

# A Biblical Perspective on AIDS?

## A Review Article

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**W**hat is the Christian response to contemporary issues?

Christians cannot simply stand aloof, on the fence, spectating at issues of local, national, regional or global concern. As the light or salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16), they must provide workable alternatives or solutions in crises.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is amongst the world's most crucial concerns. Individuals, governments and non-governmental organizations and the international community continue to contribute enormously towards the fight against AIDS. Dr. Donald Clarke's **AIDS: The Biblical Solutions** is an indication that the Church recognizes the reality of AIDS and its ever-increasing and challenging implications on humanity. Clarke's book is informed by his vast experience

as a Christian minister, counselor and educator/theologian.

The book has eight chapters. Chapter One deals with basic facts on AIDS: definitions, origins, symptoms, uniqueness, concepts and misconceptions regarding its transmission, precautions a Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) positive individual needs to take and preventative measures against its spread. The facts are enhanced by quotes from medical circles.

The second chapter identifies biblical precepts related to AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD's). The spiritual, mental, and physical consequences of immorality are explored. The statement, 'The mental institutions are filled with people who refused to confess sin ... to behave responsibly ... to deal with guilt in God's way' (p.26) is rather general and needs reexamination. Regarding

physical consequences, death is the only example he mentions here. This is inadequate. Indeed, Clarke's discussion elsewhere in the book shows that there are many more physical consequences. The chapter discusses briefly but informatively STD's, AIDS included, emphasizing that perpetrators of such are headed for God's judgment. Moral sanctity is given as the solution for STD's. Clarke, however, clarifies that AIDS is not judgment upon the innocent, meaning that not all people with AIDS (PWA) are necessarily immoral. This qualification, however, needed to be stated louder than it is in this book. The Church has often been accused of taking an accusative attitude of judging PWA *en masse* as sinners rather than practically addressing their plight. Accordingly, the Church should seriously revisit this stand.

Chapter Three is the author's evaluation of the existing worldwide campaign efforts against AIDS. Promotion of safe sex, limiting of sexual partners, sex education, use of condoms, creating AIDS awareness among the public, caring and being humane to PWA are included in various campaign strategies. These, according to Clarke, are futile attempts to effectively combat AIDS. Sexual abstinence or marital fidelity constitute his prescription for AIDS. Clarke's recommendations cannot be

simplistically dismissed. An articulate moral theology must be upheld in frankly dealing with most of the contemporary global dilemmas. No efforts at tackling AIDS can be rated as serious enough if they ignore bold reference to moral realities. To a large extent, if people shunned bars, discos, prostitution and sodomy, AIDS would be brought to minimal levels. The bone of contention may be what many could view as Clarke's hardline stance that dollars, hours and efforts expended so far on stopping AIDS are merely a waste. To be sure, we are dealing with AIDS not just in a theocracy or in a christocentric enclosure but in a pluralistic society. What are the practical dimensions and implications of the author's recommendations? Some PWA may be interested only in our practical forms of therapy without necessarily adopting the Christian faith we present to them. Clarke, assuming a Christian audience, has not adequately addressed this reality.

Chapter Four examines the marriage estate as God's design to shield society against suffering e.g. AIDS. Clarke is right in the sense that most people consciously enter marriage with blissful hopes. He observes that divorce, pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations and AIDS hinder realization of such bliss. He specifies what, from a biblical viewpoint, are approved and

forbidden sexual relationships. It is emphasized that conjugal rights are a privilege only within the marital institution. The chapter includes an outline of what he considers to be proper and improper marriage situations. This latter part is relevant in portraying the reality of most marriages in Kenya. It would benefit from more in-depth discussion. First, a biblical basis for discrediting some marriage situations is not given. Second, they are not viewed within the socio-economic milieu that called them into existence. Third, workable solutions to these problems are missing just as the full effect and implications of doing away with them are not addressed. Finally, a married audience is assumed. What of the unmarried and those that may never marry? Marriage, though a yearning for many, is increasingly becoming inaccessible to many, especially ladies. Verses quoted to support the no-divorce-whatsoever view seem convincing except for Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 which allow for divorce on infidelity grounds. The author's silence about these passages does not help inquisitive readers. Nevertheless, the chapter is useful in raising these issues for further discussion. It has useful suggestions for working towards fidelity in marriage by spouses. Apart from outlining some roles for spouses, it also

deals with some very real and practical marriage issues with regard to AIDS.

Since AIDS is viewed primarily as a moral problem rooted in sexual promiscuity, Chapter Five provides some practical principles on how to abstain from illicit sex, enhance moral rectitude and hence avoid contracting AIDS. The principles include devotion to scripture, correct thinking, being circumspect about what to read, watch/see, eat, sites to visit and company to associate with. The clarion call to 'No Sex' outside marital precincts is resounded in this chapter. The chapter calls attention to the moral integrity in cognitive, hygienic, and dietary aspects that should always characterize Christians. It is pointed out that this cannot be worked out on one's own initiative without divine intervention, but it still remains an individual's responsibility to exercise self-control. This balance is commendable. Church leaders are called upon to inculcate the youth with good values to enable them to live pure lives. This advice is appropriate. The youth are amongst the most vulnerable, at risk group to AIDS.

Chapters Six and Seven introduce a new and practical dimension, namely, counseling PWA. An emphatic Christian focus is unmistakable in these chapters. Accordingly, non-biblical counseling efforts are dismissed.

Goals, counselors, principles, suggestions and guidelines associated with counseling must be clearly christocentric. One can easily get the impression that Christians have a monopoly on wisdom, charisma, oratory, intelligence, or qualities that constitute effective counseling. This may be disputed by many. As much as it should be a prerogative in Christianity, counseling in itself is not a monopoly of Christians. Indeed, even Christian/biblical counseling benefits immensely from theories, principles developed by non-biblical proponents and disciplines without necessarily compromising its peculiarities. Taking every opportunity to witness for Christ is definitely crucial. This does not always mean refusing to acknowledge divergent standpoints or worthy contributions from others. We must give them their due recognition, both commending and pointing out their flaws objectively. In his recommendations, Clarke assumes that all pastors are trained or trainers in counseling. I cannot emphasize enough that counseling, including biblical/Christian counseling, is a discipline with recognized rudiments which apprentices, including Christians, need to master in order to be effective.

Chapter Six is a useful guide to a counsellor. It identifies important states a counsellee may be in: hopelessness,

shame, guilt, anger, bitterness, fear, worry, depression, suicidal, suffering. Thus, a PWA counsellee needs comfort and comprehensive succor from a counsellor. Chapter Seven has a variety of questions PWA may have with respect to spiritual, social, ethical and economic implications of AIDS. These questions are very important to counselors and counselees. Most of the answers accompanying the questions, though not exhaustive, are very practical and honest and deserve reading.

The final chapter is pragmatic in approach. The author revisits his emphasis on moral integrity in dealing with AIDS. The Church must speak against immorality. Some practical dimensions of ministry with a focus on AIDS are charted out. AIDS counseling centres, ministries for AIDS orphans and widows (what of widowers?), premarital counseling classes, church organized seminars on biblical sexuality and holistic activities/programmes for the youth are recommended. The Church is advised to be compassionate to the afflicted. The Church's challenge is to adequately present Jesus Christ as the answer in crises.

Some features make this book an important addition to the hitherto available literature on AIDS. Christians are duty-bound to provide

network efforts in AIDS education, prevention and care as a witness to Christ's compassion. There are practical biblical suggestions that can enrich a Christian counselor especially during home and hospital visitations to PWA. Some of the suggestions are applicable to other counseling situations as well. There are numerous biblical references on marriage, sexuality and suffering. These will benefit especially Christian counselors. There is the need to theologize such scriptural portions and relate them to counseling principles more than has been done. Apart from creating general awareness about AIDS, the book is unique in its practical dimensions especially in relation to Christian moral theology. The earnest call is that Christians at both individual and institutional levels must be practically concerned about the AIDS/HIV pandemic.

Readers of various categories will easily follow the language. Tabular forms and pictorial illustrations used here vivify the discussion, though statistical figures would have been a valuable inclusion. The greatest portion of the book serves the title. The book represents initial steps by Christians in addressing AIDS. These must be continued even further in practical dimensions in consistence with ministry that should always characterize the evangelical tradition.

A few errors and inconsistencies are detectable in this work. First, the word marriage is misspelt as marriage p. 51. Second, both the British and the American spelling styles are used indiscriminately, sometimes even for the same word. Notable cases include, behavior p.19/ behaviour p33, 51, 66, etc, counselor p.26/ counselor pp.83, 84, counseling pp.123, 125/ counseling p.137, counseled p.60, honour p.66, 76, honours p.66, honourable p.70, dishonour p. 109, tumors p.17, saviour p.35, defense p.54, self-centered p.94, centres p.123, fulfill pp.48, 94, 97, fulfilled p.71, fulfillment pp.30, 45, 50, and the verbs practice pp.21, 38,84, practiced p.120. The author should maintain a particular spelling style in order not to confuse a reader. Third, biblical books are sometimes abbreviated eg. Genesis pp.19, 21, 46 and Matt. p.22, 47. Elsewhere the books are rendered in full without any particular order eg. Genesis pp.19, 30, 45, Exodus pp.19, 22, Leviticus pp.44, Deuteronomy pp.17, 48, I Corinthians pp.21, 46, Matthew p.46 etc. Finally, though the close-to-thirty sources cited at the end of the book are valuable for further reference, it is appalling that very few of them are from Kenya/ Africa. Approaches to contemporary issues should incorporate not only contextual examples but also worldview for greater relevance. This should not

be difficult especially for Clarke with his about ten-year-experience in Kenya. Indeed, in the text he refers to African countries eg. Kenya and Uganda p.42, Tanzania and Zambia p.43. Some entries in the text are at variance with those in the sources cited eg. Costick p.42 and Costick p.131.

Fortunately, the aforementioned errors are too few to rob this book of its outstanding contributions. The book readily commends itself as a handbook for Christian readers and all those who have practical concern for AIDS and PWA. It will generate further discussion among readers with regard to the solutions offered. Finally, I should reemphasize, AIDS is a pandemic that requires a holistic and multi-faceted approach. Christians must intensify efforts to curb it. The biblical solution may not be doing it alone as Christians or dismissing all efforts from non-Christian circles.

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***Romans: A New Translation with  
Introduction and Commentary***  
by Joseph A. Fitzmyer  
(New York: Doubleday, 1993) i-xxxiv,  
793 pp., \$40.00

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In 1896, in the preface to their seminal commentary on Romans, William Sanday and Arthur Headlam wrote "The commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans which already exist in English . . . are so good and so varied that to add to their number may well seem superfluous." Over 90 years later, A.J.M. Wedderburn entitled a survey of recent commentaries on Romans "Like An Ever-Rolling Stream". The appearance of yet another commentary on this important epistle may be greeted with groans from those trying to keep up with the flood of literature on Paul. yet a commentary in a major international series by a scholar of Fitzmyer's stature warrants notice.

Father Fitzmyer, a Jesuit priest, is professor emeritus of biblical studies at the Catholic University of America. He is past president of both the Society of Biblical Literature and the Catholic Biblical Association in the United States. Readers will be familiar with his work largely due to his two volume commentary on Luke in the Anchor Bible series. Fitzmyer also wrote the articles on Romans for both the original

and revised Jerome Bible Commentary. In addition, he has published a synthesis of Paul's theology *According to Paul: Studies in the Theology of the Apostle* (Paulist, 1993).

The commentary opens with the author's own translation plus a treatment of introductory matters. As in his commentary on Luke, the introduction is extensive (almost 120 pages). The comments on the text begin with a reprint of the author's translation followed by general comments on the passage as a whole and then detailed verse by verse notes. Fitzmyer consistently provides clear, brief explanations of exegetical options (valuable for teachers). transliterated Greek or printed Latin are common, though always followed by an English translation. An extensive list of abbreviations is included as well as indices for subjects and commentators/modern authors.

With regard to larger interpretive issues, Fitzmyer classifies Romans as an "essay-letter" written within specific historical circumstances. However, his comments on the text itself often treat the text as a more abstract theological discussion divorced from those concrete circumstances. The "works" which Paul opposes Fitzmyer's understands in the traditional sense of deeds done to attain righteousness, contrary to interpretations recently advocated by