Sin and Disease
– An Historical Perspective

Many patients who suffer illness, especially of a serious or life-threatening type, question the relationship between their ailment and their own behaviour. They frequently do so even if there is a plausible medical or scientific explanation for their condition. The link between a person’s actions and their fate is expressed in the quest for understanding ‘why’ some bad outcome has befallen them. Some may reach the conclusion that they are undeserved victims being unfairly punished, whilst others are beset with guilt, as they perceive their disease as a punishment for some past sin. Within parts of the Christian church there has been a history of viewing disease as God’s punishment for sin.

Knowledge of this historical position may help in the counselling or pastoral setting as our patients grapple with questions of their own responsibility for having become sick.

A potential link between sin (guilt) and disease is a feature of most religions including Christianity. The current trend is for physicians to emphasise the scientific causal link and de-emphasise any guilt feelings. Such exoneration may not always be in the best interests of our patients who may instead bring the questions out into the open. An approach which allows patients to express their own fears and sense of guilt may allow a Biblical Christian perspective to clarify the true link between disease and sin.¹

Sin and Disease in the Bible

The Old Testament embodies God’s attributes of justice (mishpat) in His dealing with people. It portrays God as a sovereign Judge (shophet) who rules and judges the world. In God’s dealing with nations and individual people, there are numerous examples of His vindication of the righteous and condemnation of the wicked. God’s judgement can have both positive and negative outcomes. Baird has noted that in 200 cases where justice or judging are applied in the Old Testament, 112 times it is expressed as God’s equity, 33 times as God’s love and salvation and 55 times, God’s wrath including punishment, disease or death.²

There are well known examples in scripture where divine judgement is expressed in disease. Miriam received the judgement of leprosy when she became ‘leprous, white like snow’ because of her attitude towards Moses’ (darker skinned) Cushite wife (Numbers 12). The Egyptians received a plague of boils for their intransigence and oppression of the Israelites (Exodus 9). Another example of plague, possibly bubonic plague, befall the Philistines for their capture of the Ark of the Covenant (1 Samuel 5-7).³

Despite these graphic examples, the Old Testament displays a God who is slow to anger and who turns aside his wrath when there is repentance. The direct links between disease and God’s punishment for sin are relatively few, and there is no suggestion that the normal afflictions of individuals have a causal link with their behaviour.

In the New Testament, Jesus makes express pronouncements rejecting a direct correlation between sin and disease (John 9:3, Luke 13:2). His statements were at odds with the prevailing views expressed by the Pharisees that sickness was the result of someone’s sin. Jesus’ words provide reassurance that a person’s illness should not be interpreted as a result of personal sin. Nonetheless the New Testament does not deny the existence of some association between physical illness and sin. For example the apostle Paul suggests that taking part in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner can result in illness or death (1 Cor 11: 26-32). Also the letter of James indicates that unconfessed sin may result in illness (James 5: 13-15). These passages suggest that in some circumstances sickness may have a spiritual cause, such as unconfessed sin, and that confession of sin and repentance may result in physical healing.

Sin and Diseases in History

Leprosy

Of all diseases that have afflicted mankind, none have had such negative connotations as leprosy. Just as it was considered a loathsome disease,
leprosy has been regarded as a type of sin or a loathsome spiritual disease. From ancient times leprosy has been seen as a judgement of God upon a person. Miriam contracted leprosy because she opposed Moses (Numbers 12) and Gehazi for trying to obtain material wealth for himself (2Kings 5:27). It was natural to conclude that leprosy represented the demonstration of God’s judgement because of the individual’s sin.

The Hebrew word for leprosy in the Old Testament (tsara'ath) and the Greek word (lepra) in the New Testament correspond with a number of similar diseases, some of which were highly contagious and frequently terminal. Like cancer or AIDS today, it was a life threatening illness and had no known cure. To make matters worse, lepers were social and spiritual outcasts. For the Israelites, leprosy meant that the sufferer was spiritually unclean and unfit to worship God (Leviticus 13).

Often the worst aspect of a serious illness is the sense of abandonment by friends, family or even God. Jesus made no statement about the spiritual origin of leprosy. When the leper came to Christ and bowed before Him asking for healing, He broke the Levitical laws and normal standards of society. Mark 1:41 records that Jesus ‘stretched out his hand and touched him.’ The Greek word for touched in this verse is haptomai which means more than just a simple casual contact, but is more rightly conveyed by the verb ‘to fasten to’ signifying a strong contact between two objects. Jesus could have healed the man without touching him, but His symbolism speaks of God’s embrace and acceptance of all who are afflicted, even by the most loathsome disease such as leprosy. This example of Christ has been the motivation for largest cities were devastated losing between 30 and 60 percent of their population. At its height in just three years, between 25 and 30 percent of all Europeans were killed. It was spread by human contact and was highly virulent. A person could go to sleep at night feeling well and be dead by morning.

It was not surprising that the plague was attributed to the judgement of God. Such a pestilence that was so unforgiving could only be the work of divine punishment on men for their sins. The majority were convinced of this divine judgement and in September 1348, Pope Clement VI (1291-1352) agreed. The special papal edict referred to the plague as, ‘…this pestilence with which God is affecting the Christian people.’

The devastation that this illness brought on families and communities was bad enough, but the acceptance of the Pope’s edict added to the enormous sense of collective guilt. For a disease so terrible to represent a divine punishment, their sins must have been equally loathsome in God’s sight.

Against this backdrop of suffering and collective guilt the voice of John Donne (1572-1631), metaphysical poet and Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, brought some comfort. Donne’s meditations offer consolation in response to the plague and society’s struggle to deal with it. His work is a counter to the idea that God inflicted this catastrophe on society. In communities that had been segregated to control it, Donne emphasised the unity within society and God’s translation of His people into a better state through death.3

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Christian medical mission to sufferers of leprosy. The Leprosy Mission was founded in 1878 as the ‘Mission to Lepers in India’ whilst in the twentieth century Christian leprologists such as Paul Brand (1914-2003) pioneered work to correct disabilities from neglected leprosy such as claw hand and foot-drop.

Bubonic plague

The plague that swept through Europe in the fourteenth century with great ferocity was believed by many to represent the wrath of God. Known as bubonic plague, pestis or the Black Death, it was an acute infection caused by the bacillus, yersina pestis. By the middle of the fourteenth century, the
Smallpox

Throughout history there has been no greater scourge than smallpox. As David Koplow notes in his book, *Smallpox: The Fight to Eradicate a Global Scourge*, ‘...over a period of at least three millennia it was second to none in inflicting human pain, suffering and death.’ By some estimates, smallpox killed as many as 500 million people during the twentieth century alone. Of all infectious diseases, smallpox is perhaps the worst to have afflicted mankind. As with other plagues and epidemics, it affected whole communities and was often regarded as a judgement from God.

The eradication of smallpox through inoculation represents one of the major medical advances of the modern era. Edward Jenner (1749-1823) of Berkley in Gloucestershire was a General Practitioner who had witnessed the scourge of smallpox in his community. He observed that sufferers of a disease called cowpox, especially in milkmaids who contracted the disease from cows they milked, did not get smallpox. In 1796 he took some lymph from a milkmaid’s infected hand and inoculated eight-year-old James Phipps. Two months later he injected James with smallpox, but nothing happened. Jenner coined the term ‘vaccination’ from the Latin word, vacca or cow.

Edward Jenner was the eighth of nine children born to the vicar of Berkley, Rev Stephen Jenner. He was a man of faith and compassion and through his life worshipped at the parish church, St Mary the Virgin. He is buried there next to the altar.

Vaccination was taken up throughout Europe and America although there was resistance to its widespread use initially. This was partly because of medical concerns, but it also had a religious dimension. Some clergy opposed it on the grounds that smallpox represented God’s judgement on sinners and it should not be opposed by such measures. Thankfully such opposition was not widespread and as a result the smallpox virus is now virtually extinct and consigned to a small number of samples in two laboratories only.

Current Perspectives

The central message of the Gospel and the statements of Jesus represent a counter to certain religious and cultural views linking personal sin and disease. Through history, Christians have followed Christ’s example with prominent roles in certain diseases or epidemics, such as leprosy, bubonic plague and smallpox, which have been regarded in society as punishment from God. Nonetheless the church has not always reflected the Gospel position in relation to sin, guilt and disease.

In recent years a number of Christians have suggested that AIDS is a divine judgement on homosexuals. The evidence from scripture and from historical precedent should certainly make us cautious in attributing any disease to be an aspect of God’s judgement. As Billy Graham has remarked, ‘It (AIDS) may be a judgement of God upon us. I can’t say for certain, because only God would know that. But something is happening to us, paying us back for our promiscuity and our free way of life, in which God has certain rules and regulations outlined in the scriptures.’ His statement affirms the principle that consequences may follow abandonment of God’s moral standard but stops short of linking a specific disease with sin.

The reason why disease afflicts a person occupies the mind of many patients. This ‘why’ question has many facets and for a person of faith may invoke feelings of failure, sin or guilt linked to their disease. It represents a search for meaning, which may allow a person to examine their lived life and face the future. As Christian physicians, our role is to communicate the medical or pathological diagnosis but we can also allow our patients to express their fears and help them to view their illness in the light of the Gospel message.

References