

Pastor's Column: The Church's Responsibility in Health Instruction

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There is a crisis in medical care today. The edifice erected over the past several decades shows serious signs of failure. The medical profession recognizes this fact and is taking measures to salvage what it thinks is important or profitable. Various proposals are being made to restructure medical care in the United States. Some advocate a partially or totally controlled-access system. Others see the solution in redefining health, with a wholistic approach often compatible with New Age ideals. Others simply wish for a return to the way they used to practice medicine. Rarely is the answer sought in Scripture.

Within the orthodox and reformed position, we maintain that Scripture contains everything necessary for faith and life. There is a "Scriptural practice of medicine." And Christians today are beginning to take seriously their responsibility to understand and apply this truth. The Journal of Biblical Ethics in Medicine is evidence of this.

Christian doctors can and are making changes in their practices to make them conform to Scripture's demands. The changes may include financial aspects of the practice, as doctors understand what God expects in the area of fiscal responsibility, or billing, or insurance. Better understanding of the relationship between spirit and body may lead to changes in treatment modalities suggested. More patient responsibility may result from an understanding of self-government, as the state resumes its proper functions. But all the changes that doctors make will have little impact on the "health-care system" unless people's attitudes and habits are changed.

The process of directing change is commonly called counseling. And when this change is principally of a spiritual nature, involving an understanding of Scripture's demands, the pastor is the principal counselor. There has been much written about the pastor's role in the process of change. Likewise, it is well understood that ministers are to preach the whole counsel of God, including what He would have us know about our health, personal responsibility, the relationship between spirit and body, etc. So ministers serve a crucial role in conforming the medical practice to Scripture. Many of the same functions within this role are fulfilled by the other elders in the church, that is the ruling elders.

How can we, the elders of Christ's Church, teach His people these things? Obviously, we must first glean from Scripture the truth in these areas, understanding the issues ourselves first. This will require communication with health professionals to define the issues. Secondly, the doctrinal foundation for such teaching must be laid. How can God's people understand the influences of sin in sickness when they do not understand sin? How can they understand a Biblical view of medical insurance when they do not know the basic economic principles laid down in Scripture? But there is a prior problem.

There will be no interest in the Scriptural teaching on any issue until the authority of the Word of God is accepted and understood. If one does not accept that the Word of God written is the only source of truth, the only final authority, then experience or pragmatism or ecstasy becomes the authority. *Or* equally devastating, apathy rules and no change is made. Only when the imperative from Scripture is preached and heard, will

any effective change, in any endeavor, be accomplished.

The authority of the Word of God is the basis for the authority of the pulpit. If the people of God do not recognize the pulpit as that means God has instituted for the proclamation of His Word, then the preaching will be ineffective. But the authority which God has given to the church is more extensive than the pulpit alone. Christ has instituted His church, a government over His body, over which He is the head. And even more lacking today than an appreciation for the authority of the pulpit is a recognition of the authority of the elders. When the authority which Christ has instituted is

despised, is it any wonder that the Church accomplishes little of its task?

What church can claim to have a majority of members who understand the relationship between spirit and body, and seek health care in that context? What church does not deal with the physical effects of sin in the lives of members? What church can afford to ignore God's commands in the spheres impacted by illness. Let us then, the elders appointed by Christ over His body, take responsibility for our flocks, to nurture and teach them the whole counsel of God. And as we teach and lead, may God restore authority.