The Healthy Church?

Part II — Some Biblical Implications
For Personal and Public Health Practice

An Old Testament Basis for a Health Emphasis in Religion

While Ellen White certainly had a dominant role in proclaiming personal health as part of our religion, there is ample biblical precedent for God-given dietary and health guidelines. Genesis 1:29-30 recommends a vegetarian diet, although this was broadened to include certain meats right after the Noachian flood. Aside from Exodus 20, we often jointly classify the other laws in Exodus and Leviticus as ceremonial, pointing towards, but nullified by the cross. Leviticus 11-15 are of particular interest to our discussion, but do not seem to fit as “ceremonial” but rather with health as a motivation. If chapters 11-15 are not ceremonial it is illogical to presume, as some do, that these directions were done away with at the cross.

Then what is their purpose? Various commentators have concluded that these laws were motivated by concerns of public health, ethnic identity, ecology, holiness, aesthetics, or asceticism. While there are possible ecological implications, if these laws were given by God one might hope that his purposes were larger than ethnic identity or aesthetics alone. Asceticism is unlikely as a reason, as this was not part of the Jewish tradition. Holiness is explicitly stated as a reason for these requirements in Deut 14:1-21, Lev 11:43-45 and elsewhere. It is of interest in this regard that “clean” and “unclean,” often used here to refer both to foods and bodily states, can also be translated “pure” and “impure.”

Then “holiness” may...
not be clearly distinguishable from “healthiness.” A mark of holiness particularly acceptable to the creator may be an overall healthfulness of His people.

That God considers we should value health is strongly implied by verses such as “If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God…I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you,” (Ex 15:26) or “Worship the Lord your God…I will take away sickness from among you…I will give you a full life span.” (Ex 23:25). That the state of our bodies has a bearing on holiness is also implied by such well-known New Testament verses as “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit…?” “…Therefore honor God with your body.” (1 Cor 6:19,20). See also 1 Cor 3:16-17. Therefore one external manifestation of holiness may be the healthfulness of the group.

A New Testament Reaction To Judaic Dietary Laws

Let us return to the role, if any, that a healthy way of living plays in personal salvation by examining Romans 14. This passage contains some verses that have been troubling to Adventists. “One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables” (Rom. 14:2), or “As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.” (Rom. 14:14)! Paul probably uses the concept of “cleanness” here as a measure of spiritual status in the prevalent legal tradition of Judaism, but has concluded that food has no inherent value of this sort. Clearly he is of the opinion that what we eat is not a direct gauge of sin or righteousness. But he is not contradicting Lev. 11 if the Levitical distinction is on grounds of health.

Paul does not comment on the importance of diet in health, but rather states that diet cannot directly indicate one’s state of righteousness.

Diet then is simply used as one example of an outward manifestation that should not form the basis for religious criticism. The message of this chapter is best summarized by verse 17, “For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit…” Thus both Paul’s view that eating certain foods does not inevitably equate with sin as in the traditional “uncleanness,” and the obvious focus of the chapters following Leviticus 11 on health, supports the notion that the dietary stipulations of Leviticus 11 were indeed primarily health-related, rather than ceremonially religious in motivation.

Health Habits And The Christian Experience

Even though health habits do not have a lock-step association with righteousness, they may still play an important role in religious life. Works such as prayer, Bible study, etc., have been categorized as “spiritual disciplines.” Although such performance does not lead directly to the “pearly gates,” most would recognize their power to help us become better Christians. One point of view is that a healthy way of life has value to growing Christians by improving vigor and spiritual perceptiveness, and can be best thought of as a spiritual discipline.

So does an individual who flagrantly ignores or contravenes the laws of health have a moral problem? I believe so. First, this individual is not taking advantage of a helpful spiritual discipline. But more importantly it indicates either: a) that he/she has given no thought to the matter, or; b) has somehow genuinely concluded that there are no serious health consequences, after careful study of the evidence or; c) has recognized the important effect on health but has chosen to ignore this. Romans 14:22-23 would indicate that situations a) and c) are morally wrong.

It is not only possible to think of what a healthy way of living brings to religion, but to also discuss how true Christianity may positively influence both mental and physical health. Growing data show that religious persons of many denominations experience decreased mortality rates from many common diseases. A number of questions arise. What is the effect of the “Sabbath rest” (Hebrews 4) on health? Does being at peace with and having commune with our creator provide an important degree of psychological support with its attendant health consequences? How may the possible psychological consequences of the “works/ righteous by faith” tension figure in all this? Is it just that religious folks live more conservatively, thereby taking fewer risks?