

A Blindspot in Western Christianity?

Ralph D. Winter, General Director, Frontier Mission Fellowship
June 23, 1999, Rev. July 9, 2000

W1038.7d

I will not be speaking of a major correction in one particular stream of Christianity but rather an urgent Biblical insight lacking in virtually all forms of Western Christianity.

One reason for a correction is that our theological structure of interpretation of the meaning of the Biblical witness took place centuries before we had any inkling of the dark intelligence invested in the micro world of disease germs, and our current theological sensitivities have, amazingly, not yet adjusted to this new information. *We do not commonly attribute the origin of destructive germs to an intelligent evil being. We have no theology of mission for destroying such germs!*

A Staggering Thought

In the past almost three years of the gradual progress of bone marrow cancer in my wife's physical being, we have both been pressed to ask out loud some unusual questions, and have begun to develop some unusual answers.

First of all, came an idea we did not think of. It is an arresting and even staggering idea that looks upon the need for theological correction as long ago as the fourth century A.D. That was the first public and political century of Christianity. It was the kind of mix in which syncretism is often spawned. According to this theory it was the time when a virulent form of pagan syncretism lodged itself deeply into our Western Christian theological tradition. A detailed exposition of this amazing proposal can be found in a fairly recent Princeton Seminary Ph.D. dissertation done by Gregory Boyd, who is a currently a professor of theology at the Bethel Seminary in St. Paul. While we do not need to agree with all Boyd's ideas, what he has done in his dissertation is clearly a substantial intellectual achievement, now a stout book published by Intervarsity Press entitled *God at War*. Some of the flavor of the entire book can be caught in these few words:

We see...[someone with] polio...and piously shake our heads...saying "It is the will of God...hard to understand...we have to wait to get to heaven [to understand it]" ...[By contrast] Jesus looked at [sickness] and in crystal clear terms called it the work of the devil, and not the will of God—[something to be fought, not something to which we should simply resign ourselves.] (Boyd 1997:183)

This contrast, Boyd contends, reveals a pagan neo-platonist strand in our theology coming through Augustine, no less. It was absorbed further through Boethius and his winsome and incredibly influential *Consolations of Philosophy*. In this line of thinking is an

emphasis on a "mysterious good" which stands behind all evil, rather than simply a recognition of the good which God may indeed faithfully work "following" evil. What it then does is distract us and prevent us from turning decisively against and crushing the source of that evil. While pagan, it is pawned off on us as an attitude of noble resignation in the midst of suffering. It works itself out as a curious passivity in the presence of evil. It takes the Biblical phrase, "all things work together for good" to mean that God—who does in fact work good out of evil—is somehow the author of the evil itself.

How has this syncretistic element in our theological tradition surfaced on a practical level? A godly medieval woman guided by this kind of theology believed that a worm under the skin in her forehead must have been sent by God for her edification and, accordingly, when stooping over one day the worm fell out, she dutifully replaced it.

Or, in accord with with our by-now instinctive Augustinian neo-platonism we cannot be totally surprised that, when a godly young preacher in Puritan Massachusetts sought to fight smallpox, the other pastors with one voice opposed him and formed an "anti-vaccination society." In the perspective of their Augustinian/Calvinist theology this saintly young pastor was, and I quote, "interfering with Divine Providence." No wonder that when that young man died in the process of trying out a smallpox vaccine on himself, it was assumed that God killed him. Strangely, that comparatively young man attempting to spare the suffering of the Indians at his mission outpost is known today for his *philosophy*, not for fighting evil in the form of a virus. I speak of Jonathan Edwards.

But, in actual fact, the problem was that *Edwards' keen thinking challenged a seriously syncretistic element in our theological tradition*. By Edward's day the syncretized Christian tradition was so durable and so impervious to change that not for another two hundred years did any individual or group decide to eliminate smallpox. And when that campaign finally occurred, it was not this time to the credit of a preacher, a missionary, or a Christian theologian. That eradication effort took place only 21 years ago!

Edwards' insight could and should have displaced that particular pagan element in our theology—the passive acceptance of disease as being God's direct will which we are therefore not to fight against. Edwards' insight could have replaced the pagan element with a theology informing and guiding a serious attack on what the Bible calls simply "the works of the devil."

But, that insight died with Edwards. I have concluded

with profound sadness that, had that insight not died with him, our form of faith might have regained a Biblical zeal to set out deliberately to vanquish the works of the devil—all forms of conquerable evil. In other words, had that insight not died with him, my wife today undoubtedly would not have a terminal form of cancer. And the rest of you would not have to be daily gambling that you won't be next. The number of Americans who die every day of cancer is the number of four 747s crashing daily fully loaded.

Are We Really Passive before Evil?

You may quite readily wonder if I am unaware of "enormous research" that is going on. Three years ago—when Roberta was first diagnosed—I had the idea that surely a lot of money in this country and around the world was flowing into *foundational* cancer research. Having by now had reason to look into this supposition, I am astounded that actually very little goes into foundational cancer research compared to what we spend on cancer *treatment*—after this deadly malady attaches itself to us. My best estimate is that to understand and eradicate cancer we spend less than one thousandth of what we pay for cancer *treatments*. Indeed, it may even be less than that. The truth is actually scandalous—are we living with a deception about this?

However, the main point here is not how little goes to understand disease compared to the perfectly enormous amount we frantically spend for treatments once we are individually attacked. That huge imbalance is, of course, curious and puzzling.

The more significant point is that there is absolutely no evidence I know of in all the world of any *theologically driven* interest in combatting disease at its origins. I have not found any work of theology, any chapter, any paragraph, nor to my knowledge any sermon urging us—whether in the pew or in professional missions—to go to battle against the many diseases we now know to be eradicable. Jimmy Carter, our former president, is the only Christian leader I know of who has set out (in his phrase) "to wipe Guinea worm from the face of the earth." Note that his insight did not come from a seminary experience but, perhaps, from being a Sunday school teacher. The Carter Center set out to eradicate two horrible diseases with which missionaries in Africa have had to live for 100 years. They have now done this, and have chosen three more. And, note, Carter apparently cannot expect to fund this operation from Christian sources. He gets money from secular corporations.

Granted that Christian missions spend literally millions of dollars around the world taking care of sick people. And we nourish hundreds of thousands of children in one program or another, raising them up so they can die of malaria. (Every sixty seconds four children die of malaria.) Yet in all the earth I know of only one very small clinic in Zimbabwe where two ill-equipped missionary doctors are working toward the actual elimination of the astonishingly intelligent

malarial parasite that is called a *plasmodium*. And in secular circles the outwitting of that ingeniously evil bug is not being pursued by the World Health Organization nor the US National Institutes of Health nor even the Atlanta Center for Disease Control. Only the U.S. Navy, amazingly, is seriously involved.

Note that I am not talking about efforts to *avoid* disease, but efforts to eradicate the very source of a disease. Thus, I am not talking about contributory environmental factors or nutritional factors. All such good things are *defensive* measures. We recall that people tried their best for centuries to *avoid* smallpox. But it was better finally to exterminate the virus that was the source cause. We can be glad that destructive virus is behind us, but we have to admit that its eradication was not because of Christian initiative, much less theological insight.

Defensive measures are good, but notice our strange theological (and pagan) reluctance to set out to destroy the disease germs themselves. To do that would be to go on the *offense*. We don't do that. Yet isn't it Biblical to *destroy the works of the devil*? In I John 3:8 we read very simply "The Son of God came into the world that He might destroy the works of the devil." We don't hear much of that verse, partly because we yield in our every day consciousness to a secular mindset that implicitly denies the very possibility of an intelligent evil destroyer of God's good creation.

Is There an Active Satan? When Did He Get Started and What Is He Doing?

But an additional reason we don't hear much of that verse is because our theological tradition does not illuminate for us exactly what the works of the devil really are. The respected Dutch theologian Berkouwer made the rare comment that "You cannot have a proper theology without a sound demonology." Another theologian dared to suggest that Satan's greatest achievement is "to cover his tracks." Note that if, in fact, Satan has skillfully "covered his tracks," all of us are likely extensively *unaware* of his deeds. Isn't that logical? Paul suggested that we are not to be ignorant of his devices. We are told that Satan and his angels once worked for God. If so, I ask, When Satan turned against God precisely what kind of destruction and perversion did he set out to achieve? Where would we see evidence of his works? Would he employ powers of deception so that we would get accustomed to evil and no longer connect an intelligent evil power with evil and suffering? Would Satan even successfully tempt us to think that God is somehow behind all evil—and that we must therefore not attempt to eradicate things like smallpox lest we "interfere with Divine Providence"?

In the last 20 years paleontologists have dug up more evidences of earlier life forms than in all previous history. One of their thought-provoking discoveries is that the pre-Cambrian forms of life *revealed no* 2 *predators*. Then, at a very distinct juncture destructive

forms of life suddenly appeared at all levels, from large creatures to destructive forms of life at the smallest microbiological level.

Is this what Satan set out to do from the time he fell out with the Creator—that is, did he set about to pervert and distort all forms of life so as to transform all nature into the arena of tooth and claw that reigns today? Recent lab results indicate that retroviruses are smart enough to carry with them short pieces of pre-coded DNA which they insert into the chromosome of a cell so as to distort the very nature of an organism. Can a lion that would lie down with a lamb become vicious by such DNA tinkering? We do know that many diseases reflect defective genes. Very recent literature indicates that, in the case of the major chronic diseases, *infections* are now seriously thought to underlie everything from heart disease to cancer, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's and even schizophrenia. Just as we now know that 95% of duodenal ulcers can be eliminated in three days by tetracycline.

A Double Enigma

But we confront a second and separate mystery here that is beyond mere scientific facts. Speaking in colloquial terms, we face a "double whammy." We are not only suddenly aware that our medical people have been looking in the wrong direction. That may actually be true if, as is now reported, tooth infections are related to heart disease no matter how low fat your diet is. Finnish scientists are the ones who are aware of this, and are sure of this.

But a second and more ominous fact confronts us. We must be aware that some force is *delaying that awareness*. For example, it has been two decades since it was clearly proven that 95% of duodenal ulcers are caused by a bacterial infection, yet today half the doctors in the state of Colorado still do not employ the necessary three days of tetracycline. Is this not a clear case of demonic *cultural* delusion piled on top of a demonic *physical* distortion?

Will we now see a similarly ominous and tragic lag in the application of knowledge with regard to the relation between infectious agents and the major killer diseases I just mentioned? Can and should the church speak out on these twin problem areas? *Where are our theologians when we need them?*

The Proposed Institute

The proposed Institute for the Study of the Origins of Disease will have to confine itself in its early days of severely limited funding to the collection and dissemination of information about what *is* and *is not* being done at the roots of disease. It will endeavor to attract serious attention to this sphere. It will use both secular and theological weaponry, especially the latter. It will try to upgrade our desire to bring glory to God by ending our apparently neoplatonist truce with Satan in the realm of all his ingenious and destructive works. Our global mission agencies, which already have to their credit the discovery of the nature of leprosy, will

declare war on all *sources* of disease instead of merely being kind to sick people and preaching resignation amidst suffering.

Our actions (which often speak louder than our words) will no longer proclaim loudly and embarrassingly that our God can get you a hospital bed to lie on plus a ticket to heaven but that He is either ignorant, uncaring, or impotent to do anything effective about the origins of your disease. We cannot blame Augustine or Calvin or Luther for not knowing anything about germs or the enormous complexities of microbiology. But can we repentantly accept blame for the continuing fact that three-fourths of all Americans die prematurely from major chronic diseases which are now suddenly more defeatable than ever?

Mobilized Christian response may not come soon enough to materially help my wife—or you or yours. But the least I can do is set something in motion that may rectify our understanding of a God who is not the author of the destructive violence in nature and who has long sought our help in bringing His kingdom and His will on earth.

I just read a true story in *Readers Digest* about a family of three children who lost their oldest child, a daughter, through terrible suffering with cancer. Then, the father, raising money to fight cancer among children in general, collapsed and died ten feet short of the goal in a marathon race. I do not believe that God was the author of that double tragedy, but I do believe he used it to speed up the fund-raising campaign then carried on by the wife. However, for me the thing in this story that fairly sprang out at me was the statement of one of the younger children at the news of the father's collapse. This little boy had already learned well our syncretized theology. He said, "God would not do two bad things to us in one year." Isn't it too bad that this innocent little boy was unaware that destructive things are the very hallmark of an intelligent evil person, not the initiative of a loving God? When will this become clearer? When will there be even a significant glimmer within Christendom to act accordingly? When will we arise to work with God to destroy the works of the devil?

Our people champion singers, basketball handlers, pole vaulters. Do we find theological reason to champion those rare few who are at the front line in the fight against disease? And, I don't refer to those who treat illness but those who scout the very origins of disease.

The answer is a thunderous "NO" which can only be explained as a blind spot in our theological tradition, a fact which is itself one of the diabolic delusions classifying as a work of the devil.