



AIDS: Are there Biblical Perspectives?

Donald Macleod, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free Church College, Edinburgh, delivered this paper in April 1987 at a Rutherford House Conference on AIDS .

My remit is to discuss what the Bible has to say on this particular theme. I shall confine myself strictly to that. We are approaching the problem as Christians and unless we take our response from God's own word we have nothing distinctive to say. You will notice, too, that I speak only of *perspectives*. There is no direct biblical comment on AIDS. In the nature of the case there couldn't be, because when the Bible was written this problem hadn't arisen. But are there in the Scriptures perspectives which are relevant to this virus and the problems it creates for our society? I believe there are; and I want to begin by highlighting three of them.

First, there is the sovereignty of God. The most basic of all Christian convictions is that God exists; and exists as a God in sovereign control. That means a control which is both macrocosmic and microcosmic. It extends to existence in all its forms and in all its magnitudes. Divine fore-ordination, divine preservation and divine government operate at the level of both astro-physics and micro-biology. That means that, as a theologian, I have to believe that every single virus comes into being under the divine government. It doesn't exist unknown to God. It doesn't exist despite God. It doesn't exist in independence of God or beyond God. Its origination, its mutations and its development are all subject to the divine sovereignty. I realise that that is, at one very important level, a great problem for us Christians. It is part of the stupendous problem of theodicy, justifying God's ways to man. It is not, however, simply a problem. It is also, I believe, a great comfort and encouragement, because we are dealing with a sovereignty which is intensely and directly personal: the sovereignty not of a system but of God.

May I stress that point? The sovereignty is defined for us in Christ, the Lamb of God. It must be seen *Christologically*. We must bring to bear upon it all the insight into God's character available to us from the person, the life and the work of Jesus Christ. Precisely because it is the Lamb who is in the midst of the Throne, Christians must see the AIDS epidemic in terms not only of abstract sovereignty, or of impersonal – system – sovereignty, but in terms of Christ's sovereignty. And it is of course implicit in that the problem is amenable to prayer and intercession. We should not dismiss that as simplistic and naive. This virus is not some independent and self-governing and self-protecting entity. It is one which in all its phases and all its mutations exists under the sovereignty of God.

The second perspective I want to mention is the divine wrath. Let me say again, I am dealing in biblical perspectives. It is important to remind myself here that there is an objective moral order. The great imperatives are not simply utilitarian. They are not simply social defence mechanisms. They are not the consequences of our own embryonic environment, nor the consequences simply of human convention. There is a great objective moral order of

right and wrong. It is not simply in my head. It is out there, in the world as it is. Moreover, it is not simply an impersonal moral system. It is an order rooted in God Himself as supreme moral reality. Hence the great sanctities – life, truth, marriage – have their roots in the order of creation and, beyond that, in the very nature of God himself. That means that to violate any of these sanctities is to violate the very order in which God has placed us and the very nature that God has given to us (as bearers of His own image). There are the most profound and the most vital ties between the nature of marital fidelity and the trinitarian existence of the living God Himself. I shan't go far into this; but the Resurrection itself, that empty tomb, is the supreme validation of the claim that we live in a world of objective moral reality. It is that objective order which, in protest against the Crucifixion, has raised Christ from the dead.

When we practise immorality, when we unlawfully take life, when we bend the truth, when we violate the norms of sexual relationship, we come into conflict with this objective moral order, which, as I said, is an intensely personal moral order; and biblically (and that's all I'm saying for the moment), biblically, that order reacts; biblically, that God, that person, God, reacts, in the intensely personal reaction defined in the Bible as *the wrath of God*. We already find such reaction away back in the story of the Fall of Genesis Three, in the irrevocable and definitive expulsion of man from Eden. Whatever your view of that narrative, that is the biblical position: in response to man's defiance, the personal God reacts in terms of the irrevocable expulsion from Eden. There is no way that we can climb back over that divine word into some kind of paradisaical existence. We find the same reaction again in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Talking simply in biblical terms, that lifestyle, indubitably and on the most colossal scale, defied the norms of God; and God again reacted in an intensely personal (and destructive) way for the vindication of His own norms.

If I may dare to say so, I find the same situation again at what is surely the greatest moment in history, the cross of Calvary itself. This is not simply the great revelation of God's love for the world. It is also the great revelation of God's judgement upon human sin. There, in the flesh of Christ, between the hours of 9 and 3 on a certain day, God condemned sin in the flesh. It is not simply an idea or a doctrine: it is a fact that, on that cross, man suffered; man suffered at the hand of God Himself. One of the great problems is that we so seldom take seriously the moral dilemmas posed by the Cross. Right through the New Testament, the Cross is presented not simply as the work of Christ, but as the work of God the Father. It presents us with this stupendous spectacle of God dealing with His own son in terms of wrath. God condemned sin in the flesh.

It's against that background that one must reflect on Romans One

and its solemn teaching as to God's dealings with the ancient Roman empire. In that great passage, from verse 18 to the end of the chapter, the Apostle is talking of the wrath of God revealed from Heaven. It is not the wrath of an implacable system. It is the wrath of the living God. Now, for me the position is not that AIDS itself is the judgement of God. Paul is not saying that the diseases which result from promiscuity are the wrath of God. He is saying something much more radical. He is saying that promiscuity itself is the wrath of God! 'God gave them over to a reprobate mind'. And it is in that reprobate mind, in that promiscuity itself, that the Apostle locates the manifestation of the wrath of God.

The question we have to ask ourselves today is not whether one particular disease is itself God's judgement and God's wrath. We have to ask whether the lifestyle we have collectively adopted and for which we have a substantial and collective responsibility is not already the judgement of God.

Thirdly, there is the divine pity. Again, I go back to my basal fact that God is defined for us in Jesus Christ; and I recall that marvellous picture in the synoptic gospels where we are told that Christ beheld the city and wept over it (Luke 19:41). I believe that, true though it is that God deals with man judgementally, in terms of personal moral rectitude, it gives Him no pleasure. And I believe that He looks at our society in all its current bewilderment with pity. Even the particular victims of this disease are the objects of divine pity and of the divine commitment to comfort through the offer of His love.

These, then, are the three perspectives: the sovereignty of God, the wrath of God and the pity of God. I want to follow this up with three or four supplementary points, of which the first is this: There is a great need to avoid simplistic judgements in this area. C. S. Lewis, you recall, spoke of the historicist fallacy: the pretension that we can ourselves find patterns, divine patterns, in individual histories. I've said that it is thoroughly biblical theology to believe that our current promiscuity and its consequent diseases are manifestations of divine judgement. But I would be very reluctant to home in on particular cases and say with confidence that these are themselves being judged by God. I don't think it's at all helpful to conclude in every single case that, behind the affliction, the suffering and the pain, there lies deviant behaviour.

My second concern is this: the need for the most careful commitment to truth on the part of Christians in this field. It is a sensational subject, on which there is a good deal of misinformation and prejudice. It is incumbent upon us to deal with the information problem responsibly and to be careful as to our facts before we hasten to pronounce upon them. The whole area demands the utmost academic integrity.

Thirdly, we must remind ourselves, whatever our involvement, that, 'There but for the Grace of God, go I!' It seems to me that much damage is done by intervention in the problems of the weak by those who think they are strong and beyond temptation: as if they themselves didn't possess the same moral fragility. We must bear in mind that we share a common humanity. We must bear in mind that, although we ourselves may not be particularly temptable in certain areas, such as the area of homosexuality, there are other areas in life where we are at least equally guilty. It is a great pity that immorality has been defined so narrowly. It is surely of enormous importance that those who care and those who counsel must realise, as they deal with alcoholics or violent

criminals or the promiscuous or the addicted that, perhaps, only circumstance, only lack of opportunity, has made their own lives marginally different. How fragile the mechanisms which have held us back from the same collapse and from the same disgrace. As one contemplates articulate pro-hanging lobbies and such other phenomena, one is often painfully aware that those who agitate such proposals do so from a basis of enormous personal security: the certainty that they themselves are immune from such things. I cannot myself, as a Christian, in the light of biblical teaching, in the light of personal self-knowledge, take that detached view, even of deviant human behaviour.

Fourthly, we need to remind ourselves and those we help that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin. We have, I suppose, our own graduated scale of iniquities; and on that scale, immorality, homosexuality and drug abuse are placed very, very high. And I suppose that for many of these who today find themselves trapped within this disease, in its inexorable progress towards fatality, the greatest problem is the problem of despair; the feeling that, although for most men and women there may be forgiveness, yet *they* are beyond the pale because their sin is of such an appalling deep dye. We have to learn to project into that terrible situation the Good News that there is no sin for which Christ has not provided a sufficient atonement; there is no stain, there is no culpability, there is no degree of depravity, there is no horror of the recollected past, with which the blood of Christ is not able to deal; and we must never lull any human being into saying 'there is no forgiveness for me'. There is forgiveness for all sin.

"We must never forget that our Christian faith is primarily good news and that our current calling is not simply to stand in the heart of the 'law and order' movement crying for sanctions. Our supreme calling is to express the word of God's good news, even to our own promiscuous society, and at last to the victims of this particular disease."

Fifthly, there is that great word of the Lord's in John's Gospel, 'Him who comes I will in no wise cast out' (John 6:37). I'm talking here of our basic equipment theologically; what do we bring into these tragic pastoral situations? Well, we bring this: the assurance that the person who turns to God, no matter how close the end, no matter what backdrop in terms of the past, whoever comes, will in no wise be cast out. God will accept the penitent, the prodigal, whenever he comes; and with whatever record he comes. Now these surely are great certainties: the knowledge of the Blood that cleanses and of the Father who will always receive. I believe that we must speak, in our current crisis, a word of judgement. I believe we must speak of the wrath of God. I was very intrigued that, at the very point this year when there was so much being said in mockery of the Christian doctrine of God's judgement in this whole field, at that very moment, our society was baying for blood over the vicarage rape in Ely. It seemed so inconsistent that we had such built-in standards of justice at one level, and yet wanted an amoral universe at another. And I believe that, if in fact we abandon the idea of an absolute divine rectitude, an objective moral order, an

eternal juridical system, we shall end up, not in a world of greater tolerance, but in a world of moral chaos. But having said all that, having spoken of judgement, and of wrath, and of absolute jurisprudence, we must never forget that our Christian faith is primarily good news and that our current calling is not simply to stand in the heart of the 'law and order' movement crying for sanctions. Our supreme calling is to express the word of God's good news, even to our own promiscuous society, and at last to the victims of this particular disease.

But how are we to apply these principles in our current situation? We must seek answers at three different levels. First of all, how do the principles apply to society at large? Well, surely in this way: our society, our western society in particular, has to reckon seriously with the possibility that here is a word of divine judgement and an expression of the divine wrath. I believe that at the moment that judgement is only provisional. It is a summons to repentance. It is a call to examine our own lifestyle and to ask what it looks like in the judgement of God. How does God see the way things are? I don't want at all to convey the impression that, in this world of today, this Scotland of today, there is promiscuity everywhere. There is still a remarkable degree of fidelity and purity, and I want to express my thanks to God for that. But there is an unprecedentedly high level of infidelity. There is an unprecedentedly high level of promiscuity. And our attention is being drawn to it by this remarkable, providential phenomenon. God is saying to us collectively, 'Look at your lifestyle'. It would be, in my judgement, quite calamitous if we were today simply to take collective evasive action. I do not think that one can take evasive action against the Almighty. That is the status of much of our current attitude. We are trying to find some system whereby we can continue to live as we have lived in a permissive society: but with impunity. We want quit of AIDS, but we want to hang on to our promiscuity. That seems to me to be exposing ourselves to an appalling risk, the risk that the Almighty will escalate the conflict.

We may put it in different terms. We may abandon the whole metaphor of the judge and speak instead of the Father. But it comes to the same thing: that our Father in Heaven is talking to us collectively, drawing our attention to the problem of our lifestyle and challenging us in the most solemn way to amend it and to reform it. Whether He be judge or father, the logic is the same. We cannot afford simply to whistle in the dark and pretend that we haven't even noticed our Father's displeasure.

To go just a little bit further: we have to look at the roots of our collective promiscuity. We have to identify the factors in society which have contributed to the emergence of this new lifestyle. We have to look at our entertainment industry, our obscenity laws and, above all, our educational system. And of course, in that exercise, what the Church itself has said and what the Church itself has done must also come under the microscope, because we ourselves, to our shame, long ago ceased to speak of right and wrong, of blacks and whites and absolutes. I know very well the difficulty of applying them in, say, a hospital theatre. But the problem is not that there are no absolutes. It's precisely because there *are* absolutes that there are moral dilemmas. We have to get back to this mighty fact of an objective moral order in which something is right and something is wrong. As I said earlier, the distinction isn't in my head. It's in the nature of things. To be wrong is to be in conflict with the universe itself.

Then, secondly, the promiscuous individual: how do these perspectives apply to him or to her? What do we say? How do we

speak? Well, we must speak God's word. We may speak much else, as medical personnel, as counsellors, as friends, but our distinctive input as Christians is that to this man or woman we speak the word of God. In other words, we tell him what God thinks of his behaviour. That's what we owe. That is the service God calls us to perform: to tell him or her what God thinks of the way he or she is living. And I say *what God says*, because I take it that the Bible is accepted by most of us as the word of God. That means that we speak God's word judgementally: 'God condemns the way you live'. It means, too, that we speak directionally: 'God wants your lifestyle changed'. And we may support that directive by pointing out, among other things, that this lifestyle has certain medical consequences, because it violates the way things are. I know that judgemental counselling is unfashionable. I know that directive counselling is unfashionable. But we are called as Christians to speak God's word. And I believe that, in all counselling, one of the most important contributions is that we indicate our moral grid. Very, very often, these people are disorientated morally. They're insecure. They're uncertain. They have no reference points, no navigation lights. Part of what the Church owes them is a moral reference grid.

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And then at last, the AIDS victim himself or herself, diagnosed as having this disease, and trying to cope with all the physical, emotional and social problems which it creates for him, How do we deal, as Christians, with this situation? My basic concern is to say this: that we offer that individual unqualified acceptance, and that we say, 'We'll be here to the end'. We say that knowing full well that, as he or she moves down into the depths of his trauma, there will be great upheavals emotionally, moments of despair, moments of anger, moments of rejecting our proffered help and advice. We shall see, almost inevitably, many of those who did once offer help moving out when the going gets too rough or the situation becomes too demanding. There may be pressure on ourselves from our own social context not to take certain risks, not to be identified with that kind of behaviour. There may be many irrational fears preying upon our own minds. But still, *acceptance*: our own human commitment and love that will never let go; which will stand by the alcoholic in all his or her ups and downs, rejections and despairs; and which will do the same for the AIDS victim. Stand by. Simply be there.

Beyond that, beyond simply being there, we'll offer all possible care: physical, social, financial, psychiatric. There will, I'm sure, be more and more rumblings among certain professional bodies for various degrees of protection from this disease, demands for certain parameters which will depersonalise care further and further. I think it's very important for Christians to say 'No!' to

(continued on p. 24)

From David F. Wright, New College, Edinburgh.

Dear Sir,

Since Dr Clifford has kindly sent me an advance copy of his second letter, perhaps you will allow me to do him – and the longsuffering readers of *Evangel* – the courtesy of a prompt – and final – response.

I will not attempt to reply *seriatim* to his latest arguments, which introduce a puzzling ‘psychological doctrine of *sola fide*’. Instead, let me recall what sparked off these exchanges. It was my objection to ARCIC II’s claim that Anglican theologians of the Reformation age took ‘by faith alone’ to mean ‘only for the merit of Christ’, *i.e.*, a claim that a statement about how we receive justification (‘by faith alone’) was reducible to a statement about the objective grounds of justification (‘only for the merit of Christ’). This still seems to me an indefensible claim, not least because of its linguistic implications. (If all that is at issue is whether justification is granted solely for the merit of Christ, why muddy the waters by talking about faith at all?) My reading of the Reformers (if it is not hazardous to generalise about such a varied category) leads me to conclude that, in their eyes, ‘only for the merit of Christ’ could not be maintained without ‘by faith alone’. Both affirmations are essential, and the latter must not be collapsed into the former.

Although the Reformers defined faith in somewhat different ways, they did not teach that ‘the same necessity attaches to love and obedience as it does to faith in those who are justified’ – if by the last five words Alan Clifford means ‘those who receive

justification, in respect of the receiving of justification’. If he is referring to those who are already justified, the sentence is irrelevant to the present discussion. As Calvin’s reply to Sadoletto makes plain, objection was taken to any attempt to displace ‘faith alone’. Hence the Reformers would not agree that we are justified ‘by faith and love’ or ‘by faith and good works’. Alan Clifford’s selective quotations do not undermine this claim. Calvin indeed holds that ‘no other faith justifies “but faith working through love”’, but he proceeds immediately to say, ‘But it does not take its power to justify from that working of love’ (*Inst.* 3:11:20). He does indeed refuse to dream of a faith devoid of good works or of a justification that stands without them, but he proceeds immediately to say, ‘This alone is of importance: having admitted that faith and good works must cleave together, we still lodge justification in faith, not works’ (*Inst.* 3:16:1).

There remains a quite critical distinction here which must not be eroded. True faith in Christ may never be without some measure of love or hope or kindness to others, but *in respect of justification* what matters is only faith, *i.e.*, faith irrespective of such piety and good works. Clarity might be advanced if we avoided the ambiguity of ‘alone’, and spoke instead of ‘solely by faith’. The Reformers believed that Scripture required them to ascribe our enjoyment of justification by the sole merits of Christ exclusively to faith. Neither ARCIC II nor Alan Clifford must be allowed to blur this cardinal point.

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(continued from page 11)

these things and to say that they will take the risks implicit in the care, whatever these are going to be. And we’ve heard, these risks are often exaggerated. That doesn’t make them any less powerful as dissuasives against loving, caring acceptance. We have to accept, we have to care, even if that involves a large amount of risk-taking.

But that care must be holistic. It must deal with the total human being and the whole range of his or her problems. Now, he or she has physical problems. He or she has enormous psychiatric problems. But surely we must not leave it to others to emphasise that he or she also has spiritual problems, the problems of his or her relationship with God. Where on earth have we got to, if as Christians we are saying that we can’t take religion into this situation? Now, I recognise that we have no right to abuse our professional prestige in order to proselytise. On the other hand, we have no right to make that principle an excuse for ignoring our spiritual responsibility. That AIDS victim is guilty before God. That AIDS victim is spiritually impotent. That AIDS victim will soon stand before God’s judgement seat. That AIDS victim has a conscience which, at least occasionally, drags him before the divine tribunal. That man or woman is afraid of death, or of what’s beyond death. These problems may not be confessed.

They may not be introduced into the discussion. But they are there. We have a responsibility to bring a message of forgiveness, the offer of divine help and power and the prospect of life and immortality, even into the darkness and trauma of this tragic situation. We should not be embarrassed by it! There we are (I know the feeling) in a hospital swarming with pathologists and psychiatrists. And here is a poor little clergyman or a Christian friend among all those white coats and all this technology. Yet there are needs that neither the white coats nor the machines can deal with, and it is our responsibility to face up to them.

I close on this note: anyone involved in counselling, at whatever level, has recurring, even persistent feelings of overwhelming impotence: the inability to change, to alter things, to get results. Does this not drive one back to one great reality: to the presence of the Spirit of God in this post-Pentecost age? As we sit at hospital beds, or wherever else it may be, dealing with this problem and all its aftermath, many a time we must cry, ‘Lord, help!’. Yes, use the Truth! Use the Word! But remember: its own logic, its own rationality, its own relevance, its own clarity, are not enough. There must be that power that we cannot command, that we cannot deploy and that we certainly don’t possess. In the last analysis, the Holy Spirit is the Only Comforter.