

Can Anyone Heal Me?

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After twenty years of medical practice, I have concluded that many deeply committed Christians are using physicians as a substitute for Christ. Of course, this misuse is nothing new. The writer of II Chronicles brought a similar indictment against King Asa, the zealous reformer of Judah circa 900 B.C. "In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians." (II Chr. 16:12)

The royal physicians possessed technology that was light years behind what we have at our disposal, but the chances are that the results of our treatments are little better than theirs. Dr. Paul Ellwood, a leading health services researcher and author of the term "health maintenance organization" (HMO), states flatly that "half of what the medical profession does is of unverified effectiveness."¹ Experience bears this out. Three villages in an undeveloped country were chosen as the site for an experiment to determine what changes had the greatest impact on the health of the inhabitants. One village got modern medical care, one got better nutrition, and the third got both. The results? Nutrition had a far greater impact in improving health than medical care had.² Charles Stewart conducted research showing that education of the populace and clean drinking water had more to do with health than medical research and treatment.²

Why, then, has the incidence of "illness" and the use of personal medical services doubled in the last sixty years?³ Two things come to mind.

Rick Carlson has claimed, and most general practitioners will testify, that "well over half of those

who seek physicians' services do not have medical disorders. Rather, they are afflicted by disorders of the spirit bred by the suffering and anguish that accompany life." Further, "medicine has fostered a profoundly dependent public which searches for cures that do not exist."⁴

The rise of headache and other pain clinics provides further evidence of the despair which dogs modern man. Arguing against such a technical and mechanical approach, Ivan Illich stated that "pain is the sign for something not answered; it refers to something open, something that goes on the next moment to demand, what is wrong? How does this kind of evil exist, and why does it strike me?" Doctors are trained to "smother pain's intrinsic question mark." They "pride themselves on the knowledge of pain mechanics and thus escape the patient's invitation to compassion."⁵

How sadly true!

The second factor contributing to the increased use of personal medical services is what I will call self-inflicted diseases. The majority of the true medical disorders - as opposed to problems of the psyche (Greek for soul) discussed above - fall into this category.

We eat and drink too much. We use tobacco. We have sex outside marriage. We drive too fast. We strive too hard to succeed. We stay wired-up on coffee. These eventually exact their toll from us in the form of heart disease, emphysema, herpes, ulcers, and high blood pressure - if we don't go through a windshield first. And, that's not all the bad news. The "cures" are often worse than the diseases.

Experts recently concluded that one-third of the operations to clear blockages out of the arteries in the neck (to prevent strokes) were clearly inappropriate for the patients who had them. They said another third were equivocal. This operation is no Sunday school picnic, either! One out of every ten patients in those two categories either died or had a stroke anyway within thirty days of the surgery.⁶

Tonsillectomy is the most commonly performed operation in Western civilization. Estimates of the number of unnecessary tonsillectomies range from fifty to ninety-five percent. No long term benefit is discerned, yet twenty to thirty percent of American children have their tonsils removed. Don't think this is a simple matter, either. One of every thousand dies! That totals about two hundred annually in the U.S. Serious complications occur fifteen times out of a thousand.⁷

Drug prescriptions offer no more encouragement than surgery. Often what a doctor knows about the drug he prescribed for you on your last visit he learned from the salesman of that product. The Senate Committee on Aging recently reported that in the last eight years the number of important new drugs brought to market by the twenty-five major pharmaceutical companies totaled twelve. Twelve, in eight years! The hundreds of other new drugs introduced during that period, 1980-87, offered no significant advantage over existing drugs, yet all were more expensive.⁸

It appears, then, that many, if not most, visits to American doctors involve self-inflicted diseases or problems in the soul. I would argue that the medical establishment has usurped the Church's role as guardian of the souls of its members by proclaiming that the cause of these problems is a chemical imbalance in the brain.

A common thread binds these two groups of patients. Whether we choose mental health professionals to dispense them, or whether we use the pain-killers available to us in nature, our goal as patients is the same - to numb our souls to the hurts and humiliations we constantly encounter in a fallen, hostile world. Psychotropic drugs, rich food, alcohol, tobacco,

caffeine, and illicit sex have this in common: they anesthetize us, for a moment, to the distress of the accumulated disappointments of our lives. So we demand prescriptions for the relief of our fears and our shame or to alleviate the symptoms of our self-inflicted diseases. In this way, we substitute physicians for Christ.

In the Scriptures, healing is equated with salvation. The Holy Spirit, through Isaiah, the prophet, declares that we are healed by Christ's punishment for our sin. A commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, based on repentance and faith, is the route to real health and happiness.

Now, please do not mistake me for a faith healer. If I suffer a serious illness or injury, I will seek the best surgeons and physicians I can afford. If they judge that the chances for cure are reasonable I will undergo the treatments they recommend. But we should not blindly accept their advice, without considering the costs, in time, money and energy, and the realistic chances for cure.

References

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