

## Medical Practice and Christian Faith

### Speech Delivered to a Retreat of Medical Practitioners<sup>1</sup>

I don't know what you were taught when you were in medical or nurses training. But, judging from what I have seen of medical practice in our Christian hospitals, it would seem that your training assumed that our human bodies are machines, mechanical objects. If something goes wrong with someone, all one has to do is to find the mechanical fault and apply the right pill, injection or procedure. I realize the above is an exaggeration, but this is about the way our hospitals operate. We think, many of us, that this is practicing medicine in an objective manner.

There are, as we have already seen from my presentation on “God, Sin and Suffering,” various philosophies with respect to the nature of suffering and its relationship to God. Each philosophy goes along with different healing theories and practices. One can judge a person's basic philosophy of human beings and of evil by looking at his medical practice.

For example, the philosophy of African Traditional Religion (ATR) has produced a medical practice that is almost totally opposed to western practice. People in this country can see the difference clearly. African Traditional Medicine (ATM) is largely, though not exclusively, a matter of battling the spirits and powers. It is deeply spiritual and involves the seeking of forgiveness, redress, reconciliation, etc. It is, however, very weak on the more so-called “natural” causes and thus does not always understand the physical laws that also play their role. Thus, they may have found a cure for a specific sickness, but that cure or the medicine may cause damage to another part of the body. I am not condemning ATM; I am merely pointing to its basic philosophy that has both positive and negative results.

Western medicine is almost the very opposite of ATM in that the former as good as ignores the spiritual aspects of illness and almost exclusively treats the physical or so-called “natural.” A regime of pills or injections, surgery—healed!  
But what of the teachings of the Bible about the relationship of suffering to God and to sin? Is that merely a theological doctrine that is not related to medical practice? Is the Bible irrelevant to medical practice?

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<sup>1</sup> Held at the Jos headquarters of ECWA—Evangelical Churches of West Africa, May/1980. For background see our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, p. 225. This speech was preceded by another entitled “God, Sin, Suffering” and assumes you have heard that one.

Yes, I know. Christian hospitals on the whole do a better job than government hospitals in this country. The workers work harder. They are more concerned and show more love—much of the time. They don't take bribery quite as often and openly than others. And perhaps there is a chaplain who prays with patients and preaches. But the actual medical work that is done is not much different from that of government hospitals. Our Christian doctrine of the origin of suffering plays no real part; it appears to be irrelevant.

There is a historical reason for this. It did not just simply naturally develop. During the Middle Ages in Europe, there was this great Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who sought to create a philosophy that would embrace both Christian theology and Pagan Greek philosophy. The question is how such different systems can be combined.

Aquinas solved it in this way. There are two areas of life, he posited, namely, the spiritual and the natural. These are related to each other according to this scheme.<sup>2</sup>

Higher	Grace	Revelation	Spiritual	Soul	Theology	Church	Subjective
Lower	Nature	Autonomous Reason	Material Physical	Body	Philosophy	Secular World	Objective Neutral

While Aquinas sought to keep these two areas together, western philosophy gradually separated them and began to concentrate increasingly on the lower area, leaving the spiritual area to the church and to Biblical influence. In the natural realm, autonomous human reason would suffice for understanding the world and working in it.

It was under the influence of that philosophy that modern medicine developed—without the influence of Scripture. Christians studying medicine merely fell in line with it and did their work accordingly. That is the reason that most of us Christians in modern hospitals do our work as if there is no Bible.

But what of the teachings of the Bible? My intention with this speech is not to tell you what Christian medical practice should all include. I am not a medical person. But I do share with you the Bible and the world in which we all live. So, from this

<sup>2</sup> I have used this diagramme or explained this scheme in other publications: Boer, 1979, pp. 449-454; 1984, p. 132; 1989, p. 11; 2014, vol. 2, p. 251. In this discussion I emphasize the later mature development and meaning of this scheme rather than Aquinas' intentions. He may not have gone along with the direction this took through the centuries. See especially Boer 1979, pp. 449-450 for further references, including that of Frederick Copleston, a Catholic philosopher.

point on, I want to challenge you to think seriously about Biblical perspectives relevant to your medical practice and to do so especially in the context of the previous lecture, namely, the relationship of sin and evil to suffering. I want to plant some seed thoughts in you for you to consider. I know that we will not come to definite conclusions during this seminar, but if we have even just *begun* to think about these matters, than this event will have been a success, especially if you are stimulated enough to introduce the discussion to your colleagues at home and prod them.

### **Sickness and Social Evil**

There are many sicknesses that can be traced directly to evil. Some of these are social evils; others are the result of personal sins. I will talk mainly about those that result from social evils.

In some cases, that relationship is easy to trace. Living in a dilapidated rental can result in sickness. If it has poor lighting, it can result in poor eyes, especially if you do close-up work like reading. Such housing often has poor insulation that creates draft, which can lead to colds and respiratory troubles. It may have open gutters that draw flies which can bring any number of diseases. Yes, poor housing results in all kinds of disease among the poor that is not due to any sin on their part. It is basically the sin of selfish landlords. Where there are enough such landlords, it becomes a social problem. That relationship is easy to trace.

But it is more complicated than that. Many renters tend to be careless with the property they rent. As a result, the landlord has to spend more money than should be necessary for good maintenance. This results in higher rent which, in turn, leads to less money for basic needs and, thus, poverty of the tenant. Thus it is also the sin of the tenants that can contribute to their own problem.