

**AMERICAN BAPTIST POLICY STATEMENT ON
HEALTH, HEALING AND WHOLENESS**

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Among current social phenomena that challenge all Christians are the widespread problems of substance abuse, the rapidly increasing numbers of chronically ill persons, a new openness to the care of the dying and a greater willingness of many people to take active responsibility for their own health. Medical science continues to offer new capabilities, including the means of sustaining biological life beyond natural limits. Efforts to alter the genetic "code" and new understandings about how thought processes relate to the sense of well-being force us to venture into areas of uncertainty. In addition, technological advances contribute to the rapidly escalating costs of health care, complicating the issue of equitable access to care.

As a reaction to traditional health care, which is often viewed as narrow, cold and impersonal, movements such as holistic medicine have emerged to offer a warmer, more human alternative. As American Baptists, we do not subscribe to any holistic belief that claims that the source of life is centered within our own individual being, although we do agree that a person is an integration of spirit, mind and body.

The idea of healing is too often linked only with the physical dimension of our being. Certainly, it is within the physical dimension that deceptive healing practices have been most visible. This abuse is one reason why many congregations are reluctant to discuss healing openly or even consider healing a viable ministry of the church. Many of us have lost sight of the role of the church in healing. We fail to recognize that healing is also the mending of broken relationships, the recovery from chemical dependence, the acceptance of God's gift of salvation, the control of physical and psychological symptoms of ill-health through medication, etc. When physical or mental healing does occur without apparent human intervention, it is discussed in whispers if it is acknowledged at all. A sense of embarrassment overcomes joy; murmurs of excuse replace expressions of praise.

Our faith should lead us to a different understanding of health, healing and wholeness, namely, that to be healthy or achieve wholeness does not mean a final or perfect state of being. Wholeness involves the realization and continuous acceptance of the limitations of being a finite creature in a divinely created but fallen order. Being whole means integrating pain, sickness and death into life's meaning. Becoming healthy and whole is a difficult passage where good and evil, suffering and joy, sickness and being well are all intertwined. No matter what degree of health we might display, all of us are wounded. There is no such thing as a person who is completely free from illness, incompleteness and injury to his/her body or psyche. Health and disease are not separate states or opposing qualities. Rather, health and illness are part of a process—a continuum. The sick can be healthy; there is a healthy way to live with a disease. The way we define these terms will determine how we care for health and how we treat illness.

People are searching for the source and the avenue to that perfectly balanced blend of spirit, mind and body that we call wholeness. As Christians, we know and proclaim that source of wholeness to be God and its avenue to be the surrender of spirit, mind and body to God through Jesus Christ.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We exist in a world of accelerating change, of evolving patterns...of world hunger, technological advances, damaged environment, diminishing resources, political realignments. These developments require that we re-examine the ways we express our intent to care, to cure and to love.

Traditionally, society has defined health, healing and wholeness in two ways. The technological model defines health, healing and wholeness functionally. Health is robust physical fitness, whereas disease is a breakdown, an invasion or corrosion of the physical system. Healing is functional restoration, the conquering of an alien destroyer; repair is the goal. Wholeness lacks definition in this scheme—an inherent weakness of the technological model.

The holistic model defines health and wholeness as the balance of body, mind and spirit. Disease is the disruption of that balance. Healing is the restoration of balance. An inordinate emphasis on the individual as the source and sustainer of his or her own life weakens the holistic model.

Both the technological and holistic models are devoid of essential Christian elements. Thus, there is a great need for setting forth the Christian perspective of health, healing and wholeness.

A Christian model involves health, healing and wholeness, and defines health as the state of a person in Christ, a new creature made whole by spiritual conversion (a dramatic turning point or change of heart). True healing is a process that may include repair and/or restoration of balance, but must include or be based on conversion. Wholeness is a dynamic conversion process, incorporating repair, restoration of balance and the transformation of perspective through the power of the Holy Spirit that leads creation closer to the reign of God.

We believe there is an urgent need to live out a Christian model of health, healing and wholeness more fully, especially in light of the current situation, in both the faith community and society.

BIBLICAL/THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Our Judeo-Christian tradition has viewed health, healing and wholeness from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives are rooted in interpretations of the Old and New Testament Scriptures as well as in basic Christian doctrine.

I. Health in the Old Testament

The concept of health occurs throughout the Old Testament. In fact, health was viewed as the state of well-being, completeness and wholeness that resulted from being in a right relationship with God. This state of health was expressed in obedience to God's law, which produced strength and longlife.

Health as Wholeness

The Hebrew word that comes nearest to summing up the Old Testament idea of health is shalom. English versions often translate shalom as "peace," but the Hebrew word meant more than the absence of war. It meant a dynamic condition of wholeness and fulfillment in every aspect of life: physical, mental and spiritual, as well as individual and communal.

Health as right relationship with God

Basic to health in the Old Testament was the concept of righteousness. God is righteous (Ps. 129:4; 145:17), and knows the ways of the righteous (Ps. 1:6). Health as shalom resulted from a right relationship with God (Isaiah 32:17). "Righteousness and peace (shalom) will kiss each other" sang the psalmist, using a vivid metaphor for this intimate connection (Ps. 85:10 RSV).

Health as obedience to God's law

There is substantial Old Testament evidence that faithful obedience to God's law resulted in God's blessing. This faithful action brought about health (shalom), while disobedience resulted in liability to disease (Ex. 15:26, 23:20-26; Lev. 26:14-16, 23-26; Deut. 7:12-15; 28:27-29, 58-62; and Prov. 3:7-8).

Health as strength and long life

One mark of health in the Old Testament was strength, which was equated with shalom (Ps. 29:11). While this strength included physical health, it extended to every aspect of being. A second indication of health was longevity. God promised Abraham both shalom and "a good old age" (Gen. 15:15 RSV). "Length of days," was God's reward for those who kept God's law (Deut. 6:2; I Kings 3:14; Ps. 34:12-14; Prov. 3:1-2; 9:10-11).

II. Health and Healing in the New Testament

The word health appears only twice in the New Testament (Acts 3:16, III John 1:2). But the Old Testament's encompassing perspective on health continues in the New Testament concepts of abundant life, blessedness, holiness, maturity, and especially, healing.

Health as abundant life

The statement by Jesus in John's Gospel, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10 RSV), has often been taken as a description of health. The life Jesus offers is eternal life, without limits of time or space. Relationship with the living God, evidenced in believers, produces wholeness in an ultimate sense.

Health as blessedness

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pictures spiritual well-being (Matt. 5:3-12). The Beatitudes present the qualities of the citizens of the reign of God that are a complete reversal of earthly values. Health as blessedness is defined by God-given standards that cannot be conformed to earthly values.

Health as holiness

Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians can be read as a definition of health: "May the God of peace . . . sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thess. 5:23 RSV). This verse is unique in the New Testament in bringing together body, soul and spirit in the light of God's holiness. The God of shalom makes health holy and maintains wholeness.

Health as maturity

In Paul's letter, he declares it is his aim as a pastor to bring believers to a state of maturity or completion in Christ (Col.1:28). The standard of full spiritual development is Christ himself (Eph. 4:13). Paul acknowledges that he himself has not yet fully arrived at maturity, but is still growing (Phil. 3:12). By implication, health is seen not as static, but as dynamic movement toward God's design for us.

Healing in the New Testament

The New Testament gives dramatic attention to healing. Of the narrative passages of the Gospels, healing stories account for up to forty percent of the biblical material. The Gospels describe the healing of twenty-six individuals. Luke, a physician, records the healing of eight persons in Acts (if exorcism and the raising of the dead are included). In addition, the Gospel writers often mention that Jesus healed groups or crowds of people. Likewise, in Acts, Luke attributes healings to Peter, Paul and Philip. It is clear that Jesus healed the sick, that he commissioned his disciples to heal (Matt. 10:5-8; Luke 9:2; 10:9) and that the early church continued this ministry.

III. Health in Christian Doctrine

A theological basis for church policy and practice in the area of health can be found in a review of central Christian teachings--including creation, good and evil and redemption.

Creation

In the Genesis accounts, male and female are created in the image of God. God declares that all creation is good (Gen. 1:1-31). Though we acknowledge our sinfulness and separation from God, we also acknowledge God's original appraisal of the created order. As the people of God we experience God's ongoing creation.

This creative process is a journey toward wholeness. Our participation in it reflects our essential worth as human beings and brings with it the responsibility to promote all of God's creation as worthy of our care. We can only achieve wholeness when all of God's creation lives in concert.

Good and Evil

How can an all-good, all-powerful God allow evil? This theological puzzle has no easy answer. Neither does the question of Job's friends, "What sin caused your suffering?" (Job 22:5). Nor does that of the disciples, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).

While we know our God is not a harsh God who punishes every sin with sickness, we cannot ignore the truth that some sickness clearly can be traced to sinful individual and corporate choices. We live with paradox and with complexity in faith that God's power is made perfect in our weakness (II Cor. 12:9).

Redemption

For the purposes of this statement, redemption includes justification, repentance, reconciliation, salvation and sanctification. Peter's address on the day of Pentecost interpreted the events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as God's provision for the salvation of believers from sin (Acts 2:14-40). Repentance toward God and faith in the saving work of Christ restores the relationship between believers and God, frees believers from the fear of death and transforms the believer's outlook on life from one of selfish preoccupation to one of stewardship and service to God and others.

The experience of conversion has positive value for human health. Believers accept their bodies as mortal, but also as temples of God's spirit. Therefore, they feel responsible to care for themselves, for others and for God's creation. In addressing the sick, then, Christians seek both restoration of physical well-being and a spiritual transformation of values and relationships that are those of the reign of God.

THE POLICY

we affirm a belief in the need for a Christian model of health, healing and wholeness. Such a model is vital to creation's survival and is our only answer to our search for health, healing and wholeness.

In order for us fully to realize and attain the benefits of a Christian model of health, healing and wholeness, there must be a call to repentance leading to conversion in the Spirit that will open up all persons to a transformed perspective. We believe Christian conversion to be the route that leads to wholeness.

Churches must demonstrate collectively, actively and visibly to a fragmented, searching world the certain hope of wholeness which is found only in God, and must offer help through the process of multi-dimensional healing.

In order to fulfill our ministries of health, healing and wholeness we call upon—

1. all American Baptist congregations and clergy to:

- educate, encourage and empower church family members to live out a Christian model
- facilitate discussion of health-related issues with other fellowships and clergy within and across denominational lines;
- seek opportunities for service on health agency administrative boards;
- incorporate Christian model principles into home and hospital visitation programs;
- participate in the development of ethical frameworks for health care facilities;
- provide information about and access to health services in the community;
- advocate for the availability of, access to and funding for quality health care for all persons; and

2. all American Baptist regional offices and their associations to:

- join with other regions and associations to provide educational programs and open forums for constituency and community;
- capitalize on annual health-related calendar events;
- facilitate the dissemination and interpretation of the ABC/USA definition of health, healing and wholeness to the community at large;
- establish committees to address health-related issues;
- advocate for availability of, access to and funding for quality health care for all persons; and
- advocate for legislative health care measures.

3. all ABC program boards, colleges and seminaries and other related organizations to:

- include a Christian model of health, healing and wholeness in curricula and programming;
- promote community-based wellness programs; and
- provide resources on health, healing and wholeness for use by groups and individuals in local communities.

4. all American Baptists to pray for the health, healing and wholeness of all creation.

Adopted by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches - June 1991

160 For, 0 Against, 0 Abstentions

(General Board Reference - #7567:12/90)
