

Pastor's Column

A Foundation for the Diaconal Role in Sickness

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People get sick. This has been true since Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken. For dust you are and to dust you will return." (Gen. 3:19)

Indeed we are fearfully and wonderfully made by God. (Ps. 139:14) We have a vast immune system, constantly vigilant against disease. There is a marvelous complexity that we are only beginning to understand. However, sinful man is open to a mighty array of diseases.

Christians are sinners, living in a sinful world, and they are not spared sickness. Barring Christ's return in their lifetime, Christians will also face death. Sickness and death are both a result of the curse, and therefore have an ethical dimension. God providentially superintends all health and sickness, forbidding us to view these as mechanical or impersonal cause and effect only.

The church has wide open doors to minister to its own membership as they face sickness or death.

Such a ministry, I believe, must begin with an awareness of God's sovereignty. When illness, particularly a serious one, strikes a family member, one of the first questions asked is, "Why me?" The answer to this question must often remain hidden in God's secret counsel.

The Christian can best prepare for sickness by being mindful that "all things work together for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28) The ill Christian can well look at his own life to see if there are reasons why this

illness has afflicted him. Such things as stress, anxiety, irresponsibility, etc., can produce physical problems. If so, these spiritual problems need to be dealt with scripturally.

God may have another purpose for our illness. After being caught up into the third heaven, Paul was physically afflicted in order "to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassing great revelations." (II Cor. 12:7) Speaking of the man born blind in John 9, Jesus stated, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." (VS. 3) Ultimately the Christian must look upon sickness as a time of spiritual growth. God's will is that we be holy. We have been chosen "through the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ." (I Pet. 1:26) We are to be obedient to God in sickness and in health and seek to grow in the Lord even in the midst of trials. (For further reading on God's sovereignty in the midst of trials, I highly recommend Trusting God Even When Live Hurts by Jerry Bridges, published by Nav Press.)

The Christian must recognize that physicians and other medical personnel are human. They are not God. Thus, our hope continually rests in God. He must ultimately activate the chemotherapy or antibiotic or other treatment in our body for success to be obtained. This must be kept in mind even while we strive to be under the care of the best doctors and most up-to-date medical technology available. Doctors, with advanced training and the latest equipment, must also be reminded that they labor under God. God alone numbers our days. (Job 14:3)

Christian's must practice and instruct their children in the fact that a life of holiness is good preventive medicine. Our desire for good health must remain secondary to our living a holy life out of a love for our Savior and Lord. The fifth commandment is the first commandment with a promise. That promise "that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12b) is connected with obedience in the basic unit of society - the family. In I Thess. 4:3 a command of holiness is accompanied by an exhortation to "avoid sexual immorality". With the rapid rise of sexually transmitted diseases this command becomes all the more important. God has good reason to command His creation to live in obedience. Christians are the temple of the living God. We have the Holy Spirit indwelling in us. We have even more reason to treat our bodies properly for God's Glory.

It is this foundation that diaconal care within the church must begin. In a future article, we will attempt to show some practical outworking of medical ministry with diaconal oversight.