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Presentation:

**A THEOLOGY OF SICKNESS**

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There are a myriad of beliefs that individuals maintain regarding sickness that have profound influence on their actions, behaviors, and even their prognosis when impacted by sickness. Some of these beliefs are helpful and some are quite adverse as the individual makes decisions with respect to medical treatment, prescriptions and medical advice. For some people, their beliefs regarding sickness are grounded in a particular theology. Others may ground their beliefs in a superstition, a particular cultural theory, the teachings of science, or a combination of these.

Regardless of the basis or the foundation for the beliefs one holds, it seems that in many instances there is a theological or spiritual perspective that ultimately finds its way into the considerations and behaviors of people, especially those who are chronically or terminally ill. There are also often times when this perspective becomes part of the considerations of family members, friends and others as they suffer vicariously with the afflicted person, or as they anticipate their own probable encounter with chronic, terminal, or life-threatening illness.

Beliefs are beliefs, and all beliefs are true for those who hold them as long as they believe them. With respect to an individual's health care, however, a problem emerges when the beliefs of that person conflict with the advice and council of licensed medical professionals or the laws of the state.

There are many doctors who have earnestly tried to assist people afflicted with a sickness, but were rebuffed because that person, acting upon his or belief, determined that no such help was desirable or needed. I have heard firsthand more persons than I can recall say things like this when afflicted with chronic or terminal sickness:

- “There is nothing I can do because God is in control.”
- “This is my cross and I’ve just got to bear it.”
- “God is punishing me down here for my sins.”
- “The devil is after me.”
- “Well, it’s the Lord’s will, and God’s will must be done.”
- “This is just a trick of the devil, I am not really sick.”

- “God is going to heal me.”
- “I don’t need a doctor or medicine. God is in charge.”
- “If I will just be still, God will fight my battle.”
- “This is my test.”

Clearly, these expressions are the sincere testimonies of people’s faith in God and surrender to what is understood by them to be the deliberate and specific will of God, or an action by Satan, concerning them in particular. Beliefs such as these can be a possible source of confidence and peace within the afflicted person, while at the same time precluding that person from seeking and utilizing the full range of the services available to them through trained and licensed medical professionals.

It is not up to me or anyone else to suggest that any of the above beliefs are right or wrong because people have a right to their beliefs. Moreover, any attempt to disabuse a person of his or her beliefs is contingent upon mutual agreement regarding the standards and methodology upon which validation or invalidation is to occur. That is a difficult thing to accomplish.

Our task in this paper therefore, is not to prove anything, nor to validate or invalidate anyone’s beliefs. This paper simply offers to people a theological view regarding the origin, nature and purpose of sickness that will enable them to reflect on sickness in a way that they may consider it in a new light.

I reassert that people have the freedom and right to believe whatever they believe and that the content of this paper is not a criticism of anyone’s beliefs. It is an attempt, however, to briefly set forth some diverse theological views on sickness that are worthy of reflection and, I hope, of potentially great benefit to those who read this paper.

## **THE NEED FOR A PRAGMATIC THEOLOGICAL VIEW REGARDING SICKNESS**

Beliefs usually establish a worldview for individuals that enables them to cope with this thing we call life, and all of its issues and challenges. Beliefs are intended to allow individuals to survive and realize optimum wellbeing. Therefore, if what one believes does not increase the opportunity or possibility of survival and does not enhance or optimize the individual's sense of wellbeing, that belief, or belief system, needs to be revisited and reevaluated from time to time.

Let me say again that all beliefs are beliefs, and not facts, and all beliefs are equal with respect to their meaning for each individual concerned. However, not all beliefs are equal with respect to proximity to truth, or with respect to results and benefits. For example, a person whose house is on fire may believe that God will send rain to extinguish the fire, while another may hold the belief that it is better to thank God for the fire department while dialing 911. This is not to say that God cannot or will not send rain to extinguish a fire. I am sure that many people have seen this happen. But it is more likely that a larger number of people (including many who love and depend on God) have seen results from dialing 911 with greater frequency. Does this in any way invalidate one's belief in God to act meaningfully and productively on one's behalf? That does not seem to be the case at all. In fact, it should validate the witness of the author of one of the great hymns of the church which affirms that, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform."

I tend to look upon fire departments, doctors, hospitals, grocery stores, etc, as gifts from God to the family of humanity, even if they do not consider themselves to be so. These entities, which serve such a noble purpose in human affairs, simply could not be without the wisdom and the insight that God has revealed to human beings in the course of human history. Our acknowledgment of their worth and value and our use of them serve as recognition of these gifts of God and it is to God, not the entities themselves, to which we give praise.

## **A BRIEF OVERVIEW REGARDING SICKNESS AND SUFFERING AS VIEWED BY SOME WORLD RELIGIONS AND CULTURES**

Hinduism and Buddhism affirm the doctrine of reincarnation and both share the view that as we become attached to the material things of this world, we become ignorant regarding our real nature as Divine Beings. Hinduism also teaches that whatever we experience in this life, be it good or bad, is a consequence of our behavior and conduct in our previous life. The only way to overcome this condition is to recognize ourselves for what we really are, spiritual beings, not the individual independent physical distortion we think we are and conduct ourselves accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhism adds to this view that all suffering is essential to life and that all suffering, including sickness, is the result of our desire for the pleasures and things of this world. If we eliminate our desire to live our lives as individuals, we can overcome suffering.<sup>2</sup>

Islam teaches, in part, that life is a test and that the adversity we experience in life, including sickness, is a part of that test. Additionally, Islam teaches that God allows sickness and that every sickness has a cure. Allah is the ultimate healer, but Muslims are encouraged to seek treatment, especially from a Muslim physician who is obligated to put his practice in the service of Islam. Therefore, the relationship between a patient and a physician is considered to be a spiritual matter.<sup>3</sup>

The BAHA'I teachings hold that suffering is an inevitable consequence of our lives here on Earth. Some of it is caused by God, some by others, and some by us. The BAHA'I also teach

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<sup>1</sup> Hinduism and Christianity: How Does Hindu Teaching Compare to the Bible?

<http://www.gospelway.com/religiousgroups/hinduism.php> (October 21, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> Buddhism and Christianity: How Does Buddhist Teaching Compare to the Bible?

<http://www.gospelway.com/religiousgroups/buddhism.php> (October 21, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> The Role of a Muslim Doctor. <http://www.islam-usa.com/im5.html> (October 21, 2006)

that suffering is not only caused and allowed by God, but that suffering caused by God is intended to promote the spiritual welfare of human beings.<sup>4</sup>

Christian Science teaches that God did not create sickness or suffering and does not allow it to “really” exist. Sickness and suffering are considered illusions which can be halted, healed, or corrected through prayer. However, the practitioner of Christian Science must have faith in order to be healed of the illusion, and must also have an understanding of the nature of God and God’s laws. Christian Scientists do not encourage the use of the resources of the professional medical community.<sup>5</sup>

In some cultures, the practice of witchcraft and divination are mainline resources used to address sickness. For example, a “diviner” may proclaim that bones hold the answer to the cause and the cure of sickness and disease, and that through his “visionary” or “fortune-telling” power he or she can unlock the mysteries of the bones and reveal all that needs to be known to heal the sick.

In other cultures, witchcraft or magic is the source of sickness and the witch doctor possesses unique powers to treat all problems associated with it. Additionally, some cultures view sickness as a spiritual matter that can only be resolved by mediation with deceased ancestors through appropriate rituals.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> An Introduction to the BAHA’I Faith. <http://www.northill.demon.co.uk/bahai>. (October 21, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> The Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Scientist).

[http://www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/christian\\_science.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/christian_science.htm). (October 21, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Bringing the African Culture into the Church

<http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/tlhagale.htm> (October 21, 2006)

## THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN VIEW REGARDING SICKNESS

The Judeo-Christian view regarding sickness is derived in part from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the book of Genesis, verses 16 and 17. It is here God warned Adam that if he ate from the “tree of knowledge,” he would surely die. Both Eve and Adam disobeyed God (sinned), and were condemned to die. It is therefore inferred that because of their sin (original sin) that sickness, disease and suffering became a reality in the world.

Throughout the Old Testament, the evidence suggests there were many instances when sickness, disease and death were meted out as punishment by God because of His displeasure with certain individuals, communities, states and nations for whatever reason He determined. Throughout the years, this persuaded many people in the Jewish culture to believe that all sickness, suffering and disease were the consequences of something said, thought, or done that displeased God. However, the Old Testament eventually presents a character by the name of Job who was proclaimed by God to be the most righteous and faithful person on planet earth. Yet in this biblical narrative, Job’s children died, his great wealth became depleted and he ended up chronically ill without ever understanding why.

The whole point of highlighting God’s proclamation of the unblemished record of Job in the text was, and is, to make crystal clear that not all cases of sickness, disease, suffering, misfortune and death are the result of sin or punishment for wrong doing.<sup>7</sup>

In further support of the witness of the Book of Job, Jesus taught that God allows the sun to shine and the rain to fall on people who do good and those who do evil.<sup>8</sup> On the occasion of his ministry offered to a man born blind, Jesus explained to his disciples that no one in particular

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<sup>7</sup> Job 2:3 GNB

<sup>8</sup> Mt. 5:45 GNB



sinned to cause this man to be born blind. On the contrary, Jesus said his blindness represented an opportunity to demonstrate the power of God.<sup>9</sup>

Bishop J. C. Ryle of the Anglican Church proclaimed the following more than one hundred years ago:

Sickness is everywhere. In Europe, in Asia, in America; in hot countries and cold, in civilized nations and in savage tribes – men, women and children get sick and die. Sickness is found in all classes. Grace does not lift a believer above the reach of it. Riches will not buy exemption from it. Rank cannot prevent its assaults. Kings and their subjects, Presidents and their people, masters and servants, rich men and poor, educated and uneducated, teachers and students, doctors and patients, ministers and their congregations, all go down before the great foe. “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city.” (Proverbs 18:11) A man’s house is called his castle; but there are no doors and barricades which can keep out disease and death.<sup>10</sup>

One of the more compelling texts in support of the Christian view that sickness and death are not the result of a person’s particular sin can be found in the report concerning the sickness and death of Lazarus. The report establishes that Lazarus was a good person and was dearly loved by Jesus. Yet he got sick and died. According to the report, when Jesus reached his grave site, Jesus cried for a little while and then raised him from the dead.<sup>11</sup>

A cornerstone of Christian thought is that both suffering and death can serve a redemptive purpose. A positive benefit and much good for ourselves and for others can be derived from some suffering. Bishop J. C. Ryle offered the following view:

Sickness helps to soften men’s hearts and teach them wisdom. Sickness helps to level and humble us. Sickness helps to remind men of death. I believe in many minds, sickness is “God’s day of visitation,” the day He visits us, and that feelings are continually aroused on a sick bed which might, by God’s grace, result in salvation. I do not say that sickness bestows these benefits to everyone who is overcome with illness. Sadly I say nothing of the kind! Every year an innumerable number are overcome with illness, and restored to health, who evidently learn no lesson from their sick-beds, and return again to the world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jn. 9:1-3 GNB

<sup>10</sup> Sickness by J.C. Ryle. <http://biblebb.com/files/ryle/PRACT15.TXT> (October 21, 2006)

<sup>11</sup> Jn. 11:1-44 GNB

<sup>12</sup> Sickness by J.C. Ryle. <http://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/PRACT15.TXT> (October 21, 2006)

## A PERSONAL VIEW

My personal view regarding sickness and suffering is predicated upon my acceptance of the doctrine of **free will**. God's decision to make us free and morally responsible for our choices and behaviors necessitated a world of positives and negatives. If there were no positives and negatives or no choices upon which we are free to act, we would be mere puppets and God would be responsible for our actions since we would not have any choices or decision-making capability. However, God did make us free, and this necessitated some self-restraint of His power. In other words, God limited some power that He alone possesses so as not to become liable and accountable for the individual choices and decisions He freely allows us to make, including the freedom to reject God and to sin.

If this is, in fact, a free will environment, then righteousness must necessarily presuppose the possibility of unrighteousness, happiness must presuppose the possibility of sadness, life must presuppose the possibility of death, health must presuppose the possibility of sickness, good must presuppose the possibility of evil and so on. These things must be in this world where God made us free.

The question arises why God would make us free. My answer is simply that God loves us and desires to be loved by us. God desires our love more than our ceremonies, more than our sacrifices and more than our rituals. The great commandment admonishes us to love God with all our heart, but love is an entity that can only be realized and shared with God or others freely.

Love can be requested, or even commanded, but it cannot be forced, compelled, bought, stolen or taken. Love is an entity that can only be freely realized and freely shared. That is what makes love so special. We can be forced to obey a lot of things and to fulfill many expectations, but love is not one of them.

This is why we say that God did not cause evil, but rather that God allowed the possibility of evil to manifest itself. God does not cause suffering. God allows the possibility to manifest itself and we become subjected to the possibility of evil because it is necessary to the establishment and the realization of a free will environment.

Had God not made us free, everything, and I mean everything, would be perfectly fine except that we would not be free and this entity called love would be inconceivable. Additionally, had God not made us free, we would not be morally responsible for our thoughts, actions, choices or decisions. Had God not made us free, the notions of justice, compassion, forgiveness, character and integrity, to name a few, would be inconceivable.

Again, God does not cause sickness and suffering. Sickness, disease, death, accidents, disappointment, betrayal, health, healing, sadness, happiness, joy, friendship and all that we experience in this life are connected to the necessity of a free will environment. Not only sickness, but also all of the above and more are “equal opportunity visitors” into our lives from time to time.

Another component of my view regarding sickness is my awareness that God is the ultimate source of all healing and cures. Nevertheless, neither God nor Jesus ever said in the scriptures that healing could not be realized or facilitated through the efforts of others or through our own self-help initiatives.

Additionally, throughout the Bible, it is clear that God frequently used and still uses believers and nonbelievers as instruments through which people are helped and strengthened in some way. The Good Samaritan was not called a Christian or even a devout Jew.<sup>13</sup> Jesus did not condemn the woman with the issue of blood for seeking the assistance of physicians and others before she

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<sup>13</sup> Lk. 10:33 GNB

came to him.<sup>14</sup> God can use spit, mud, frogs, mules, ravens, broken pieces of a ship, blood, a cross or whatever pleases Him to bless, heal and help people.

God has given the gift of healing to many in the professional medical community and to some outside it. Our faith in God does not require that we close our minds or our hearts to others when the evidence substantially suggests that they are well suited to address our sickness and our need for healing.

We preach to people with powerful conviction that God will feed them if they are hungry, and God will. But God is not going to be upset with us if we tell them this, and also advise them to try to get a job. Someone once wisely said, “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.”

Faith does not demand the abandonment of common sense or a rejection of aid and assistance apart from God. It is important for us to do all we can to help others and ourselves by making use of available resources gifted and made possible by God to address our needs.

I do not know this to be a fact, but I suspect that most of the people in and around Judea who went to Jesus for help had already been seen and treated by someone else who also had a reputation for healing. However, Jesus did not condemn them, hold that against them, or refuse to help them. One man took his sick son to the disciples for healing before presenting him to Jesus and yet Jesus healed the son anyhow.<sup>15</sup>

Another point is that many of the people whom Jesus healed had no idea who he was or what powers he had before he healed them. It is also very important for us to remember that if or when Jesus inquired about their condition, they did not deny the reality of their sickness.

Unfortunately, there are still people in the community today who try to cope with sickness by denying its reality. It is my trust that we as preachers, along with physicians, will endeavor to

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<sup>14</sup> Mk. 5:24-34 GNB

<sup>15</sup> Mt. 17:14-18 GNB

inform and convince people of faith that faith does not require the abandonment or rejection of medical science and other resources. Before Jesus fed the hungry multitude of more than 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, the disciples told Jesus to send the people to the grocery stores and restaurants in the nearest village where they could purchase food.<sup>16</sup> That was not a rejection of faith in Jesus, but a normal and practical first response to the situation.

We must counsel people who try to cope with sickness through denial. We must make the effort to convince them it is neither logical nor Biblical to do so. There is nothing wrong with telling a doctor that one's body is under attack by sickness, just as it is not wrong to call the police when threatened or under attack by another person. Such responses are practical.

I affirm God's healing power and I preach it. I also affirm and preach that faith in God's ability to intervene regarding our sickness to effect healing and cures does not and should not preclude anyone from utilizing the gifts and abilities of trained physicians, quality medications and skillful surgeries when deemed appropriate or necessary. Our faith in God provides room to affirm that God has specially gifted some among us to be conduits through which healing and cures can flow and be realized by those who need it.

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<sup>16</sup> Mt. 14:13-18 GNB