

OTHER CHRISTIAN ISSUES INVOLVING HIV/AIDS



OTHER CHRISTIAN ISSUES INVOLVING HIV/AIDS

Laying a Biblical Foundation

The following topics deal with African cultural issues relating to HIV and AIDS. This is meant only as a guide since there will be variations from place to place in Africa. Some of the differences in African countries will be significant. Others will be minimal. Instructors, therefore, should be prepared to address each issue as it specifically relates to the cultural context in which they find themselves.

Traditional African Views of Health and Wholeness

- Health and wholeness in Africa is physical, social, psychological, and spiritual well-being.
- Traditional healers combine the role of doctor and priest, combining both medicine and religion.
- The health of an individual is connected to the health of the wider community and society.

The Traditional African View of Illness

Causes of illness:

1. Supernatural, either through the agency of God, spirits, or the ancestors.
 - Through a human agency (e.g. cursing, bewitching, poisoning, etc.).
 - Natural causes.
2. Illness is often viewed as resulting from a breaking of spiritual and/or temporal relationships.
3. Illness is almost always imposed on one by another.
 - Through evil or ill will, such as cursing or bewitching
 - Could be by a negative pronouncement by an aggrieved person on another
 - Misfortune on someone due to persistent disobedience or bad behaviour
 - Persistent misfortune that is only erased by a ritual
 - Something that cannot be explained because it is evil
 - Tragic consequences of moving away from social norms
 - Through the use of herbs, muti, charms, and/or other medicines

Traditional African Views of Healing

1. Healing in traditional African context is almost always a process of liberation (individually or corporately) from whatever has caused the illness.
2. Healing in traditional African context is a process which includes both a

- temporal and spiritual component.
3. Illnesses are fought with a combination of medicines (herbs, powders, etc.) and specific words, chants, incantations, communications, or prayers which will address the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of the illness.
 4. The healing process is affected through various ways involving people, animals, plants, spirits, ancestors and God-the-Creator.
 - Traditional healers are believed to be the instruments of the spiritual realm.
 - Healers are expected to be aware of and to understand activities in the spirit world.
 - Healers are expected to be able to communicate and consult with the spirit world.
 - Healers may become instruments of the spirit world and become spokespersons for spirits.
 - Healing involves not only medicines, but also prayers.
 - There is no separation between the temporal and spiritual domains.
 - Medicine is considered effective ONLY when given power by God.
 - There is a sense that through the activity of God and the spirit world, society can be liberated from illness.
 - Healing is the prerogative of God only.
 5. Traditional healers operate with a knowledge of the physical and cultural environments in which they operate.
 6. Those who consult healers in a traditional context do not do so for medical reasons alone, but to deal with social, psychological, and spiritual problems, all of which are considered to be a part of illness.
 - It is therefore necessary for healers to understand culture in order to be effective in healing.
 - It is important for healers to recognise physical, mental, spiritual, social, and other kinds of evil.
 - Healing involves not only medicines, but also prayers.

The Role of Evil in Illness

- The African world view recognises the existence and activity of evil spirits (as opposed to evil forces) in bringing illness.
- Mechanisms exist to discipline, drive out or weaken the influence of evil spirits.

The Contemporary Situation

- Traditional explanations for the causes of illness continue to dominate in Africa.
- The overwhelming majority of Africans, including urban and well-educated people, well as rural people, still consult traditional healers.
- Treatment for illness often combines both traditional and modern medicine.
- In numerous African countries, traditional healers are officially recognised along with

modern medical doctors, under Ministries of Health for the well-being of the nation.

HIV and AIDS in the Traditional African Context

- There is much discussion in Africa as to what HIV or AIDS is. Very often, discussion centres around whether AIDS is a natural disease, a curse, or a judgement from God.
- Although AIDS appears, at first instance, to resemble a curse, it has important characteristics which mean that it cannot be a curse.
- The instructor should carefully examine these matters with students in order that they clearly understand the issues involved and understand the nature of AIDS from a biblical perspective, if taught in the Church context.
- The appearance of HIV and AIDS:
 - HIV/AIDS is a disease which by all appearances has no direct identifiable cause.
 - “Cause and effect” of HIV are spaced widely apart, and it appears that HIV moves silently through whole populations. By this we mean that generally in Africa, people need to see a direct link between something which happens and the event which caused it to happen in order for them to believe in that cause. Example: If HIV is largely caused by a risky sexual act yet it takes months or years before that illness is evident, they do not believe that sexual contact is the real cause.
 - Traditional explanations for HIV and AIDS can be:
 - Traditionally, HIV/AIDS is often thought to be a curse or to be bewitching because of the following:
 - Has no visible symptoms from the start
 - Is characterised by wasting away, the thinning disease
 - Has no known origin
 - Has no medical cures and is not understood
 - Is considered a shameful disease
 - Yet, in an African understanding of the concept of “curse”, HIV and AIDS cannot be a curse because:
 - It is non-specific, and transcends all races, people, and beliefs. Whereas, a curse is only passed through a bloodline.
 - It is contracted as a result of will and choice, a curse is imposed.
 - It is similar to other non-curable diseases such as cancer.
 - It is caused by a virus which can be detected in the blood; illness which results from a curse has no identifiable cause.

Biblical Principles in Relation to HIV/AIDS

The Bible does not speak directly about AIDS. AIDS is a relatively new disease in terms of when it was discovered. Yet, AIDS is not a new disease in the eyes of God. He knew about the onslaught of AIDS from the beginning. However, the principles of practical

living, given in the Bible, speak to the problem of AIDS and related issues that affect our families, our churches, and our communities.

Biblical Principles Regarding Disease and Health

The Old Testament Concept of Health

- A state of completeness in a person and nature, or complete harmony between people, God, and nature.
- The key Old Testament word for health is “shalom” or “peace”, both physical and spiritual, in the individual and society.
- **Requisites for health in the Old Testament:**
 - Complete obedience to God’s law
 - Medicine for this is **repentance, forgiveness and obedience**. These ingredients result in wholeness of spirit, mind, and thus, outflow to physical well-being and one being in good relationship with other people
 - Health in its spiritual sense refers to righteousness, which is basically a spiritual relationship between people and God
 - Disobedience to God leads to illness
 - Health in its physical sense is characterised by strength, power, and long life
- **Health is a state of wholeness and fulfilment of one’s reason for existence:**
 - Fulfilling God’s purpose for being.
- **Individual and societal health are linked in the Old Testament:**
 - Health of the individual is derived from the pursuit of righteousness as one pursues the will of God
 - A righteous individual contributes to a healthy society
 - Each relationship has specific obligations and relationships are ultimately bound up in one’s relationship to God.
- **Healing in the Old Testament**
 - The aim of healing was to restore “shalom/peace”
 - Human beings are viewed holistically
 - Healing is holistic involving healing of social diseases (oppression and injustice, etc.)
 - Healing involves healing of personal sin
- **Further lessons from Old Testament book of Job:**
 - Illness can come even when one is obedient
 - There is not always a ‘cause and effect’ relationship between personal sin and physical illness
 - There is not always a ‘cause and effect’ relationship between societal sin and illness
 - Suffering may have other causes and purposes which are beyond our finite understanding or control
 - In the face of illness, it is necessary for people to continue to trust God

- Sometimes God permits illness to come to an individual through no wrong done, in order to fulfil a purpose under God's control that is higher than one's understanding.

The New Testament Concept of Healing

The New Testament accepts and confirms the Old Testament concept of health and healing. If there are differences, then it is in 'emphasis' rather than 'substance'. The Old and New Testament are totally in harmony regarding principles of physical health and healing.

- **Definitions, or requisites of health in the New Testament:**
 - Life, in a state of fullness and peace (John 10:10)
 - Holiness, or completeness of man (1 Thessalonians 5:23)
 - Wholeness (Luke 17:19)
- **Healing in the New Testament:**
 - A demonstration of the power and glory of God and the presence of the kingdom of God in the world often came when Jesus healed the sick. It was His way of demonstrating both His love and compassion for the suffering, and Divine power over these illnesses. The same can be said for the miracles of Jesus (Examples: healing of the blind man, calming the stormy sea)
 - A testimony of the "good news" of the availability of salvation to every person, and the working of the Holy Spirit to bring people to Christ
 - Healing usually involved a combination of both the physical and spiritual. (Example: total healing which restored completeness in the lives of people.)

The Biblical Teaching on Suffering and Sickness

- Because of sin, suffering and sickness have entered this world. God did not bring suffering and sickness to teach people lessons. Rather, sin entering the world in the first place, and the sinful nature of each individual at birth, lends to choices in life that bring suffering and sickness on an individual basis (Romans 5:12-21).
- Suffering and sickness may be used by God to display His power and glory (John 9:3).
- Suffering and sickness may be used by God to produce righteousness in the believer's life (James 5:13-16).
- Suffering and sickness may be used by God to bring about repentance (Numbers 21:4-9).
- Suffering and sickness may come to the believer for reasons known only to God. (Note the whole book of Job. Job was never told by God the reasons for his suffering.)
- Suffering and sickness may be used by God in purifying the life of the believer (2 Corinthians 12:5-10).

The Biblical Teaching on Healing

There is no question that both in Bible times and now, God heals! In Scripture we contextually conclude that God heals for different reasons, many of which are above our ways that we do not fully understand because we do not fully understand God's ways. At best, we see through a glass darkly in understanding God's ways (1 Corinthians 13:12). Yet, not everyone is healed of sickness and suffering, even amongst believers. We see that sometimes even non-Christians are healed by God. Yet the Bible has much to say about healing:

- It is the believer's privilege as children of God to seek the will of God in the matter of physical healing. Any healing, whether by natural, medical, or supernatural means must come from Omnipotent God, who created the human body in the first place (Luke 4:18,19; Isaiah 38:1-5).
- The believer is encouraged to ASK the Lord for physical healing, according to Scripture (James 5:14-16), and that God delights to demonstrate His love and power through physical healing (John 11:4). All through the text of Scripture, people ASKED for healing and they received it. Today, we are to ASK for healing as the believers' first response to the HIV and AIDS-infected. The Christian Church sometimes has characterised AIDS as a disease for which even God cannot bring healing. There is no Biblical support for believing that God is unable to heal those infected with HIV and AIDS. God can and does heal some infected by HIV and AIDS.
- Suffering and sickness is not always removed by God in response to prayer for reasons we do not always understand. Sometime God heals depending upon our response, but not always. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 the apostle Paul's suffering was not removed, even though he asked for it to be removed. Why? We do not fully understand. Yet, in Matthew 9:22, Jesus healed the woman with the issue of blood because of her faith. To many it would seem that Paul had the same faith as did the women with the issue of blood, yet only one was healed. Why? We do not have full understanding as to the reasons why one is healed and another is not.

Healing in the crisis of HIV and AIDS is the believer's privilege. Here, the Church of Jesus Christ can raise up an army of praying believers that will intercede for those hurting from the effects of AIDS. We CAN pray; we SHOULD pray; we MUST pray! Are all those for whom we pray (infected by HIV/AIDS and other illnesses) going to be healed? The Biblical principle that ALL WERE NOT HEALED also follows with HIV and AIDS. Experience shows us that some who are prayed for healing from HIV and AIDS will be healed. Others will not be healed, sometimes for reasons that we cannot understand. Yet, we should not stop praying for them. Christian ministers walking in obedience to the Biblical pattern can assuredly pray for healing for those with HIV and AIDS, yet should not presumptuously make unsubstantiated claims of healing from HIV and AIDS. All healings, before being reported to the general public, as done by Jesus, will stand the

scrutiny of being verified by medical authorities as to whether or not the HIV status of a person has changed from 'positive' to 'negative' due to divine healing.

The Biblical Response to HIV and AIDS: Compassion or Condemnation?

Compassion as the Biblical Response:

The following is only a brief summary of principles in the Bible about Christians. Twenty-two points, plus triple-word-score, plus fifty points for using all my letters. Game's over. I'm outta here. showing compassion for other people.

- God is a compassionate God (Psalm 103:2-5; 13-14). As God's children, believers too, should demonstrate compassion towards others, just as God has showed His compassion towards us.
- God does not base His love and mercy towards us on the basis of 'how good we are'. The Bible clearly teaches that God demonstrated His love to us first while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). Therefore, if we all received what we deserve from God, none of us would have any hope because we all have sinned. Therefore, how can we bring condemnation upon an HIV or AIDS-infected person, even if it was because of inappropriate behaviour?
- Jesus had compassion for the sick, no matter what the origin or cause of that sickness (Matthew 9:35-36). Jesus was deeply concerned for those who were afflicted with various diseases. Because believers are followers of our Lord, we must also have this same compassion, and minister the love of our Lord in the lives of others including the HIV and AIDS-afflicted.
- Paul commanded us to be compassionate.
 - **Galatians 6:2** "...bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ." This carrying of burdens is particularly pressing in the case of people with AIDS. Unfortunately, the Christian Church has been very slow and reluctant to become involved. Yet, AIDS cannot wait for the Church to get on board!
 - **Galatians 6:10** says "*Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*" The context here demands us to respond to the hurts and pain of others whether they are believers or not.
 - Compassion is an expression of the fruit of the Spirit, which is **love (Galatians 5:22)**.
 - How this works itself out in reality is first demonstrated in our attitude toward the person infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. To lack love and not to express it to the PWA is a denial of saving faith and the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. We need to be careful that we are not denying our Lord by not showing love and compassion towards the PWA, or those around him or her. This would be a serious violation of Scriptural principles operating in our lives.
 - Moving a step further, it is one thing to have a loving attitude. But, the Bible admonishes us to put "action" to our faith (James 2:14). It is not enough to say with our mouth "I care about those infected with HIV and AIDS" and

not put action and involvement into our caring. Faith without works is dead, even when it comes to HIV and AIDS. Every Christian church must be in the HIV and AIDS crisis if we are doing the works of Jesus as we should be.

Condemnation as a Response:

Sadly, many Christians have felt in their hearts the following attitude towards those infected with HIV and AIDS: *“They are getting what they deserve! They should have been more mindful of their behaviour!”* In honesty, while many Christians will have never openly said those words, in their hearts they have held those kinds of attitudes. We have seen that the Biblical response to AIDS is that of love and compassion summarised by *“there but by the grace of God, go I.”* Therefore, we must examine our hearts before God and be willing to confess wrongfully judging those with HIV and AIDS, and also demonstrating our bias by non-involvement in the AIDS crises in our communities. We also must examine the issue of AIDS and God’s judgement.

What is the Judgement of God?

Judgement is to pronounce a sentence on, or a misfortune resulting from what one deserves. It is the action that results when God’s holy nature has been violated.

- **Judgement upon sin in the believer’s life:**
 - It is a means to bring about restoration and bring that person back into right standing. Judgement by God is not to destroy or to cast aside the believer. It can be considered a discipline to turn us around.
 - This is a corrective measure that God uses to bring a wayward child back to Himself when he/she has been resisting God.
- **Judgement upon the unbeliever’s life is different:**
 - It is corrective punishment upon the offender by God, and not by man. - It is first, to bring the offender to God and into relationship with Him
 - It can appear that God is angry or has vengeance, but it is important to note what God has to say about His vengeance:
 - **Romans 12:19-20** *“Do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to (God’s) wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’” says the Lord. Therefore, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.”* Here the principle of Scripture is that it is not for US to bring judgement on those with HIV and AIDS. We are instructed to practically demonstrate God’s love to the affected and infected with practical acts that will help the PWA’s needs to be met.
 - **Deuteronomy 32:34-35** is a verse that many people misuse to justify their feelings against a PWA, because of perceived misbehaviour. *“Vengeance is mine, and recompense; their foot shall slip in due time; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things to come hasten upon them.”* In this

context the vengeance or judgement of God is directed in His timing, against His enemies who will reap what they have sown. In this text, we see first of all God's reaction towards sin by the word "avenge". Sin is something which God must judge. However, in the day of salvation and grace as we are living in now, God's heart is always to restore and bring the lost sinners into right relationship with Him. Jesus Christ gave His life on the cross for that very reason! God says it is not His will that ANY should perish (John 3:16) and have to suffer eternal separation from God because of unforgiven sin. It is the Christians' task to bring the good news of the gospel to everyone, including PWAs, if there is unforgiven sin. Our task is not to judge but to lead them to Christ who can forgive.

- **Judgement may be an instrument of God to bring about repentance and restoration.**
 - In the story of King David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba (and if that were today David could have become infected too with AIDS) David and Bathsheba were judged by God for their sin. God called them to repentance (not damnation) through His prophet, Nathan, who exposed the sin that they thought was well hidden.
 - In their case, David and Bathsheba suffered the consequence of their sin through the death of their son. Yet, God did forgive their sin. In their case, as in others' such as families with histories of sexual abuse, the sins of the fathers can be repeated for generations (Exodus 20:5 & 6). However, it is important to see the balance. God has provided a remedy for every sin, even generational sin with generational consequences, which is repentance and obedience.
- **Types of Judgement:**
 - **Universal Judgement**

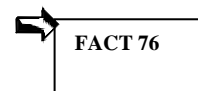
The world and all its inhabitants are under judgement because of sin (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12-21; 8:20-23).

 - All are affected in some manner by universal judgment as a result of the Fall because of sin, as experienced in illness, the debilitating effects of sin upon humanity intellectually, morally, and socially.
 - Even if we live godly lives, we will still experience some of the world's suffering as a result of the Fall, because of the presence of sin in our world (example: economic hardship because of wars, natural disasters such as earthquakes, governments that are evil because of sin, etc).
 - **Cause and Effect Consequence**
 - This form of judgement involves God's cause-and-effect rules in the moral and spiritual realm.

- Examples of this type of judgement are seen in the ‘Ten commandments’ and other Biblical admonishments where it says: “*Thou shalt not...*” which included drunkenness, immoral behaviour including sex outside of marriage, rape, and incest, etc. If these commands are broken, a negative consequence always follows, not only to the persons themselves, but to those around them and the community at large. (Example: we see in the case of HIV and AIDS, natural consequences resulting from sexual misbehaviour. One loses his/her life, or does not see the children grow up, or children become orphans as a result.) The circle of those who bear the consequences of the wrong behaviour of an individual can go on and on.
- **Specific Divine Judgement**
This type of judgement is what most Christians mean when they say that AIDS is God’s judgement upon PWAs.
 - Specific divine judgement occurs in the Bible when God directly intervenes to punish a specific group of people. (Example: Genesis 6 God’s judgement of the world; when Sodom and Gomorrah were judged by God for their wickedness, Genesis 18; when God judged the nation of Israel, Numbers 14; with Korah and his followers, Numbers 16).
 - Specific divine judgement is directed towards a specific group of people at a specific time, for a specific act of rebellion against God, or for their innate wickedness. (Example: The story in Genesis 6:5 of the flood.)
 - Specific divine judgement is announced by God, Himself, or his prophets before the judgement begins. (Example: Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis 18; Judah and the Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah 25:1-11.)
 - In specific divine judgement, more than cause and effect or the natural consequences of the sinner’s action takes place. God causes something out of the ordinary to happen to demonstrate that this is a response of His divine wrath that is taking place. In the case of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we see that there is retribution over and above the natural course of events. God specifically acted with a judgement upon them, in this instance.

Evaluation of AIDS in the Light of Biblical Judgement

When we look at the AIDS pandemic, we must ask if this is a judgement which is different from the ‘universal judgement’ on mankind as a result of the Fall of creation.



- **AIDS is not a specific, divine judgement:**
 - AIDS cannot be a specific divine judgement from God upon all PWAs because it does not meet the criteria for that type of judgement (stated above).
 - It is not directed against a specific group of people.
 - The judgement was not announced beforehand by God or by any of His servants.
 - If we assume that AIDS is caused primarily through sexual contact and wrong behaviour, it would not be in the character of God to bring this judgement upon those who have contracted HIV and AIDS through no fault of their own.
 - If we make the wrong assumption that AIDS is because of sexual sin, then it would be inconsistent of God to suddenly bring about this judgement in mass when sexual sin has gone on long before AIDS came about. God is not inconsistent.

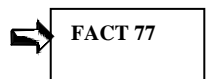
- **AIDS is NOT a specific divine judgement from God upon all those who are infected:**
 - AIDS is a 'cause and effect' consequence.
 - The contraction of AIDS, in many cases, has come as a result of promiscuous, sinful behaviour by at least one partner (Note: understanding that in marriage relationships, for example, one partner may well have not been promiscuous, but faithful). The 'cause and effect' of contracting AIDS in this case is not a judgement. The outcome of the promiscuity by one person has had the 'effect' caused by another, resulting in HIV and AIDS.
 - We see this supported in the following Scripture:
 - **Romans 1:27** speaks regarding issues of homosexuality (same sex). Here Scripture speaks "...*and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.*" From this verse it seems clear that one of God's judgements is not some terrible sickness, but rather simply allowing the natural and logical consequences of sin to pile up, and awful as they are, to punish the sinner.
 - Thus, we might say that those who engage in immoral behaviour and contract AIDS are experiencing the natural and logical consequence of their sinful lifestyle.
 - God's judgement and the innocent persons affected by AIDS must be considered as follows:
 - Is everyone who has contracted AIDS under the judgement of God? The answer is, "No." Why? The answer to that question is in the nature of sin itself. Sin is rarely, if ever, self contained. Sinful acts such as immoral acts, often reach out beyond those

who are directly involved. For example: the sin of the alcoholic who drinks away his pay affects his whole family when they go ill-clothed and unfed. Results for this alcoholic:

- The alcoholic receives the judgement of God in his body not functioning properly and perhaps liver problems because of his sin of drunkenness.
- But, the innocent children who have never touched a drop of alcohol also suffer from that sin, as well.
- The immoral person may receive AIDS as a consequence of his/her lifestyle and pass it to an innocent person.
- However, we would not call AIDS a judgement of God upon innocent persons.
 - They are the unfortunate victims of the effects of sin.
 - In this sense, we might say they are suffering from **universal** judgement.
- The seeming lack of cause-and-effect judgement for some individuals also does not fit into the argument that AIDS is a divine judgement. God's laws are consistent as His judgements. Some persons contract HIV and subsequent AIDS upon being immoral once, and others do not contract HIV and AIDS at all, even though they are immoral time and again. There is not always a predictable cause-effect relationship between behaviour and consequences/punishment. Example: a flood kills and destroys the property of both the righteous and the unrighteous. We cannot conclude that this is a divine judgement of God either.
- Biblically, Jesus warned against this direct association of sicknesses and disaster with personal or group sin. (John 9:1-3 where the man blind from birth was thought to be judged because of sin. Jesus countered this and said that the blindness was not because of sin and was not a judgement) (Luke 13:1-9).
- Why some seem to be able to sin without terrible immediate consequences, while others have immediate negative consequences is beyond our ability to understand. Ultimately, the answer to this question lies in the mystery of the nature of God and all that is wrapped up in the universal sin problem in the world. In the end, we do know that God will judge all sinners and He will be totally **just** in His judgements.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that God does not bring AIDS to anybody. We also believe that AIDS is not a judgement of God as such. We also know that God's heart is yearning for every single person to come into right relationship with Him. The Christian church's task is to be the "light" in the darkness of AIDS. To be the "salt" in a world where generally there is a taste for unrighteousness (Matthew 5:13, 14). There is NO OTHER answer to the AIDS problem than the message of Jesus Christ, relayed through the church of Jesus Christ!



**Acknowledgement: Some of the information in this chapter has been gleaned from
MAP International, Nairobi, Kenya**