Health as a Bible Teaching: How Adventist Developed It

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How did Seventh-day Adventists come to make health a matter of religious belief?

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The Bible reveals Gods interest in health for the body, not just for the soul. More than any other major group, Seventh-day Adventists have explored and embraced the Bibles message about health.

How did we come to have a theology of health? And what are the main elements of it, as found in Scripture? This article will not attempt to list all of our health-related beliefs, but it will concentrate on why we have a health emphasis i.e., our theology of health especially as this emphasis developed in the early years of our movement.

As people who accept the Bible as the revealed Word of God, we base our theology of health on divine revelation. A theology of health should reveal Gods plan about healthful living for the human race. Yet so few, even among Bible-believing Christians through the ages, have given any heed to such a thing. A survey of the literature throughout the Christian era shows that churches in general gave little attention to the relationship between healthful living and spirituality.

Dual Nature? Christians have frequently assumed that human beings have a dual nature, made up of body and soul. Those who believe this way value the soul as the significant part of a person, far superior to the body, which functions as a prison house for the soul. Such a low opinion of the human body explains why over the centuries Christians have written so little on keeping the body in good health.

Health Reform Movement. In the 19th century, however, a new trend began to emerge, especially in the United States. The literature of that period reveals a growing emphasis on healthful living, leading to the rise of the health reform movement, which had no particular religious base.
This movement sought to bring about greater health and improved longevity by helping people reform their habits.

And indeed, people were concerned about health. There was general dissatisfaction with the medical profession and growing agitation against the rising tide of intemperance.¹ Yet at that time most Christians considered disease as a divine punishment for sin. By contrast, health reformers, reasoning from cause to effect, refused to blame God for all disease. Instead, they argued, disease was caused by peoples failure to follow the laws of nature.²

Early Leaders. In the 18th century, various Methodists and Quakers had already expressed concern over the growing consumption of alcohol. In 1743, John Wesley appealed to Christians to abstain from drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity.³ In the United States, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a well-known Quaker physician and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and Lyman Beecher, a prominent preacher and college president, began writing and speaking out on the detrimental effects of alcohol.⁴ These powerful influences led to the establishment of the American Temperance Society in 1826; ten years later the American Temperance Union was established.⁵

One of the greatest leaders of the health reform movement was Sylvester Graham, who turned the movement into a moral crusade. His influence led to the founding of the American Physiological Society (1837) and the American Vegetarian Society (1850).⁶ Others who played a significant role in the health reform movement were Drs. Trall and Jackson, Dio Lewis, and Horace Mann.

Unity, Not Dualism. When the Seventh-day Adventist movement emerged in this climate of health reform, naturally its followers were exposed to the various health concepts being agitated. With so many people suffering from poor health due to intemperate living, the use of health-destroying substances, bad medical advice on treating disease, and ignorance regarding how to preserve health, Seventh-day Adventists began to see people as having been created with a wholistic nature. They asserted that God created us as a unity of physical, mental, and spiritual faculties, each important for the harmonious, healthy operation of the
human organism. This view had far-reaching consequences for understanding the relationship between health and spirituality.

Ellen G. White's Influence. Early Sabbath-keeping Adventist publications reveal a growing emphasis on the relation between health and one's religious experience, the imminent coming of the Lord, and the mission thrust of the church. This growing interest cannot be due to the health reform movement alone. The visions of Ellen G. White had a profound impact on Adventists' understanding of the relationship between health and religion and on the attitude of the group's leaders toward healthful living. In fact, at first the early Adventist literature made no references to the health reform movement.

Our early publications emphasized several themes in their theological understanding of health:

1. **Spirituality and Health.** One of the first biblical arguments used to warn believers against the use of unhealthful substances concerned idolatry. In 1848, Ellen G. White had been shown the injurious effects of tobacco, tea, and coffee (*Counsels on Diet and Foods*, p. 495). As early as 1851, she linked these health dangers to spiritual matters by calling the use of tobacco an idol (*Manuscript Releases*, 5:377).

   J. M. McLellan elaborated further by noting the connection between idolatry and covetousness. Citing such Scriptures as For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (Eph 5:5), and Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry (Col 3:5), he concluded that those who use tobacco are idolaters, defiling the temple of God, and that the Bible equates such idolatry with covetousness.7

   J. H. Waggoner cited 1 John 5:21, Little children, keep yourselves from idols, to warn believers to keep themselves from the idol of tobacco.8 A little later Ellen G. White also explicitly named tea and coffee as idols (*Testimonies for the Church*, 1:222-224).

   Our pioneers also argued that the complete development of our spiritual powers required the full cooperation of all our mental faculties. Unhealthful habits impair the mental powers. It follows, then, that those
who use health-destroying substances cannot be as good Christians as those who abstain from them.  

Moral Issue. An increasingly-frequent argument was that transgression of physical laws is a moral issue and thus a sinful act. God is the author of mans organic structure, our pioneers noted, which implies that Gods will is as manifest in this organism as in the ten commandments. Those who injure this divine workmanship through unhealthful living are in conflict with the will of God. This is rebellion against God, and sin. They saw sin, therefore, as the transgression of the law, written by the finger of God in the whole organism of a man, as well as in the Bible. Unconscious violation of physical laws was considered a sin of ignorance. Conscious violation, however, was a moral transgression: the act a sin, the actor a sinner.

D. T. Bourdeau took a slightly different tack. He declared that using tea and tobacco was itself a transgression of the Decalogue. Using these health-destroying products, he said, violated the sixth commandment of the Decalogue which states, Thou shalt not kill.  

Sabbath-keeping Adventists developed a growing appreciation of how significant the human body is for the believers religious experience. They recognized that the physical body was not insignificant to spiritual life, as most other Christians believed, but was the habitat of Gods Spirit. This view elevated the role of the body to that of a temple in which the divine Presence dwells.

Scripture Base. Believers cited Scripture in support of caring for this body-temple: Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are (1 Cor 3:16, 17); What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? (1 Cor 6:19); And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (2 Cor 6:16). They identified the temple of God in 1 Corinthians 3:16 with the temple of the Holy Ghost in 1 Corinthians 6:19. In this light, James White could assert that it was quite unlikely that the Holy Spirit would dwell in those who followed the filthy, health-
destroying, God-dishonoring practice of using tobacco or unhealthful substances like snuff and tea.\textsuperscript{13}

Our pioneers saw health as also associated with Christian perfection. In appealing for cleanliness of body, they cited especially 2 Corinthians 7:1: Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.\textsuperscript{14}

For them, living to God’s glory involved treating the physical organism healthfully. After all, Scripture clearly stated, ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are Gods (1 Cor 6:20), and Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).\textsuperscript{15}

Romans 12:1, they noted, taught the Christian to treat his body sacrificially:I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.\textsuperscript{16}

2. Eschatology and Health. Our Adventist pioneers related health to Christ’s return. They saw healthful living as an indispensable facet of the believer’s preparation for the Second Advent. Joseph Bates, therefore, stressed the need for cleansing body and spirit and perfecting holiness (2 Cor 7:1; Isa 52:11), because continuation of unhealthful, defiling practices would prevent entrance into the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27).\textsuperscript{17}

Ellen G. White saw that using unhealthful substances would prevent a person’s final sealing with the seal of the living God (Rev 7:1, 2; see Selected Messages, 3:273). She also associated Christian perfection with the Second Advent, noting that Christ will have a church without spot or wrinkle or any such thing to present to his Father (see Eph 5:27).\textsuperscript{18}

Similarly, she said that Our souls, bodies, and spirits are to be presented blameless by Jesus to His Father [1 Thess 5:23], and unless we are clean in person and pure in heart, we cannot be presented blameless to God (Manuscript Releases, 6:217, 218).

In referring to health-destroying practices, J. N. Andrews stated, Deceive not yourself. If you would stand with the Lamb on mount Zion [Rev 14:1], you must cleanse yourself from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and perfect holiness in the fear of God [2 Cor 7:1].\textsuperscript{19}
In view of the imminent return of Christ, J. M. McLellan urged people to live healthfully and crucify the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5:24) because otherwise it will be impossible to stand before the Lord at His coming.20

3. Gods Mission and Health. Our rapidly expanding mission work brought ever-growing demands for financial support. Ellen White called for denying unhealthful appetite so that money could be saved for the work of the Lord.21 In one of her appeals she employed arguments of economy, healthful living, and divine favor, stating that if all would study to be more economical in their articles of dress, and deprive themselves of some things which are not actually necessary, and lay aside such useless and injurious things as tea, etc., and give what they cost to the cause, they would receive more blessings here, and a reward in heaven (Early Writings, pp. 121, 122).

From this overview of the experience of the early Adventists one can clearly see the workings of Providence in the rise of the Advent movement. In the setting of a health reform movement in the secular world, and with Adventist pioneers minds open to reform, the Lord impressed Adventists with the vital relationship between spirituality and health of the body. They found a firm scriptural basis for being serious about matters of health. They perceived that health habits were not only for personal well being but played a vital role in the work of the church in preparing for Christ’s second advent. When these early believers became convicted of the importance of health reform they took steps to put these convictions into action, ordering their lives in harmony with what the Lord had revealed to them. All funds saved by eliminating health-destroying substances and adopting a modest and simple lifestyle were to be invested into the spreading of the last message of mercy for a dying world.

Whenever Adventists continue to walk in this scriptural light on health reform, their work prospers; whenever they neglect this light, their work languishes. The success of the Advent movement depends on how faithfully its believers implement God’s light.

NOTES
2 Ibid., p. 47.
6 Blake, Health Reform, pp. 36-44.
14 [James White], Faith of Jesus, Review and Herald, March 14, 1854, p. 60.
15 See, for instance, Ellen G. White, Manuscript Releases, 7:370 (Ms. 3, 1854).
16 McLellan, Temple of God, p. 182.
18 Quoted in Arthur L. White, Ellen G. White: The Early Years 1827-1862 (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1985), p. 224. Here she also stated that we must be perfect Christians, deny ourselves all the way along, tread the narrow thorny pathway that our Jesus trod, and then if we are final overcomers, heaven, sweet heaven will be cheap enough.
19 Andrews, Tobacco, p. 5.
20 McLellan, Temple of God, p. 182.