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AIDS and the Wrath of God

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AIDS AND THE WRATH OF GOD

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I

Is AIDS God's punishment of homosexuality? Yes, according to the confident claims of some Christians. For example, at least one notable Christian leader preaches this, and is by no means alone, concluding that the message God is sending to homosexuals through the affliction is that if "you do it, you die." Support for such a contention is found in the traditional scriptural interpretation of homosexuality as a sinful practice opposed to the will of God and deserving of judgment. Even Romans 1:27 may be cited, which speaks of what happened to certain homosexuals as that which they deserved. Essentially what this first option requires to account for the plague of AIDS today is the performance of a miracle of God, perhaps along the lines of Gordon Kaufmann's definition: "Any event which one finds himself led to interpret by reference to God's act rather than finite acts or causes (though not necessarily denying that such finite agency is also involved) is a miracle."¹

Other Christians are not quite so bold, answering with something of a "qualified yes" to the question. They endorse the idea that AIDS is the natural consequence or cost of this sin. It has been claimed that contracting AIDS through homosexual behavior is like getting hurt when running a red light, an infraction of the rules with an accompanying penalty attached. Other relevant examples would be dying from jumping off a tall building, developing emphysema from a lifetime of smoking, or suffering cyrosis of the liver due to alcohol abuse. Biblical support for this position might take into account Paul's emphasis on the natural order and homosexuality as a violation of it with harmful consequences. At first glance it appears as if this option does

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not include God's intervening action, but further reflection may demonstrate otherwise.

Still other Christians emphatically respond, "No, God has nothing to do with AIDS, a disease caused by a virus that has, tragically, found its way into people's bloodstreams." These Christians are by no means ethically or doctrinally bankrupt; they may strongly affirm the traditional biblical interpretation of homosexuality as a sinful practice. It is the idea that God would deliberately afflict people with AIDS which goes against the grain of their thinking informed by a theology of a profoundly loving God.

Before I share the implications of my own reflections on the question, it is important to define what is meant by homosexuality. There is an important distinction to keep in mind between homosexual behavior and a homosexual orientation. Three possibilities to define homosexuality, then, are same gender sexual relations, same gender sexual desires, or both together. Most relevant for the discussion of this paper is homosexual *behavior*, since it is through the actual sexual act that AIDS is often transmitted, not merely through an orientation. A homosexual orientation is neither necessary nor sufficient for a homosexual transmission of the disease. Thus, homosexuality in this paper will be defined as same gender sexual relations.

The question now becomes this: Is AIDS God's punishment of same gender sexual relations? Once again, the various answers mentioned so far are an "unequivocal yes," a "qualified yes," and an "unequivocal no." I will attempt to solve the various dilemmas in which these three options find themselves by explaining my own "qualified no" to the question.

II

What are some of the dilemmas in which the answer of an "unequivocal yes" finds itself? An experiential dilemma springs from the obvious fact that not all homosexuals become afflicted with the disease. Some homosexuals simply go on living their lifestyle untainted by the virus which does not happen to be present among any of their lovers. Others remain free from the disease by taking necessary precautions, like using a condom. (That condoms are not always effective, though an important fact, does not detract from the point here.) Given these clear counterexamples to the assertion that AIDS is definitely God's punishment of same gender sexual relations, the only way to make sense of the claim is to assert that AIDS is God's punishment of homosexuality where the virus which produces the disease is present and where precautions either are not taken or do not work. This is not to mention the additional case of unsuccessful transmission of the disease when the virus is present even in the absence of any precautions.

Not only do some people who engage in homosexual behavior not contract AIDS, there are other people who never engage in it and yet still catch the disease. These include not only "guilty" intravenous drug users, but "innocent" babies victimized from birth along with recipients of polluted blood transfusions. If AIDS is God's punishment of homosexuals, then, it appears to be a deficient procedure, for some homosexuals escape the punishment while others innocent of homosexuality are included. It is natural to assume that the meting out of punishment by God would be intended to promote justice, not abrogate it, at least with regard to *our* limited grasp of what justice entails, not to mention *His*. We would certainly not expect God to act less morally than we ourselves would.

There is an uncanny resemblance, incidentally, between an old Calvinistic idea and

today's casual acceptance of the notion that God has singled out homosexuals for punishment. We are *all* deserving of God's wrath, it is acknowledged; yet it is still seen as perfectly appropriate that only homosexuals have been chosen for the actual punishment. This is similar to the historical Calvinistic defense of double predestination. How can we fault God, so the argument went, for sovereignly choosing some to go to heaven when everyone deserves hell?

Theologically, those who respond in the unequivocal affirmative must finally hold a weak view of both sin and God. In terms of sin, these believers, rather than taking all expressions of it with the utmost seriousness, can trivialize those sins other than that of homosexuality. They likely would not consider claiming that unhealthy eating habits are directly punished by God with heart disease, or prejudice with race wars. They insist, however, on stressing the punishment value of homosexuality, namely, AIDS. This tendency is especially clear in fundamentalist and some evangelical circles, which often seem straddled with blinders to all but sexual sins.

In terms of their view of God, what kind of God do they think they serve? A harsh, unforgiving, legalistic God anxious to level an excruciating, abominable disease on the wayward? Or a merciful Father in whose Son resides the forgiveness of all of our deepest, darkest sin; who graciously, patiently calls us to repent; and who is continually wooing us to Himself by His love? Without unbiblically compartmentalizing the characteristics of God and creating false dichotomies within His nature, we must critically assess our propositions about His work in the world in order to identify the dominant theology of God which undergirds our portrayals. The world must not be expected to differentiate between God, whose very nature is love, and our harsh caricatures of Him.

What about the homosexual who contracts AIDS and is then converted to Christ? All of the sins which he has ever committed have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, yet he still may die from the disease. Are we to believe that his life remains the price that God demands for his sin of homosexuality, when the infinitely costlier price of Jesus' life on the cross has already been paid? I find that untenable. Even the hardest heart at this point would be inclined to modify the claim and propose, instead, that this person's death is only the natural consequence of his sin. Thus we arrive at the second option, the "qualified yes."

III

This option does not ostensibly claim that God intervenes to inject the virus into the bodies of homosexuals, but that their sin has this disease as its natural consequence. Note that the emphasis here is on their *sin*, not simply their outward behavior understood neutrally. The consequence is claimed to derive from the spiritual significance of the physical behavior. This option is more defensible than the first. It takes more into account the natural processes of life by which disease is transmitted, for instance; but it retains some major weaknesses.

One potential weakness is the tenuous connection between the sinful act and the resultant disease. To speak meaningfully of a link here, as this option demands, requires that there be a real causal relationship between homosexuality as a sin, on the one hand, and AIDS, on the other. This connection is understood by proponents of the second option not merely on the level of physical causality, but by a causal link consistently functioning

between the physical and spiritual realms. That is, adherents of the second option claim that God in a meaningful way is punishing homosexuals, even if that claim remains implicit. The way this punishment is accomplished is through the natural means of a sexually transmitted virus, but the reason for the punishment is because the behavior is blameworthy spiritually and morally. Thus, the “qualified yes” adherents see a connection between the act of homosexuality *in its sinfulness* and the resultant disease. The strength of this connection is what will determine the tenability of this option.

Why is this connection weak? Again, one reason is that the transmission of the disease seems to have less to do with spiritual factors than with natural ones. If someone is wearing a condom and it serves its purpose properly, AIDS can often be avoided. This undermines the causal tie between the sin and the disease—if it is so readily contingent on such naturalistic, arbitrary factors as the proper use and functioning of a condom. AIDS is only the natural consequence of homosexual behavior where it is present, where it is not stopped by precautionary measures, and where it is transmitted. Are we to believe that the causal link between the sin of homosexuality and the disease of AIDS only applies in this range of situations? Once again, such a proposition, rather than taking all sin seriously, can seem to emphasize only the blameworthiness of homosexual behavior in those cases where there is an obvious physical consequence. Sinful behavior, however, is not only wrong when there is a painful earthly result, but all the time. It is innately and not merely consequentially wrong.

The analogy of the second option between AIDS and other examples of consequences in the physical realm breaks down, for at least two reasons. First, there is neglect of the aforementioned distinction between the levels at which the causal links are presumed to operate. That is, to claim that AIDS is a punishment from God or the direct cost of homosexuality is to propose the existence of a “vertical” (excuse the spatial metaphor) causal nexus between the spiritual reality of blameworthy sin and the physical reality of bodily sickness. That is clearly different from a simple, “horizontal” cause and effect operation within this physical world, such as the typical result of walking in front of a rushing train.

Secondly, AIDS is not part of the natural order, *per se*, but an intruder. It is a disease caused by the life of a virus that has been introduced into people’s bloodstreams, where it was not originally intended to be. Can AIDS then with any confidence lay claim to be the *natural* consequence of homosexual behavior? Before its invasion, AIDS was not the result of homosexuality. Thus there is not the inherent connectedness between them as there is between, for example, cholesterol and arteriosclerosis. That there *appears* to be an intrinsic relationship between homosexuality and AIDS now, especially in this country, is only because of the particular spread of the disease to date, without which there would not be this visible connection. In Africa, where transmission has largely been heterosexual and polygamy is often still the norm, the relationship between AIDS and homosexuality is much less at issue.

The underlying claim of the second option, if it is to be a coherent argument, must be that God is the one responsible for that original unnatural invasion of the HIV virus into society which made AIDS the blameworthy consequence of homosexual behavior whenever such behavior transmits the virus. This is why the second option essentially reduces to only a qualification of option one.

Scripture, though, portrays God as being *against* disease and sickness, not its strongest promoter and propagator. David described God as the one who forgives all our sins and heals all our diseases. Jesus came that we might have life, and that more abundantly; it is the enemy who comes to steal, kill and destroy. The presence of the kingdom of God was epitomized in the life of Jesus by the miraculous *deliverance from* sickness, not *relegation to* it. Those in the church who are sick are instructed to have hands laid on them by the elders so they may recover. Confession of sins and faults, one to another within the church, is for the purpose that healing may take place, with the added promise that, if sins have been committed, they will be forgiven. The Bible makes clear that God's will is that we enjoy good health, not be riddled with a chronic, terminal disease. Salvation is about holistic health and healing in every dimension of our existence, made possible through a right relationship with God.

IV

So does that mean God has nothing to do with the spread of AIDS, as the third option would have us believe? Not necessarily. The third option does rightly stress the central truth that God's nature is one of profound love along with His holiness. Those who would stress God's holiness today to the practical exclusion of His love not only have a fundamental misunderstanding of holiness, but risk becoming modern-day pharisees, considering themselves holier than others, and others worthy of death but not themselves. The third option certainly contains great truth, but leaves something to be desired by way of reconciling such a monumental epidemic as AIDS with His superintending sovereignty.

My "qualified no" option, then, picks up at this point, incorporating some truth from the second and third options while hopefully avoiding the logical and theological pitfalls we have seen. No, God did not intentionally and maliciously intervene to introduce this death-dealing virus into society. Yes, He allowed it, but only after having so structured His created order so that, ideally, this virus never should have emerged. The reason for its emergence and expansion was greatly facilitated by unnatural behaviors which, in the present order as it has been created by God, manifest the greater risk of introducing something harmful into that order than natural, healthy behaviors possess.

It may be suggested that my "qualified no" is really a "yes" to the question after all, since it was God's doing originally which would later contribute, in a sense, to the spread of the unnatural invading virus. In fact, although I would quarrel with that conclusion given God's original intent and His intense abomination of sickness, I consider this insight to be the thrust of truth motivating Romans 1:27 (and perhaps also 1 Corinthians 6:18's teaching that sexual sin in particular is directed against the body). Any message to sinful humanity that has at its foreground the grace of God, such as the book of Romans, necessarily must have as its background His wrath, not as a divine "I told you so" assigning blame and inducing shame, but echoing an urgent cry for repentance and intimating the judgment to come for the obstinate of heart. F.F. Bruce calls this wrath "that principle of moral retribution that must operate in a moral universe," a principle which, I submit, stands in rough correspondence to my "qualified no."²² The apostle Paul would perhaps be more inclined than I to replace this notion of an impersonal principle operating today in the syndrome of AIDS with direct divine agency, though perhaps not. Those who cite Romans 1:27 as evi-

dence that AIDS is God's punishment of homosexuality tend to miss Paul's larger points, rendering their hasty traversal of the hermeneutical gap presumptuous. Paul was underlining that the real reason for God's wrath was the suppression of the truth, as he was casting *everyone* in the plight of a sinner meriting God's condemnation and in dire need of that righteousness that comes alone through the gospel of grace. Paul was not being self-righteous, as many are today in their denunciation of others' sin, but had as his only standard of righteousness that of God's very own. This is a standard of which *everyone* has fallen short, and attainable only through Christ by faith, thus forever precluding moralism.

Are homosexuals worthy of death? Yes. Just as the malicious and unmerciful are, which includes many in the Church, particularly in their behavior toward homosexuals and persons with AIDS. Even as we are *all* deserving of death for the sins which we have committed. Is God specifically punishing homosexuals through AIDS? No, although He did fashion the creation such that it is now more probable that an unnatural invader, like this virus, would generally spread more easily through unnatural ways of life such as promiscuity, intravenous drug use, bestiality or homosexuality than a natural way of life such as a committed relationship of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

This principle holds with greater consistency and plausibility when applied to other maladies than do those underlying principles of the earlier options. For example, option one, as mentioned, would probably concede little resemblance between excessive weight or heart disease due to overeating, and AIDS as caused by homosexuality. The former would be explained naturally, the latter by reference to God's direct action of judgment and punishment. The option I defend would see the same dynamic at work in both scenarios: In each case, as a matter of probability, the unnatural, sinful behavior tends in the direction of and enhances the vulnerability to sickness. It would be a valid inference from this principle to predict that feelings of animosity among Christians toward homosexuals would also tend to produce harmful long-term effects, psychologically, sociologically, physiologically, not to mention greatly undermine the Christian witness in the homosexual and lesbian communities. Such effects, too, would sound another call to repent, even as the somewhat recent riots in Los Angeles reverberate a clarion call for us all to renounce our bigotry and racism.

Similarly, option two's untenability based on the dubious correspondence between the sin and the sickness is replaced with a recognition that the same God who resides in heavenly places built this universe, investing it with those principles in which we can see spiritual truth. We plant a seed and watch it grow, knowing that God so created such a thing to illustrate for us lessons from the spiritual realm. Likewise, behaviors which are morally and spiritually debilitating have in the physical realm a similar detrimental tendency to promote sickness and disease. E. Stanley Jones analogously taught that the Way is, as it were, written into the universe. This parallel can exist without there being direct continuous intervention, as illustrated by the seed or AIDS. Thoughtful reflection suggests it is likely that the way He was at work in the life of AIDS, along with the other venereal diseases, was in so creating the world that such sicknesses never should have started or continued to spread, and probably would not have without unnatural, sinful behaviors.

I have somewhat blunted the distinction between righteousness and naturalness on one side, and between sinfulness and unnaturalness on the other. My intention in this regard should not, however, be construed as a strict equation of these. They are often the same,

but not always. Even natural desires can find illegitimate, unordained and, thus, sinful expression. As C.S. Lewis argued, evil is a distortion and perversion of the good. Nor am I advocating the dogmatic assumption frequently unquestioned among charismatic believers that every occurrence of sickness is always attributable to a specific, particular sin. It is precisely such strict formulations which encourage the automatic attribution of any instance of AIDS to homosexual behavior. It is then a small step to begin making the kinds of additional assumptions about the spiritual meaning of sickness which I have resisted. I only affirm that it is generally the case that righteousness tends in the direction of health, and sinfulness in the direction of sickness. The understandable human penchant to apprehend a more definitive meaning to sickness can be misleading. We can easily begin making false assumptions and drawing erroneous conclusions. It is to be remembered that the meaning of sickness is less intrinsic than derivative. AIDS' ultimate import, both generally as well as in particular cases, derives from the meaning with which God alone invests it.

It was common in Jesus' day to assume that an affliction implied a sin, thereby rendering any resultant pain rather beyond redemption. Jesus inverted such logic by affording sickness, in some instances, the opportunity to serve the most sublime purpose of all, namely, the glory of God. In John 9:1-3, the disciples asked Jesus about a man born blind, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Without entirely invalidating this assumption, Jesus certainly challenged it by his answer, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." Then, in John 11:4, Jesus declared concerning Lazarus's illness, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

Options one and two provide a rationalization for Christians to look on afflicted homosexuals with contempt and judgment, rather than mercy and compassion. Rather than praying for their healing or reaching out to help, much less discerning any potential glory to God, we are inclined to consider them to be experiencing their just desserts. Rather than weeping over the tragedy of or hoping for the cure for AIDS, we callously, carelessly assert that justice is being rendered. Even if the claim is tenaciously retained that homosexuals richly deserve their suffering, should that stop our ears from hearing the desperate cries of the suffering and needy? How easily we forget that if we ourselves were to experience what we truly deserve for our sin, we would already be banished from the awesome presence of God forever—every one of us! In Jesus' day, it was the lepers who were supposed to be stricken by God with their affliction; and it was Jesus who dramatically reversed such twisted thinking by reaching out to touch and heal them, these broken, ostracized, marginalized people. Jesus spent much of His ministry healing those who had been cast off by society and especially by the religious. Today, is Jesus not speaking through the victims of AIDS and the others so often shunned by sinner and saint alike? The homeless, the prostitute, the drug addict, the prisoner? "When you have done it for the least of these, you have done it for Me."

A "qualified no" loosens the lid on this issue enough to allow room for mystery in this whole discussion. AIDS and every other disease, along with a plethora of other causes of acute pain and horrendous suffering in this world, constitute what philosophers call the problem of evil. Why does God, if He is able, not do something to alleviate or ameliorate this suffering? This challenge is perhaps the greatest of all obstacles to faith. Answering the

question of why there is evil and suffering and sickness in this world is never easy. Most attempts to claim that AIDS is God's punishment of homosexuals are a convenient way out for those who do not seriously struggle with the profundity and unmitigated horror of such a disease. They refuse to acknowledge God as the One who suffers with us most, as the One who sent His Son to die on the cross in our place. Rather, He is conceived more as the One who gleefully rains down additional suffering and dreaded diseases on the already weak and deluded. Such "easy answers" actually make trust in a good God and a loving Father difficult, if not practically impossible, for the emotionally sensitive and intellectually honest. A rejection of those easy, graceless answers means we are able to see the truth in the words of Scripture that indeed rain falls on both the just and on the unjust. Perfect justice is not accomplished in this broken, fallen world, but only in the world to come.

This leads to one important further point to consider. Resisting the temptation to assign exclusive or even primary importance to potentially misleading physical consequences, we become privy to an important insight into this matter of AIDS. Those who contract the disease of AIDS through homosexuality, and even die from it, are not necessarily worse off than those who cleverly or fortuitously avert the sickness for a lifetime. The former may not only simply regret having been "caught," but graphically learn the depth of their sickness and sin and come to God with broken, contrite hearts of repentance to find forgiveness in His grace, and even healing for their bodies or, just as miraculously, provision of sufficient grace to cope victoriously with sickness and to die a redeemed death. Like the thief on the cross next to Jesus, they may cry out for mercy and receive His promise to be with Him in paradise. Those who never come down with a sickness because of their sin, in contrast, may continue to go miserably on their way, their physical health intact but their spiritual health ebbing away. Their souls could be dying even as their bodies are strong, while the souls may be flourishing of those whose bodies are withering away. John Wesley described the latter in a journal entry from February, 1753, "Three or four weeks ago he fell ill of a fever, and was for a while in heaviness of soul. Last week all his doubts and fears vanished; and as he grew weaker in body, he grew stronger in faith. This morning he expressed an hope full of immortality, and in the afternoon went to God."³ The relationship between the spiritual and physical realms is profound and, sometimes, paradoxical.⁴

Notes

1. Cited by H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1988), p. 262.
2. F.F. Bruce, *Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 78.
3. John Wesley, *Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986; reprint of the 1872 edition), 2:280.
4. I would like to thank Ginger Asel, Stuart Noell, and Jerry Walls for their suggestive, insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.