

Biblical Positions on Medicine

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IT may seem strange to go to the bible for enlightenment in a field as technical and modern as medicine. The bible can apparently give us only an archaic conception of medicine, primitive and of mere historical interest. But if, in truth, medicine means the care of man, the preservation of health, it is obvious that we need to know something about man in order to care for him. How can we know something about man? This is the whole question. We can inquire by a rational inventory of experiments and observations. We can also receive what God gives us in a revelation on this subject. The two methods can go together. They can also be contradictory. But we can easily posit, on the basis of faith, that because God created man and inspired the bible, what he tells us in the bible about man is most true. For God knows more about man than man does himself. And when God reveals man's reality to us, it is indeed this reality and not some other that is ultimate, that holds sway over all the rest. Thus the bible enlightens medicine about these ultimate realities that shape man's life, and as a result it can inspire a particular development in medicine.

THE IDEA OF MAN

What does the bible tell us about man? Many things that we will pass over, because they would be without immediate relevance or are well known:

1. Man is a creature. He is not an autonomous being who possesses life by himself or who holds anything on his own. He is wholly dependent on the creator.

2. Man is created in the image of God. But may we say that man is this image today? No—but it is always expressly testified to us that we have known what this true image of God was: it is Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:6). It is thus Jesus Christ who, being the true image of God, represents man to us such as God desired and created him to be. He is the one who—although God—is more truly man than any one of us. And as a result, in order for us to find out what man is and ought to be, truly, we need to look to Jesus. It is he who provides the key to this ultimate reality of man.

3. Man is not delivered over to destiny. He does not live in a world that is the plaything of blind forces or calculated fate. He does not live by a fate that dominates man's devel-

opment. There is no blind good luck or bad luck. The life of man is completely known, guided, and used by God. God is the one who combines in it the good and the bad, happiness and unhappiness—taking into account Satan's activity, which God uses, and the presence of sin.

4. For man is radically sinful, in his essence and not only in his actions. He is oriented toward evil. He pursues evil, and ultimately death, because, despite his conscious horror of death, his profound tendencies compel him to seek death as well as sin.

5. We will spend more time on the idea that man is presented to us in the bible as a unity. Contrary to current thinking, the bible does not separate out two elements in man, the soul and the body.

Man is considered a unity in which we can identify three elements that are distinct but not separate: the body, the soul (the ensemble of mental and psychological qualities), and the spirit, which is the particular place of encounter between God and man. This spirit opposes the soul-body complex in the sense that the soul-body is purely natural and wholly perishable. The spirit, by contrast, is the gift of God, supernatural. From a biblical point of view, therefore, the soul has no particular value. There is no such thing as the immortality of the soul. In themselves, none of the elements that compose man are immortal; he receives this capacity only through grace, as a result of judgment. The bible therefore is not spiritualistic: even the spirit does not exist apart from God, the personal God who is the God of Jesus Christ.

As for the two parts, soul-body and spirit, they are as we have said closely linked, completely intertwined, to such an extent that no man can differentiate them and separate what is natural in man from what is supernatural. God alone can separate them (Heb. 4:12). So no one has any right to disregard one of the elements in order to say that only the others are interesting. No one has the right either, even for convenience, to isolate one of the elements that make up man. When man is considered, he must be taken in his totality—because he must be taken such as God desired him and with the appearance that God gave him. This shows already that the doctor cannot limit himself to caring only for the body, without engaging precisely in this kind of isolation.

And, besides, on another point relative to man, the bible has to do with medicine: the body, which up to this point has been the object of essentially medical preoccupations, is not foreign to the bible's preoccupations. First and essentially, it is in the body that our attitude toward God is manifested (Rom. 12:1). The body is thus an element that gives materiality to our "inner life," and as such it must take part in this inner life. It can be neither disregarded nor separated from the spiritual life, particularly since it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). It is thus not negligible: not because it has an independent value of beauty, power, or joy, but because it was created by God to be his temple. Receiving this eminent dignity from God, it cannot be held in contempt by man. And finally, it is this body (taking part in the flesh) that is promised to resurrection. No more or less than the rest of man, it is placed under judgment and promised to resurrection. The bible therefore does not consider one part of man as noble, high, divine in itself, immortal, and another part as vile, corrupt, and destined for death. All is corrupted by sin, and all is promised to salvation.

Thus the body, this primary concern of medicine, also has much to do with faith. The body is not a domain external to faith. It is the very presupposition of ethics—and since nothing that happens to the body is indifferent to faith, since all action upon the body has its reaction upon the spiritual life (because of their fundamental unity), for this reason the bible has something to tell us about medicine.

SPIRITUAL AND CORPOREAL

It is generally assumed today that the corporeal influences the spiritual. And in fact the bible assumes this, as we will see. But much more often, the bible presents the opposite idea: the influence of the spiritual on the corporeal. Most often, the relation between the two is presented to us in such a way that the corporeal appears only as a sign of what the spiritual is, and as a result it experiences only the repercussions of what happens on the spiritual level. The real drama, the real action, takes place on a stage to which we don't have access, where we do not feel comfortable. And what we see and observe naturally is only the end point of the drama, the leftover part of the action, that shows through on the level that we can perceive and that takes shape for us there.

But again, it must be understood that when we speak of the spiritual, we do not mean a mystical outpouring, or the "unknown region," or the capital of the human spirit, or the realm of the feelings or the irrational. It is precisely the relation between man and the God of Jesus Christ, that is, the action of this God upon man and the attitude that this man take up in response to this action.

The fear of the Lord is health for the muscles and refreshment to the body (Prov. 3:7–8). That is, between the creature and the Creator there can be a right order of relation, and this is what can promote health best. What weakens the body is the will to live for oneself, as an independent creature. It is the act of breaking the bond with the creator. When this right bond

is established, this attitude of fear (which concerns the life of every man) is expressed as a moral life, stability of heart, a certain purity, and here we have one of the essential elements for the establishment of health (Prov. 4:20–24). But then we arrive at this simplification: it is the good (with a meaning as yet undetermined) that preserves man from illness—and the reverse: evil brings illness upon the sinner. This is not false, to the extent that sin gives birth to death, and this idea in simplified form inspires in part the disturbing questions of Job, who does not understand that the just may be afflicted with illness. But the thing becomes too simplistic when it tends to precisely equate the good with health and when it forms a necessary link between ideas of the good, evil, sickness, and health.

For the moment, what is important to hold is that what dominates man's life is not the relationship of man and his body with the things and the world around him. That is only a repercussion, only a secondary phenomenon. The primary phenomenon, what determines man's life, is the relation of his spirit with the Spirit of God—with Wisdom—and this relation is also what influences (among other things) health and sickness.

IDEAS OF LIFE AND OF DEATH

Some words in the bible have a double meaning, but not two meanings: corporeal life, corporeal death, spiritual life, spiritual death. There are not some "instances" involving the one sense and others involving the other sense. Throughout, even when one meaning seems very clear, "life" signifies both corporeal and spiritual life. "Death" signifies corporeal and spiritual death. The modes are various, but the two phenomena are always tied together. We cannot separate the two aspects from each other. Bodily life and death are not thinkable from the biblical point of view except in relation to spiritual life and death.

In what way are they presented together? Bodily life and death are, first, signs of what is happening on the spiritual level. They are, in addition, proximate examples of it (we would have no fear of spiritual death if by approximation we did not know what physical death was). They are pledges of the promise of spiritual life and death, a beginning of its fulfillment, to the extent that man is an inseparable unity. Finally, they are its consequences, and we are back again to the idea of the primacy of the spiritual.

Thus, after the fall, God lets man live, physically. This is a promise of eternal life—this fallen state is already the sign of the covenant, and that God does not abandon this man in this state that he is not made for.

—God condemns man to death. The sign of this death is the physical death that we can experience.

—If man lives physically, it is because God gives him a certain spiritual life. It is because all of the bonds are not broken between this man and his Creator. He continually receives this new gift of life, and he receives it from God. It is this relation therefore that produces physical life.

—If man dies physically, it is because he is one condemned to death, a sinner whose sin leads to the break with God. And because of this, he cannot survive on his own. Here again it is because he dies spiritually that he dies physically.

Now, in all this, “spiritual life” means union with God, through the grace received in faith, by means of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. “Spiritual death” means separation from God.

Once again, this is not a spiritualism: the spirit does not exist if it is not the spirit of God, and union with God does not exist if it is not established by a free act of God that reaches across all transcendences, and by means of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that brings peace between man and God. And if we say that life as a whole depends on the spiritual life, this does not mean that it is more important. It is simply based on the following fact: God, as his name indicates in Hebrew, is the Living One, the One who has life in himself and who has it exclusively [Ex. 3:4]. Nothing lives apart from God. God is first the One who exists eternally. Thus, life comes necessarily from union with God. Everything that is separated from God dies: it cannot be otherwise, for apart from God is nothingness. It is therefore this spiritual life, this union with God, that alone can give life.

This life has a meaning: to give glory to God (Is. 38:18). Death also has a meaning: to show forth the justice of God.¹

All this does not mean that faith or a correct theology are an insurance policy for good health. We will see that sickness can have very diverse meanings, and that faith is not a cure. But it teaches us to consider that there can be no life, with the health that this implies, without spiritual life, that health is not a combination of treatments but a way of living in obedience to the laws that God desired for our life. My medicine would be thus above all a hygienics, but not a naturalistic one: a hygienics in which the first act is repentance for sin—and conversion.

THE IDEA OF ILLNESS

Thus we come to the essential problem of medicine, the one that is so often doctors’ only preoccupation: the state of crisis that is called illness. Now, what we have to say here about illness cannot be a collection of isolated thoughts but only an outcome of what we have said to this point.

Illness essentially appears in the bible as an action of Satan, who is left free within certain limits fixed by God. This is what the prologue of Job teaches. God therefore relinquishes his creatures into Satan’s hands so that Satan may exercise his power, but he can do so only up to a certain point. Satan would like to go further, to the point where he would be certain of attaining victory, but God has made the promise: “You will not be tempted beyond your strength” [1 Cor. 10:13]. As a result, the limit to Satan’s action is the human strength that God knows for each one of us. This is especially how it is for sickness and suffering, which cannot go beyond our strength.

But if God lets Satan act, this is not a game, nor is it to leave to the evil one a legitimate exercise. It is because ill-

ness possesses a profound meaning. It is either to the glory of God—or else it is a sickness unto death.

In the first case, it is not unto death (John 11:4), and it can have many purposes that all lead in the end to God’s glorification. In this case, its purpose may be to test and strengthen faith (Job) and thus to cause man to become decisively aware of the fact that help is in the Lord alone. Or sickness may be there only to be overcome, to bring about a miracle and lead to conversion. In this case, sickness is the means that God uses to manifest to man his sin and his deliverance (John 9:3). Or it may be the sign that spiritual sickness is healed, having no other reason than this deliverance, good news brought to man (Matt. 9:1). Or sickness may announce the coming of the Kingdom of God in a negative way, this kingdom in which sickness will be no more. The announcement of its coming is that sickness is put in the same category as the death that has been vanquished (Matt. 11:15). Finally, sickness may be a way of affirming God’s sovereignty over death and the world; thus it ought to lead to the glorification of the Lord (John 11:14). It thus enters into God’s plan, as always happens. It is a means of causing God’s action and mercy to burst forth in the world. And the doctor obviously should be careful to not deflect sickness from its meaning, to not keep the sick person from becoming aware of this purpose that sickness has.

But the texts offer us another hypothesis: Sickness unto death. On this subject, we must note that the idea of the suffering or sickness that purifies is completely absent from the bible. Pain in the bible is not a means of removing sin or of purifying our life. This is not the case even for Christ: it is not Christ’s suffering that brought about redemption, but his death. Christ’s suffering is the inevitable result of sin. “The wages of sin is death” [Rom. 6:23]—this death enters by way of sickness. In this sense, sickness is unto death. It is not a punishment, in the sense in which sin and penalty could be held in a fair balance.² It is a sanction, in the sense of an unavoidable and just consequence. As a result, sickness unto death appears to us first as one of the tangible signs of our state of sin; it is our normal condition to be sick, as it is our normal condition to be sinners. This is why the healings that Jesus Christ performed are both corporeal and spiritual. It is why the one who receives health receives at the same time pardon for sin. The healing of sickness without the forgiveness of sins is only an adjournment, a patching up, a little boost: it is not health. This deliverance from sickness has no value in itself. It can be a temporary betterment, but sickness unto death is still present and must reappear in one form or another. This remission of disease has meaning only as a sign of forgiveness—and thus it has worth only to the extent that the heart is willing to receive forgiveness at the same time (James 5:15).

As a consequence of sin, sickness is presented to us from two principal angles. It can be a sanction, or a means that God uses to turn us from sin.

—A sanction. It thus becomes an outward sign of sin, the physical mark of our impurity. This is the meaning of all the Mosaic legislation concerning leprosy (Lev. 13). Leprosy

here is the type of all sickness. The one who is affected by it is characterized as impure. The remedy is a purification. But this leprosy, a sign of sin, involves as a consequence the leper's separation from others. He is, in brief, consecrated to God, confined within his disease, and his exclusion from the camp clearly marks man's powerlessness to heal this disease. Only the fulfilling of God's will is what heals it.

—A constraint that God uses to incline man's will and draw him from the path of sin. An example is the diseases that Moses released upon Egypt (Ex. 7), which were concerned with breaking the rebellious will of Pharaoh. But in fact, even a miraculous sign, even an extreme suffering, cannot break the sinful will. In such a case, sickness is then the warning of the punishment that will overtake the sinner. It is a time for reflection, in which the punishment has begun but is still uncertain, and during which a man can "turn from his evil way" [Ez. 3:18, Zach. 1:4]. The same goes for the diseases that were sent upon the Church of Corinth because they were treating the Lord's Supper unworthily (1 Cor. 11:30). It is a case of striking the spirit of man so that he may be converted. But in reality, this conversion is what is first needed. Only afterward can the providential meaning of the disease be perceived.

Conversion is needed first . . . and this is why these two kinds of sickness are both unto death: because in both cases we begin from there, with the final condemnation that is borne upon man and his sin. It is a means of warning man about this condemnation, but a warning that will be grasped only in faith. In this case, sickness ceases to be unto death and becomes unto the glory of God. If not, it finishes out its work.

But this link between sickness and sin must not be understood in a simplistic sense. It does not mean that he who is the greatest sinner is the one who is most sick—or that sickness is the sign of a greater sin, or even of a specific, particular sin. Not at all. All are equally sinners before God—all equally deserve condemnation, death—and, as a result, sickness. All men are sick, Jesus tells us (Matt. 9:12), when he says that it is the sick who need doctors. He says this to those who *think* they are well but who actually are not. But some know that they are sick and accept healing—others consider themselves healthy and do not seek a cure.

As a result, acute sickness, what we generally call disease, is only the illustration of what ought to be our normal and permanent condition (as sinners), by virtue of condemnation (Luke 13:1ff). Thus it is by God's grace that it is kept from us, and when it comes it should be considered as being directed not only to the one who suffers it but to everyone: as a call addressed to all, so that they may turn from their sin (Ex. 15:26).

But then, this leads to a different understanding of health; it turns what we believe upside down. We learn that the normal state is sickness, and that the exceptional, abnormal state, not inherent to our nature, is health. Left to ourselves, we will go immediately to death by the way of sickness. It is God's hand that restores us continually to a state of relative health,

which we do not deserve. Healing is thus nothing other, in every situation, than God's merciful intervention in the course of nature. And this is why we do not know what health is.

We know how difficult it is to distinguish, medically, between health and sickness. There are only imprecise boundaries between the two, and it is extremely difficult to say where health or sickness begins. This affirmation is clearly confirmed by what the bible teaches us: what we know by the name of health is only the absence of illness. Our health is always only a preparation for death. We do not actually know what true health is, that of Adam's before the fall. Thus, there is no man who is truly well, for even in forgiveness we live with a body of sin, a body of death promised to corruption. Whereas health, in the absolute sense, is promised only to the incorruptible body.

REMEDIES

We are accustomed to a medicine that focuses directly on the pain that is manifested and wants to heal this pain in its physical aspect. Such a medicine is necessarily symptomatic: that is, it observes certain physical deficiencies and focuses on them. But we have seen that these physical deficiencies are in reality only the signs of other, more profound injuries, spiritual injuries. Thus medicine focuses only on symptoms when it attempts to treat the exclusively physical aspect of the sickness. It does not go to the root, and this is what explains the judgments that the bible brings to bear against medicine.

On the one hand, we observe the powerlessness of medicine: man is not capable by himself of healing sickness (Jer. 46:11, Hos. 5:13, etc.). He can at the very most reduce its effects, but his skill can never go far. Sometimes medicine is even presented to us as completely contrary, opposed to God's will, a sign of man's revolt against God (2 Ch. 16:12, Jer. 17:5). This happens when medicine becomes an idol, a power that we petition independently of God. In this case, medicine dresses itself up in what is not its own. It draws forth the praise and gratitude that are due only to God—it raises hope and stimulates faith. It truly takes the place of God and is for this very reason condemned. Before this idol, we hope that it will act on its own, that is, we hope that life and death belong to it, are in our hands. But this lying god has not kept its promises. The biblical affirmation that medicine is powerless without God's help is striking. We observe that man succeeds somewhat in removing suffering, but not in overcoming or reversing sickness. For if a sickness recedes, how many other forms reappear or arise for the first time? If acute illness is arrested, how much more does health in general, racial resistance, weaken? If microbial diseases seem to be conquered, how much more do nervous diseases arise, and so forth? We have placed our confidence so much in medicine, and we receive a denial: there is confidence only in God.

Does this mean that medicine should be exclusively spiritualistic? Without refuting the exaggerations of Christian Science, it is enough to note that Christian medicine cannot be spiritualistic, because man is not a pure spirit. The primary

problem to pose is a spiritual problem, in general, and particular to the specific illness. But this does not exclude the material cure and physical healing. Man is a unity, let us remember.

The healing that has a spiritual effect, the forgiveness of sin, must bring among other results man's adherence to the order of nature as God desired it. In the same way that this leads the Christian to accept obedience to the laws of the State, he must know how to obey the laws of nature for his body and agree to reform his life in a way that avoids what is bad for him. God created for man a setting, some needs, and the means of fully satisfying these needs. Hygienics is thus nothing other than accepting the life that God desired man to lead, from the physical point of view as well. Thus the healing of sin attains the cause of the illness, which is always a disobedience to this natural order that God established. Of course, the symptoms of the disease, its material consequences, are not ended thereby, but the disease is attained in its reality because Satan no longer has a hold from this angle. Thus the Christian idea of sickness indeed entails a material healing and activity as well.

But our materialistic concept, most commonly, has accustomed us to thinking of treatment in materialistic and immediately utilitarian terms. Most often, treatment has only one goal: to end suffering, and this is reinforced by the conception that each individual person's importance comes from his deeds and actions. All of the extreme phenomena of each of us appear incredibly important, because we are individualistic to the extreme. We have lost the sense of life's relativity and of the individual person's integration within real communities and generations. All of this falsifies the idea of treatment. The true cure is the one that attains the roots of the illness and that acts over a more or less extended period of time, that may even act only in our descendants. The bible does not in fact do away with treatment; it teaches us first that treatment is given to the doctor by God, that it is indeed a dedicated means of caring for the body (the supreme virtue of the plant is its curative power [Ez. 47:12, Rev. 22:2]), and that treatment changes through time (James 5:15). Here we must simply admit that the bible gives humanity a role.

The bible also teaches us that certain men have a gift of healing. We will leave unresolved the question of whether the gift of healing has to do with miraculous healings or with the doctor's having a true medical gift.

And this idea of treatment is linked to the following two affirmations: that Jesus Christ is the only cure for the reality of our illnesses, that he bore our illnesses (Matt. 8:17), and that resurrection is the only real healing from this point forward (Hos. 6:1).

This therefore entails a certain attitude with regard to treatments. If they are in submission to the order of God, we need to know if the treatments that we use are consistent with the order of nature that God desired—if, for example, they do not tend to treat man as [mere] material, if they do not interfere with his nature, if they are not an attempt to encroach upon God's domain. So, when the doctor considers

the treatment to apply, he must ask himself a twofold question: that of the treatment's technical value and also that of its validity before God.

Translator's Notes

1. The French noun *justice* may be translated into English as *justice* or as *righteousness*.
2. The image here is of a weigh scale, with sin in one pan and penalty in the other, equally balanced in weight.