physicians have given up smoking but most nurses have picked up where the physicians left off. And one could go on to mention the other diseases as well.

A professor of psychiatry once said that it was an article of faith with him that if you tell people what is right they will do it. A brash sophomore in the back row piped up and said, "If that were true, no doctors would smoke cigarettes." The truth is that people live by what they love, not by what they know.

But even if telling people what is right were acceptable, some would disagree about what is correct advice. Is it right to tell a patient to stop drinking because he has cirrhosis? My colleagues say yes. Is it right to tell a patient to stop being promiscuous because he has gonorrhoea? My colleagues say no.

The healing of the person (in contrast to healing the disease) is outside the reach of the current medical model. Pills may allay your anxiety. Psychiatry can give you a better opinion of yourself. Physical therapy may restore your ability to work. But medicine cannot give you a reason for your existence, purge away your guilt, remove your existential dread of death or turn you away from destructive habits.

In response to this defect in the medical model, we now have a bewildering array of quasi-medical attempts to deal with the whole person. They include hypnosis, acupuncture, mind-control, meditation, rolfing, bio-feedback and scientology, mixed with Taoism, Sufism and other sorts of mystical religions. The latest word is that medicine and religion are going to have a love affair. Beyond secular humanism, I see medicine threatened by all sorts of loose-thinking psychics, Shamans, spiritualists and mystics pushing what is called holistic medicine. Their assumption is that you are a part of God and that, by mobilizing the spiritual power within you, you can get well and stay well.

The assumption that we are a part of God is incorrect. God is completely different and separate from us. We are normally alienated from him. We come into our best state of spiritual and mental health when we are reconciled to him and then his Spirit indwells us. He has laid out the conditions for our reconciliation in great detail. We are reconciled to God only through the death of his Son.

Notes

¹Anne Sommers, letter to the editor, *New England Journal of Medicine* (1978), p. 746.

²The quotations from George Washington and other figures from history are taken from Harold D. Eberlein, "When Society First Took a Bath," *Sickness and Health in America*, eds. J. W. Leavitt and R. L. Numbers (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 331-41.

Recommended Reading

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Leavitt, J. W. and R. L. Numbers, eds. *Sickness and Health in America*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

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Chapter 7 And Then . . .

Peter Wilkes

In the preceding pages five scholars have argued the intellectual case for Christianity. In a university setting that is all one might expect. Universities are, after all, cerebral places. Such a purely intellectual approach, however, does scant justice to the wholeness of Christianity.

It has been the speakers' contention that the secular outlook offers an inadequate approach to human nature. Yet its inadequacy is most clearly demonstrated not in the lecture room but in life itself.

At the end of the day, scientists, economists, physicians and archaeologists go home to assume roles as parents and husbands or wives. It is in such practical areas of relationships where the alienation that is the logical consequence of secular humanism most often reveals itself. The breakdown may seem particularly poignant when a person is undeniably competent in some professional or intellectual realm.