

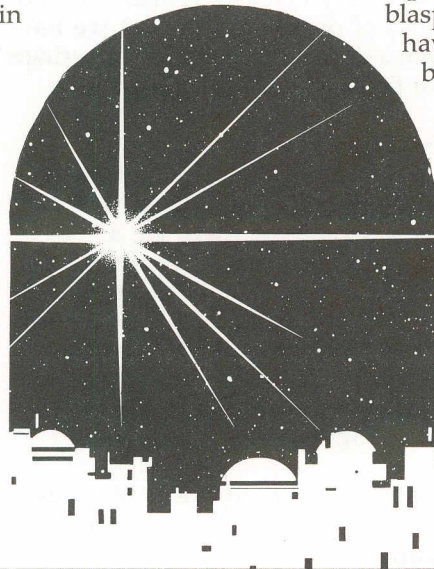
THE SUBSTANCE OF this article will seem as far from the theme of Christmas as chalk from cheese, and hell from heaven. At least, to start with. But remember the proverb (which is at least half true): all things come to those who wait!

More importantly, recall that the route of success is often the route of indirection. Napoleon, when attacking the great city of Toulouse, pointed on the map to a much smaller city and declared, "That is how we will take Toulouse." No one ever takes the city of Happiness by making a direct attack upon it; and who would have thought that one could climb to heaven *via* a cattle shed and a gallows, as the gospel teaches?

Having made my apology, I turn to a theme much less ethereal than Christmas and much more attractive to the carnal nature than religion: salvation from sickness.

The New Testament word for *save* is often used in the sense of *heal*. It is a very well-kept secret that:

the best estimates are that the medical system (doctors, drugs, hospitals) affects about 10 per cent... of health: whether you live at all (infant mortality), how well you live (days lost due to sickness), how long you live (adult mortality).



physical environment (air and water quality). Most of the bad things that happen to people are... beyond the reach of medicine.¹

Phew! Please read that last sentence again.

Doing Better but Feeling Worse

The doctor who made that announcement went on to defend his profession by pointing out that, of course, doctors do help. They mend broken bones, stop infections with drugs, and operate effectively on swollen appendixes. These comments from Aaron Wildavsky, M.D., are not found in some tract on holistic medicine, but in a very respected classic of the last decade entitled *Doing Better but Feeling Worse*, edited by John H. Knowles, M.D., former president of the Rockefeller Foundation. All of average education could read and understand most parts of this volume, and would find the enterprise rewarding.

Having included the blasphemy quoted above, having dropped such a blockbuster, the author saw the necessity of shoring up his case. Observe the following abbreviated summary as it sets forth the present state of the medical art with reference to the main causes of death in the United States.

A Summary of Medical Frustration
Cardiovascular disease.
"In general, cardio-

BETHLEHEM'S PHYSICIAN *and* CALVARY'S HOSPITAL

by Desmond Ford

The remaining 90 per cent are determined by factors over which doctors have little or no control, from individual life style (smoking, exercise, worry), to social conditions (income, eating habits, physiological inheritance), to the

vascular disease lacks any decisive, conclusive technology with the power to turn off, reverse, or prevent disease."

Cancer. "There are no methods for reversing the neoplastic process in

cells or for preventing their emergence from normal cells."

Cerebrovascular disease. "Since no therapy exists for preventing or reversing atherosclerosis, this class of strokes is neither preventable nor reversible."

Kidney disease. "At the present time, no effective treatment exists for chronic glomerulonephritis...."

Diabetes Mellitus. "...the blood vessel disorder which is a major aspect of the disease is unaffected by insulin and remains a mystery...there is no therapy to stop or reverse the process."

Cirrhosis of the liver. "Once the disease is firmly established, there is no known method for turning it around."

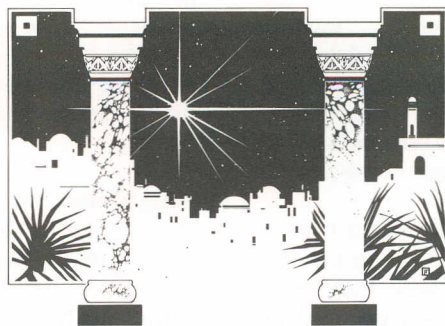
Perinatal disease. "Much of the infant mortality in the earliest days of life is associated with prematurity, and obstructive disease of the lungs accounts for much of this. At the present time, there is no effective therapy for this pulmonary disease."

Congenital malformations and deficiencies. "Most of them are untreatable."²

The outward world is a mirror of the inner, and the physical ills to which we are all prone reflect the sicknesses of the soul common to all humanity. But the message of Christmas is that there is One who can heal.

A Star in the Darkness

What a depressing summary of medicine's powerlessness before the chief causes of death! But we have cheated a little. We left out the fifth cause of death which is pulmonary diseases, such as influenza and pneumonia,



bronchitis and emphysema. We left it out because here the track record is different. "Almost all cases of primary bacterial and mycoplasmal pneumonia are treatable and curable by use of the appropriate antibiotic." That's better. But then comes this: "Bronchitis, emphysema and chronic pulmonary obstructive disease are still unsolved etiologic problems."³ That explains why pulmonary diseases remain the fifth cause of death. But at least we have seen a star in the darkness, or perhaps the first gleam of the rising sun.

Physical Problems

So we have listed the causes of 80 percent of all deaths in the USA. Then, of course, there are a multitude of physical troubles which are "not life-threatening but confounded nuisances"—as a good friend once described to me his particular problems. Our book continues with these in the following way:

Acute respiratory infections (such as the common cold) "...essentially untreatable."

Arthritis "...unexplained, mystifying..."⁴ And so the confession continued, both frank and appalling, though refreshingly honest. (Now you know why GNU published a book on gospel/preventive medicine, *Worth More Than a Million*.)

The Great Physician That Never Loses a Patient

What has all this to do with Christmas? The track record of the gospel is wonderfully in contrast to the preceding. Because of Bethlehem

and Calvary there is a healing available to all of us of much more value than temporal healing as eternity is more valuable than time. The One whom history, hymnology, and ecclesiology have called "the great Physician" had a right to the title. Imagine a doctor who never lost a patient entrusted to his hands!

That's the way it was, and is, with the Physician who left heaven to set up his practice in dusty Palestine, and chose a cross for his operating theater.

The essence of the Christmas message is the forgiveness of sins made possible through the birth and death of the divine-human mediator.

The words spoken in connection with the first Christmas—"He shall save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:23)—can be as legitimately translated "He shall *heal* his people from their sins." The outward world is a mirror of the inner, and the physical ills to which we are all prone reflect the sicknesses of the soul common to all humanity. But the message of Christmas is that there is One who can heal. And every thoughtful, sensitive soul yearns for that healing. "There's a secret in his breast/That will never let him rest."

So said one poet speaking out of the inner experience of even the best of humanity. The *General Confession* in the Episcopal liturgy puts it this way: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us."⁵ Even unbelievers acknowledge the disease. Joseph Wood Krutch said the agony of modern man is that he must be resigned to the conviction that he is an ethical animal in a universe lacking the ethical element. In other words, man is a creature for which his world, as well as his worldview, makes no room. Yet Krutch asserts, "We would rather die as men than live as animals."⁶

The Christmas Message of Forgiveness

The essence of the Christmas message is the forgiveness of sins made possible through the birth and death of the divine-human mediator. That's why the God-man came to a stable where sacrificial animals were kept. That's why the story records the beginning of bloodletting for him on his eighth day. That's why the Bethlehem record closes with the massacre of the innocents, prefiguring the massacre of the One transcendently more innocent than any other of humankind.

"The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Our Healer healed by paying the wages required by the disease instead of seeking wages for his own spotless work. It was fitting that the heinous nature of the disease should be underlined by the seriousness of the remedy.

What a remedy! It not only removes the horrible scarring of the soul occasioned by the illness, but it immunizes against future prostration by the powers of devastation and death. Christ is of sin the double cure—removing sin's guilt and power. The remedy not only justifies God in pardoning those whose penalty has been paid; it also invades the inner *sanctum sanctorum* of the sinner and attacks the ego



enthroned in the soul, replacing it with a new ego sanctified by the Spirit.

Now, loving God, we can do as we like, for his therapy has changed our lives, and made them reflective of heaven, rather than hell.

Salvation is a healing, a making whole, a restoration; first done in man the microcosm, then in the world and universe, the macrocosm.

The great Physician was threatened by all the powers of hell and forsaken by his own Father that the evil of sin's sickness might be recognized, atoned for, and shunned. He was forsaken, as though sin's essence, that we might never be forsaken, despite our sin.

The Why and How of the Cross

No one can look at the Sufferer on the cross without echoing his own "Why?" It is as mysterious as the earlier scene in the garden where the holy One bled from every pore as he wrestled with a horror the world had never known. Not by chance does the "Why?" occur in the central sentence from the gibbet (Mt 27:46). We were meant to note it, echo it, and find the answer.

That cry of dereliction shows the "how" of humanity's healing. Because he was treated as we deserve, we poor sinners—sick in body, mind and soul—can yet be treated as he deserves. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:25 NIV).

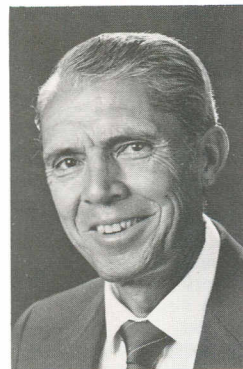
Compare New Testament history with Old Testament prophecy. Repeatedly in Isaiah 53 we find the refrain that a mysterious, sinless sufferer would take the stripes deserved by his people, and be bruised for their iniquities.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
And by his wounds we are healed. (Isa 53:6,5 NIV)

Note that last word. Salvation is a healing, a making whole, a restoration; first done in man the microcosm, then in the world and universe, the macrocosm. Only a divine Physician would be capable of achieving such, and yet he would come *incognito*, emptying himself of his glory until all that remained could be hidden in the womb of a peasant girl.

That is the glory, the incomprehensible wonder of Christmas. Each year the returning festival invites all who suffer in body or soul to find in that wonder their everlasting healing, their eternal salvation. □

1. J. H. Knowles, *Doing Better and Feeling Worse*, p. 105.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.38-40.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
5. *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 6.
6. *The Modern Temper*, pp. 248f.



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