

THE RELEVANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH FOR A MODERN WORLD

By David T. Tharp*

When an individual becomes aware of certain physical or emotional perceptions that are different from his or her normal range of experiences, a critical decision follows. The individual may choose to ignore these changes and hope that they will go away. That may prove to be the case with minor illnesses or injuries, but in other cases the results are not so benign.

Not infrequently, the decision to disregard these unusual sensations represents one's ignoring the very feedback signals that the human body was designed to provide to indicate its struggle with a potentially overwhelming illness or injury. What one believes to be minor indigestion may represent a major heart attack, and what appears to be a slightly unusual mole may represent a highly malignant melanoma. If the abnormal sensation goes away and the body is able to repair itself without outside intervention, then a physician and the benefits that he or she represents become irrelevant. However, if the underlying problem is not so readily remedied, the decision whether to seek medical treatment may represent life or death.

If the individual enters the medical setting, those abnormal perceptions or sensations now are called "symptoms" and represent either the direct effect of the physical insult upon the body or else the response of the body to the insult. These symptoms, along with other tests that measure bodily functions that cannot be seen externally, form the basis for establishing a "diagnosis." The diagnosis represents an explanation of the problem, its probable etiology, and its potential danger to the individual. From this understanding, a means of treatment is formulated, which then becomes highly relevant.

As one examines the question of the relevance of the Christian faith for a modern world within the context of this medical metaphor, the issue becomes whether the modern world, and mankind specifically, is in such a state that it, like the human body when confronted with a minor illness or injury, can repair itself, or whether it represents a more malignant condition which requires the outside assistance of a "physician." To prove that the Christian faith is relevant to the modern world does not require one to prove that the modern world is necessarily in a worse state than in the past, but merely that it is in a state of "dis-ease" that cannot heal itself, that ultimately is destructive or life threatening, and for which the Christian faith offers potential benefits.

One of the malignant symptoms affecting society today is the drug problem.

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Drug use destroys lives, as Squitieri describes how “more people were murdered during 1990 than any time in the USA’s history — and by most projections this is just the start of the nation’s most violent decade.” He goes on to quote Frank Crivello, a Wisconsin state judge and former Milwaukee district attorney, who states, “There is rage out there . . . You have the drug epidemic, the proliferation of guns, gangs, of course, and a whole sector of the community that lives in utter poverty and hopelessness. Everything right on down the line is more violent.”¹

In spite of clear medical evidence regarding the negative consequences of drugs, whether they be legal, such as alcohol or nicotine, or illegal, as with cocaine or marijuana,² there are some who would rationalize away the symptom as well as the danger. In arguing for the legalization of drugs as an answer to the drug epidemic and its associated crime, Princeton’s Professor Ethan Nadelmann states that his case is based upon the assumption “that most illegal drugs are not as dangerous as commonly believed.”³ Why would society choose to ignore such a malignant symptom as the current drug epidemic? Giannini states, “As long as people need to feel unnatural ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ in order to cope with their daily activities, substance abuse will continue to be a major problem . . . patients must accept that they have been chemically dependent and receive help in finding new techniques for coping with the stresses in their lives.”⁴ It seems that this assessment applies to society at large.

Many feel that the drug epidemic and the increased violence in our society are related. Certain youths, ages 15 to 24, have been described as a

new lost generation — fueled by the violence of the drug trade, armed through easy access to high-powered firearms, angered by an economy that provides little hope to the less fortunate and guided by an entertainment structure that often glorifies murder.

The number of murders committed by juveniles likely will quadruple by the end of the decade, partially because of child abuse, drug abuse and poverty, according to an American Psychological Association study.⁵

The tendency to protect one’s personal interests above all else has also become the hallmark of our society. There were 1.5 million babies aborted in 1986 in the United States, with about 25 percent being repeats and perhaps 260,000 going unreported. In the Soviet Union, approximately 10 million abortions are performed each year with 2-3 abortions performed for each live birth.⁶ Child abuse, both physical and sexual, is symptomatic of a generation brought up to “look out for number one.” It is suggested that “as many as 40 million people, about one in six Americans, may have been sexually victimized as children.”⁷

Escalating governmental and personal debt, symptomatic of feeling entitled to material goods one cannot afford, the continued spread of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases in spite of extensive educational programs, and an ever-increasing divorce rate are symptoms of the breakdown of society secondary to putting immediate individual desires above all else. These represent

a malignant undercurrent in our society that neither our technology nor our education seem able to solve, and the consequences are potentially fatal. According to a quoted report from the Centers for Disease Control, "the suicide rate for 15- to 24-year-olds increased 40 percent during the 1970s . . . an increase in family breakups and of alcohol and drug abuse, inadequate job and educational opportunities, and the greater availability of guns have been offered as explanations."⁸

Is the Christian faith relevant to the modern world? Certainly one sees mankind in the death grip of a malignant disease, a disease called sin, in which individuals place themselves and their desires above that of God, in an attempt to become "like God" (Gen. 3:5). In treating this disease, Jesus makes it clear that, as the "Great Physician," he is critically relevant. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). The question is not whether Christ and the Christian faith is relevant to the modern world, but whether Christians, as Christ's representatives, are relevant.

The Christian life represents a wartime existence, a spiritual war in which there will be no peace or armistice until Christ returns. Piper states, "The problem is that most Christians don't really believe that life is war and that our invisible enemy is awesome . . . There is a peacetime casualness in the church about spiritual things."⁹ Dr. Timothy Warner summarizes this condition when he states

The battle seems to be intensifying in North America at the end of the 20th century as evidenced by such things as the rise of cults, the New Age Movement, fantasy/role playing games, heavy metal rock music, Eastern mystical religions, various psychic and occult activities, and ultimately the overt worship of Satan. People in Africa are shocked at some of the reports of activities associated with Satan worship.

At the same time, the church has become more and more like the world around it and has lost its sense of spiritual power which would enable it to cope with this rise in demonic activity. We are being forced to take a second look at a subject that we would rather avoid completely.¹⁰

As Christians, we must take seriously 2 Corinthians 10:3-4, which states, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world." Christ, as the Great Physician, calls us to be healers in the middle of a war zone. If Christians choose to remain comfortable and safe, walled off from the world within the confines of a religious "country club" known as the church, or else so much like the world that they become invisible within their society, then the Christian faith will not be relevant to the modern world. But if Christians choose to live out their faith as fully committed soldiers and healers for Christ, then the Christian faith is not only relevant to the modern world but represents its only hope in the face of a fatal disease.

NOTES

¹Tom Squitieri, "19 Cities Set Records for Murder," *USA Today*, 2 January 1991, 1.

²Harold I. Kaplan and Benjamin J. Sadock, *Synopsis of Psychiatry: Behavioral Sciences, Clinical Psychiatry*. 5th ed., (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1988), 223, 236, 249; and David Gelman, Lisa Drew, Mary Hager, Mark Miller, David L. Gonzalez, and Jeanne Gordon, "Roots of Addiction," *Newsweek*, 20 February 1989, 56.

³Robert L. Bartley, ed., "The Devil You Know," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 December 1989, 6(A).

⁴A. James Giannini, William A. Price, and Matthew C. Giannini, "Contemporary Drugs of Abuse," *The Ohio State Medical Journal* (August 1986): 513; reprint, *American Family Practice* (March 1986): pages not cited.

⁵Squitieri, 2.

⁶Rus Walton, *Biblical Solutions to Contemporary Problems: A Handbook* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers Inc., 1988): 8, 11.

⁷Alfie Kohn, "Shattered Innocence," *Psychology Today* (February 1987): 54.

⁸Mark T. Sampson, "Suicide Rate Rising for 15-24-Year-Olds," *Clinical Psychiatry News*, 5 (May 1987): 1, 15.

⁹John Piper, "Prayer: The Power that Wields the Weapon," *Mission Frontiers* (June-July 1989): 15.

¹⁰Timothy M. Warner, "Spiritual Warfare," distributed to Free Church Senior Pastors by Church Ministries Department, Evangelical Free Church of America, May 7, 1990: 1.

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