The Healthy Church?

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

An Old Testament Basis for a Health Emphasis in Religion.

Ellen White had a dominant role in proclaiming personal health as apart of our religion. Yet we emphasize that we are not dependent on her writings alone for major tenets of the faith. Is this the case for our health teachings? There is some 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, perhaps reflecting a special situation (Gen. 9:3). 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".

Chapter 11 is well known to Adventists, and deals with dietary proscriptions. Chapter 12 gives rules for the "uncleanness" of a woman after childbirth. Chapter 13 deals with infectious skin diseases (probably leprosy and others), and the measures to be taken with anyone that "has a swelling or a rash or a bright spot on his skin that may become an infectious skin disease". These measures include quarantine, washing of clothes, and regular inspection by the priests with detailed criteria for the pronouncement of cure. The motivation here is clearly the health of the community and limiting spread of infectious diseases.

The latter part of Chapter 13 and all of Chapter 14 apparently deal with green and red mildew infestations of clothes and walls of houses (stones, timber and plaster are mentioned), clearly treated as an infectious problem. Mildews are caused by fungus organisms living off organic materials such as those used in clothing, or in the construction of dwellings, or in foods. Certain fungi can cause such diverse disorders as ringworm, farmer's lung, bone abscesses and valley fever in humans.

Moulds of the genus *Aspergillus* (Aspergillus glaucus and flavus) appear as green or yellow (and others red) patches, thriving in moist or dry conditions, and living on foods, clothing, leather or soft wood, and occasionally infect thy human ear canal or skin. Other *Aspergilli* can cause severe allergic reactions in certain individuals, or produce toxic chemicals, some of which are now known to have useful antibiotic activity in small doses, or to be a potent cause of cancer, such as the aflatoxin produced by *A. flavus*. Although there is no conclusive evidence that these moulds are indeed the topic of Leviticus 13-14, advice to avoid clothes or building materials infested with such moulds would seem prudent. Once again a health motivation is a reasonable deduction.

Chapter 15 of Leviticus deals with potentially infectious bodily discharges, such as semen or menstrual blood. Any high protein containing fluid is an excellent medium for bacterial growth. Our modern knowledge of medical microbiology makes all this quite sensible, and it was surely excellent, and prescient advice at the time. The much more modern demonstration by Semmelweiss of the effects of lack of cleanliness at the time of childbirth is clear indication that care when dealing with body fluids is of great value!

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What do chapters 11-15 prefigure or represent? Certainly not the atonement. If they 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? They were after all given to Moses and Aaron by divine influence (Lev. 11:1), although possibly not recorded in their present form till the Babylonian captivity.

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, reflecting his original intent by their continued clarity of thought and physical vigor into old age.

It is important to make a distinction between the original intent of this material (that is God's intention) and the Jewish interpretation and practice. For them it is likely that the labels "clean" and "unclean" were synonymous with "holy" and "sinful". There is little evidence that they saw foods as physically "healthy" or "unhealthy". Yet it seems possible that this was the original motivation, and from a Christian's perspective, ancient Jewish interpretation of scripture was hardly infallible! Paul, in Romans 14 (see below), clearly felt it a need to correct the traditional idea that consumption of unclean foods was inevitably sinful. However he does not go on to explain the original reasons for including these chapters in Leviticus.

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... if you pay attention to His commands and keep all His decrees, 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). See also Deut 7:15. 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, who is in you...?" ".... 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 (which is to be distinguished from equating holiness with the healthfulness of the individual).

There was a strong element of ritual in the Levitical laws. In a number of places a distinction was made between the establishment of the state of "cleanliness" by the priest and the timing of the ceremonial ridding of the "unclean" label. When the goal is adherence, ritual may be an effective promoter. Of the various options, it seems to this

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writer that an original public health motivation for Leviticus chapters 11-15 is most likely, having an alliance with, but not equated to holiness.\footnote{Note that the above brief discussion avoids any mention of the extensive Jewish dietary and other health regulations in the two Talmuds and the Mishnah, as extra-Biblical.}

**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. I believe that Romans 14 gives us some insight. 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. Does he then contradict Lev. 11 that claims an important distinction between clean and unclean foods? Not if the Levitical distinction is on grounds of health, whereas Paul had salvation in mind with no understanding that diet may partially determine the physical and mental state of the "bodily temple".

There is nothing to suggest that Paul had any special insights on healthy living. He does not comment on the importance of diet in health, but rather states that diet cannot directly indicate one's state of righteousness. Indeed verses 1-20 show a related theme; "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?..."(verse 4); "You, then, why do you judge your brother?... For we will all stand before God's judgement seat"(verse 10); "Therefore let us stop passing judgement on one another" (verse 13). Paul goes on to plead that the believers "... not destroy the work of God for the sake of food" (verse 20), admonition that may have saved a good deal of pain in our own ranks. 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.

The final verses of Romans 14 add to this picture. "So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God....But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that does not come from faith is sin" (verses 22-23). This explains why we cannot judge each other, as how can we know if our brother is or is not acting against his convictions and faith? So what of those who apparently have no convictions? Can they never sin? Paul makes it clear that this convenient course of action will not do, however. The second part of verse 22, which is omitted above, reads "Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves". Hence we have a responsibility both to carefully decide what we approve, then to act according to our conscience.

**Health Habits And The Christian Experience**

What then is the place of health practices in religion? Even though they 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 both change character and values, so as to help us become better Christians. It is the results rather than the mechanics that led to them, that are of most value. 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.

What of the many apparently minor dietary decisions that we make every day? One person has honest doubts regarding the health hazard of eating (real) turkey just at Thanksgiving, or another occasionally indulges in a candy-bar at times when it could physiologically be considered overeating? For us to pass judgement on such acts is quite futile. Even apart from considerations of the degree of hazard to health, many other factors can enter into individual decisions, that when taken thoughtfully may be appropriate to the particular situation, or represent honest mistakes.

It is not only possible to think of what a healthy way of living brings to religion, but to also reverse the causal direction and 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\(^5\). The reasons are not clear and space does not permit detailed discussion here. However, 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?

**Conclusions**

From a historical perspective Adventists are far from unique among religions by incorporating an emphasis on diet. There are a number of good reasons for a religious group to recommend practices that may lead to better health, and there is biblical precedent for this. The Adventist health emphasis of many decades has been a real force for good in the local community, and also at a national and international level, as we have contributed to the body of scientific evidence guiding opinion, official recommendations, and, to some extent, practice.

Our "health message" will indeed guide us to better health, so honoring God, but we should not use such "lifestyle works" as a litmus test of spirituality, or as a basis for criticism of our "brother". Such is unbiblical! As a bonus beyond good health, healthy living may also be valued as one other discipline to help us along the spiritual pathway.

Members need a continuing lively emphasis on the value and characteristics of our health message, which would be much enriched by further scholarly research to provide a firmer Biblical and ethical basis. Otherwise it is likely that standards of practice within the church will decline, and may well already be doing so. Support for personal health education and maintenance of traditional practices within the church has markedly declined in the United States. This deserves informed discussion, and careful consideration of the consequences.

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