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FEATURE

Biblical Perspectives on Health for the Contemporary World

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***Abstract:** Perspectives on health from the Bible such as biblical anthropology and the laws of God, as a basis for health and disease dynamics, are receiving support from science. Biblical anthropology teaches that a human being is a whole person, with physical, mental, social, ecological and spiritual dimensions. The body is not the opposite of the soul, it is its visible expression. One dimension affects the other dimensions, because a human being is a unit. Scientific studies show many connections between mind and body, such as aerobic exercise and memory, the effect of one body system on another, and even spirituality and disease. Health and disease are the result of obedience or disobedience to God's laws. Research in the area of behavioral epidemiology shows links between lifestyle and diseases such as cancer and heart disease. Biblical perspectives provide a useful theoretical framework for public health practice and research.*

Science and faith have traditionally been in disagreement, and they often appear not reconcilable with each other. Although both are ways to acquire knowledge and find truth, they are different in their assumptions and their methodology. However, they are beginning to come together in the field of health. The impact of religion on health has begun to be explored. How is it possible that a religious book such the Bible, the foundation for the Christian religion, written between 1500 BC and 100 AD, can have relevance for the twenty-first century, in a science-based, contemporary world? The objective of this paper is to show how biblical perspectives on health and disease dynamics are receiving support from the scientific field. Biblical perspectives about health corroborated by science would not only confirm Christian faith, but also could be a valuable and current source for health promotion, and could provide a theoretical framework for research, and for integrating health and faith.

A Biblical Perspective on Human Life

There are several biblical perspectives on health, disease, healing, and public health, such as salvation and healing (Ps 103:3-5¹, Matt 5:24-25), the body as temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16,17; 6:19-20), the desire of God for His children: health (3 John 2), healing, a gift of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:8-10), the massive healing ministry of Jesus Christ (Matt 4:23,24), the rewards for youth that have the best eating habits (Dan 1:8, 12-20), norms of public health among Israel (Lev 11-15), and healing miracles through the Old and New Testament (Exod 11-12, Num 21:4-9, 2 Kgs 2:1-11, John 20:31, Acts 5:12-16), among others. I will concentrate here on the analysis of two perspectives: biblical anthropology as basis for its health message, and the laws of God as basis for health-disease dynamics.

Biblical anthropology answers the question of why human beings should take care of their health. The word 'anthropology' comes from two Greek words 'anthropos,' which means 'man,' and 'logos,' which means 'study;' so anthropology is the study of man as a human being: His/her nature, purpose in life, culture, and environment. Biblical anthropology, therefore, is the study of man or woman from a biblical perspective. What is man/woman's nature? How does a human being function? What happened to man's original nature? How has humanity been restored? What is man's mission in life? How should she/he live now? What does the future hold? Those are questions that biblical anthropology needs to answer. I do not pretend to cover all the aspects here; I will limit my focus to studying man's nature and lifestyle.

The Holy Bible teaches that a human being is a product of the personal creation of God. While the creation of things, stars, plants, fish, birds, and animals were the result of a "God said" (Gen 1:3,6,7,9,10,14,15,20,21,24,25); for the creation of man, the Bible says, "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man become a living being" (Gen 2:7). 'Living being' is a translation of the Hebrew 'nephesh hayah' that means "living soul." Human beings are the product of the union of dust and the spirit *of* God, and that being, the result of that union, is a soul living. Man does not *have* a soul as a substance independent of the body that lives within the body. A human being *is* a soul. *Soul* refers to the whole person, its totality of life.

The Hebrew words of the Old Testament used to refer to the entire or part of the human nature are *lev* (heart), *nephesh* (soul), *ruach* (spirit), and *basar*

¹ The Scripture version used is the New International Version, unless otherwise indicated.

(flesh). The use of these words, however, underlines emphatically the unity of human nature, and not the existence of elements that are independent or antagonistic (Terrerros, 2000). *Nephesh* never means a nucleus of indestructible existence in opposition to the corporal life that could exist separated from it (Veloso, 1990; Wolf, 1975). In the New Testament, the Greek words used to describe human nature partially or totally are *pneuma* (spirit), *sarx* (flesh), *soma* (body), and *psuje* (soul). An apparent dichotomy appears between 'flesh and spirit' and 'body and soul,' however, this is only the adaptation of the inspired writers to their audience who were influenced by the Greek philosophical thought in the middle of the Greek-Roman world (Terrerros, 2000). None of them refer to a separated element or entity independent of the whole human nature; they refer to the entire nature, the whole man behaving in different dimensions.

The soul can be expressed through physical, mental, spiritual and social dimensions. The body is the visible expression of the soul, and it cannot exist independently of the body. In the moment that the inverse phenomenon to creation takes place, the body (dirt from the ground) and the spirit (the breath of God) separate, life stops, and the soul is no more (Eccl 12:7). This is death (Job 34:14,15; Ps 146:4). The living soul is a whole: bio-psycho-socio-eco-spiritual. Therefore, every dimension of human life affects the other dimensions positively or negatively. So, the physical dimension affects the mental, social and spiritual dimensions, and vice versa.

One of the most well-known anthropological perspectives, the one that shaped the religion and culture of the Western part of the world and the Philippines in Asia, is the Greek dichotomy. This perspective teaches that man is made up of two independent and antagonistic substances: body and soul. The body is sinful, the seat of concupiscence, temporal, mortal. It is the prison of the soul, which is exactly the opposite: holy, pure, the seat of moral virtues, immortal, eternal; and it is liberated from the body at the moment of death. Soul and body, in the Greek dichotomous perspective, are independent, and are not related; they are antagonistic. They fight in life, and at the eventual death of the body, the immortal soul is liberated.

What is the impact of the two anthropological views on a person's lifestyle? On the one hand, the result of the Greek dichotomy on lifestyle is the exaltation of the soul and the depreciation of the body. Since the soul is good and the body is bad, spiritual development is encouraged, while care of the body is ignored. Taking care of one's lifestyle makes no sense, since the body is not transcendent and is unimportant. The belief in immortality disregards present health (Vaux, 1976), and has been found to be the greatest obstacle to preventive medicine (Wynder, 1994). On the other hand, the impact of biblical anthropology is completely different. Since the soul is the whole person, and the body is the visible expression of the soul, they are dependent and related, and the physical

dimension affects the other dimensions. So, according to biblical anthropology a healthy lifestyle is encouraged, desirable, and is appropriate, based on man's nature.

The human being was created as a whole, sinned as whole, dies as a whole, and will be resurrected as a whole. Resurrection of the body is possible only after the complete destruction of God-created life (including the soul) in the death (Cullmann, 1964). Therefore, the present redemption of human beings is as a whole. This is why the Bible focuses on health. The purpose of the Bible is to teach the plan of salvation to save the whole person--the entire person, not only one part of it. The church that accepts the biblical anthropology is also mandated to conduct a ministry of healing and to promote a healthy lifestyle as part of its mission and doctrine. This was exactly what Jesus Christ did: He "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. . . . People brought to Him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them" (Matt 4:23,24). So, the founder of the Christian church practiced what the biblical anthropology teaches by offering people transformation of all the dimensions of the human being. He said "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10) to show that He provides, for those who enter into a dynamic relationship with Him, quantity and quality of life now and beyond.

Research on the Mind-Body Connection

When the biblical perspective on the unity of human nature expressed through different dimensions that affect each other is contrasted with research, it is clear that science is progressing toward a wholistic conception of human life, in which what it is done to one dimension, for instance, the mind, directly impacts the other dimensions, such as the body, the immune system, or vice versa (Stump, 2009; Zhen & Berthoud, 2008). For instance, neuroscience shows that regular, systematic exercise is not only good for bones, muscles, digestive, cardiopulmonary and immune systems, it also prevents and combats stress, depression, and anxiety. It relaxes and energizes the entire nervous system, and it sparks mind and life through the production of different biochemical substances (Olson, Eadie, Ernst, & Christie, 2006; Tang Xu, 2005). Exercise supercharges the mental circuits, sharpens your thinking, lifts your mood, boosts memory, and creates an environment in which the brain is willing and able to learn (Ratey, 2008).

Another example of the impact of the body on the mind and the mood is the effect of a daily good breakfast. Early studies begun 30 years ago by Carey and Vyhmeister (1971) in the Nutrition Department of Loma Linda University

School of Public Health showed the benefits of having a good breakfast every morning: Glucose levels are kept high during the day, particularly in the mornings, giving the body and mind energy for work and performance, and preventing hunger, nervousness, and irritability. Now, there is increasing evidence that skipping breakfast has negative consequences later in the morning (Benton, 2008), and it is well known that “the first meal of the day will help flip the switch back to energy storage, so it is important to do it right” (Harvard Medical School, 2005).

Eating breakfast is associated with many benefits in schoolchildren, including academic performance (Melanson, 2008; Miller, 2007; Taras 2005). The Dairy Council of California (2010) says that when children eat a nutritious breakfast, it results in improved attention in late morning task performance, quicker and more accurate retrieval of information (i.e. working memory), fewer errors made in problem solving activities, and better concentration and ability to perform complex tasks. Freshmen college students that were breakfast-eaters also showed better memory test scores than breakfast-skippers, and in addition the hope is that if students routinely eat a nutritious breakfast, “there will be less reliance on medication (e.g., Ritalin and anti-sleep agents) to help people function” (Staub 2008).

So, the nature of human being as a living soul, created to behave as a whole in different expressions, is corroborated and illustrated by scientific research. Both sources of truth show how closely physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions are related.

The Laws of God

A second biblical perspective that has transcended history and has current applications in the field of Health has to do with the laws of God. The Bible teaches that the dynamics of health and sickness are based on laws made by God. The creator of everything, including humankind, submitted every thing to different kinds of laws. The Scripture shows that health is the result of obedience to God’s laws; while sickness is the opposite—the natural result of the disobedience to the same laws (Exod 15:26; Deut 7:12-15,28; Deut 28:1-6,11-13, 20-22,27-28). But, obedience or disobedience to what kind of laws?

First, obedience to the moral law, the Ten Commandments, written by the finger of God (Exod 31:18). For instance, those who keep the Seventh Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Deut 5:18), will practice abstinence of sexual intercourse before and outside of marriage. From a public health perspective, this is the best way to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. The reward will be good reproductive health. Meanwhile, those who challenge this law through practicing sexual intercourse before and/or outside marriage, or with several partners, or homosexual intercourse, will be at

high risk of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases or HIV/AIDS. Another example could be related to obedience or disobedience to the sixth commandment, "You shall not kill" (Exod 20:13). Those who respect their own lives and others' lives, for example, will not drink alcohol, particularly when they will be driving a motor vehicle, and as a reward they will have a higher probability of living a peaceful and happy life. But there are consequent burdens and heavy responsibilities that follow from the natural consequences of disobedience to God's law.

Second, obedience to the natural law, is alluded to in the word of God (Ps 33:6,9) illustrated in the natural environment created by God in six days, and written by the hand of God in every cell, tissue, organ, and system of the body (Gen 2:7). When God "formed the man from the dust of the ground," He formed the 218 bones, more than 800 muscles, more than two million pores, and three million pulmonary alveoli. The scientific laws that govern the care and maintenance of these body systems have been discovered and studied by biomedical sciences such as anatomy, physiology, and molecular biology.

The dynamics of health and disease as related to God's laws of health explain in great degree the presence of happiness and misery in our world; however, the Holy Scriptures recognize that health and sickness may have many causes. Here are a couple of examples: First, Job was a man who lived a lifestyle obedient to God's laws (Job 1:1), but he got sick with a terrible skin disease that caused him to live in ashes to alleviate his painful rash (Job 2:7); in this case, sickness was not result of disobedience, but a test caused by Satan, which God allowed, to fulfill a bigger purpose in the context of the cosmic, universal, but invisible Great Controversy (Job 2:1-6). The story of Job finishes when God intervenes and heals him, and gives him much more than what he had lost (Job 42:10). The second example is the man born blind. His blindness was caused neither by disobedience to God's laws nor because of heritage; "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:1-7). Christ healed him immediately.

God's laws as a basis for the dynamics of health and disease were given to Israel around 1500 B.C. At that time, most nations believed that health and disease were the result of the interactions of supernatural forces that were beyond human control. The different gods interacted and/or fought among themselves, and humankind suffered the consequences, for good or evil. The only things that humans could do were first, to pacify the gods or gain their favor through sacrifices, often human ones, and second, to protect themselves through magic arts, tricks, and rituals. In this context, how revolutionary was the idea that God would place the dynamics of health and disease in the people's hands! Health and sickness did not depend on supernatural forces or gods, but on individual decisions and actions related to laws that the Creator had established: "If you live according to my laws, I will award you with health; if

you do not follow my laws the natural result will be illness.” More than that, He presented Himself to His people, saying, “I am your healer” (Exod 15:26).

The first organized health system worked successfully. When His children aligned themselves with Him and His laws “no one faltered” (Psalm 105:37). Another version says, “there was not one feeble person among their tribes.”² When they lived a lifestyle based on obedience to the moral and natural laws of God, they had good health as a reward, and no one got sick.

Research on Natural Laws

This individual responsibility related to health and sickness has been corroborated particularly by one branch of science that comes from the field of behavioral medicine or psychology of health: Behavioral Epidemiology, which is applied to the understanding and prevention of lifestyle-related diseases. *Behavioral epidemiology* is a term that has been used in the literature since the late 1970s for research that studies the distribution and etiology of health-related behaviors in populations, in contrast with research on clinical cases, as part of initiatives for disease prevention and health promotion (Sallis, Owen, & Fotheringham, 2000). Behavioral epidemiology is not limited to describing behavior in the population; it also analyzes the social context that determines those behaviors, and the frontiers of the field go even further than this description of the field (Catania & Dolcini, 2002). The stages of study in the area of behavioral epidemiology include the following: First, establish links between behaviors and health; second, develop measures of the behavior; third, identify influences on the behavior; fourth, evaluate interventions to change the behavior; and fifth, translate research into practice (Sallis et al., 2000).

Lifestyle-related diseases, also called chronic diseases, are becoming pandemic in the world today. Common ones include circulatory diseases, cancer, osteoporosis, diabetes, and obesity. These illnesses might begin when individuals are in their mother’s womb, or when they are babies, children, or teens. Their incubation period is very long, and their signs and symptoms may come only after 20, 30, 40, or more years. They progress across the lifespan, and evolve over time; this is why they are called ‘chronic’ diseases, because the Greek word *chronos* means time.

Chronic or lifestyle-related disease complications are the number one and two killers of the world’s population, and they are the ones that are causing the cost of health care in the world to increase tremendously. Each year 12 million die from heart attacks, and 10 million die of cancer. More than 22 million people die every year because of these two largely preventable diseases! If we compare

² King James Version.

these two leading causes of death with all other causes of death, such as transmittable diseases, HIV/AIDS, accidents, violence, and suicide, we will discover that in developed countries, cancer and stroke are killing 10 to 14 times more people than all other causes put together, and in developing countries, 3 to 4 more times more people.

Studies to determine the causes of lifestyle diseases are ongoing and there are several theories for explaining the cause of each disease. Although the actual causes remain unknown for most of them, science has discovered factors associated with chronic disease--this means that when certain factors are present, chronic disease will also be present. These factors belong to two groups: unchangeable and changeable. Unchangeable factors are age, sex, and heritage. Some chronic diseases appear with aging; there are some diseases related to being a male, and some other diseases related to being a female; and when we have relatives in the family with a chronic disease, particularly parents and grandparents, there is a high possibility of developing the same disease at a particular time in life. We cannot do anything about these factors. Although scientists are trying to modify heritage through genetic engineering, it will take a lot of time and money to acquire the technology and understanding to try to change even one of these three unchangeable factors.

Chronic diseases also have changeable factors, however. There are six decisive changeable factors: smoking, sedentarism, medium/high alcohol consumption, high fat/salt/refined foods intake, low raw vegetables/fruits intake, and stress. These factors are actions, behaviors, and habits of daily life that affect our health. They are behaviors that depend on personal decision and responsibility.

When these changeable factors are present, chronic disease will frequently appear. When it persists in the person with signs and symptoms, chronic disease will complicate; and when the factors are still present because people ignore them, or do not want to change, or they simply can not change, the chronic disease will eventually kill the sick person.

So, chronic disease, and its complications, which are the number one and two killers of the world, depends a great deal, on individual decision and action. The Bible taught the same idea 3500 years ago when God taught His people that health or disease was the reward or result of adherence or non-adherence to His laws, particularly His natural laws, created and written by Him in every cell, tissue, organ and system of the body.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the biblical concepts of health, disease, and public health, such as biblical anthropology and the laws of God, not only provided a

successful health system for Old Testament Israel, and for the early Christian church, but they may also contribute to the contemporary world by providing a theoretical framework for better understanding of health, disease, and public health. Evidence from current literature shows that the biblical perspectives on health presented in this article have received recent scientific support. This corroboration from a scientific perspective encourages the promotion of healthy lifestyles that will prevent or decrease the incidence of chronic and lifestyle-related diseases, through health promotion and education. The perspective of wholeness in human nature and the perspective of individual responsibility for practicing a lifestyle in harmony with God's laws, corroborated by science, can provide a theoretical framework for research, orient public health practice, and integrate medicine and faith.

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