

The Grace-filled Health Message Entrusted to the Seventh-day Adventist Church: The Leader and Health

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Many have called for the systematic study and definition of our Seventh-day Adventist theology of health. Of course our approach to health is described in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Health is so inextricably intertwined in all that we do and are that it seems like something that is germane to our being Seventh-day Adventists. God demonstrated His interest in the health of His people from creation. He created a magnificent environment to sustain the well being of His creatures. He provided a nutritious diet, fresh air, pure water and opportunity for exercise as our parents tended the garden. He cared for their spiritual health and walked and talked with them in the cool of the evening. From the beginning, spirituality and health have been intertwined. The earth came forth from the Creator's hand ready to be the home of the creatures of His design. Even after the fall, the flood and the captivity, God demonstrated his concern for the health of his people by giving them specific directives regarding health. This made the difference, protecting them against many of the diseases that ravaged the Egyptians and others.

God incarnate in the life of our Lord Jesus modeled wholistic development. Scripture confirms that "the child [Jesus] grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him." Luke 2:40, NIV. "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." Luke 2:52, NIV. Here the physician, Luke, correlates the physical, emotional, mental and social and demonstrates the wholistic Being in Whose image we have been created. Over the centuries, this imprimatur of the Creator has been eclipsed by the degradation and turmoil of a planet in rebellion.

Historical background

The end of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century found health care in turmoil! Life expectancy was at an all time low. Bloodletting was a standard treatment as was the liberal use of heavy metal derivatives (mercurials), arsenicals, and alcohol in diverse concoctions, tobacco and opiates. Calomel, a mercury compound, was a standard treatment for many ailments including yellow fever. It was given to patients as a purgative and cathartic, often to the point that their hair and teeth fell out (mercury toxicity). This was indeed the age of "heroic medicine" representing aggressive methods and practices used well into the nineteenth century. The already weakened bodies of the ailing were further stressed by these

dangerous and unproven methods resulting in more harm than good, albeit well-intentioned and even well accepted by the medical community of the time.

D. E. Robinson terms these years as “The Times of This Ignorance” in his informative book entitled “The Story of Our Health Message.”¹ He recounts the experience of George Washington, who, when he became ill with what was to be a fatal illness, sent for a “bleeder,” not a physician. The following day the family physician was summoned who, while awaiting a consultation with two other colleagues, ordered a second bloodletting. In addition to all the blood loss, the hapless President Washington was subjected to calomel (cathartic/laxative), induction of vomiting (tartar emetic) and inhalations of vinegar and water. The account of this devastating “assault” on the president’s already failing existence ends with the recounting of what was understood to be Washington’s last request that he be allowed to die without further interruption! When the report of the disease, treatment, and untimely death of the president were made public, no details were spared to ensure that everything possible had been done to try and alter the unfortunate outcome! This was December 1799.

There were debates raging within the “medical fraternity” about the effectiveness of these various treatments that were being used. Similar conversations were taking place in Britain, Europe, and in North America. The pendulum swung between the attempts of “heroic” medicine to decrease excessive vitality that may have manifested as a fever (by bleeding, emetics, and catharsis), to the use of stimulants as well as alcohol in order to replenish vitality (which had been thought to cause the fever in the first place!). Diet and sanitation were all but ignored as being important for a patient’s wellbeing and restoration to health. At this time, there were also movements of therapeutic reform that were beginning.

While we as a church often claim “Health Reform” as an Adventist invention, that is not really the case. The term “Health Reform” described the process of change that was occurring in response to the dismal “therapies” being used at the time already described. Way before the Great Disappointment in 1844, Joseph Bates, a sea captain, who subsequently became a founding father of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, abandoned the use of tobacco in 1823. In 1824 he abandoned all forms of alcohol and in 1828 he abandoned tea and coffee. Of the latter he is reported to have said: “It is poison. It had such an effect on me that I could not rest or sleep until after midnight.” In 1845, he was convicted of the Seventh-day Sabbath truth and in 1846 joined James and Ellen White in proclaiming this and other fundamental beliefs now held by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is interesting that in 1844 he ceased eating meat and within a few months had stopped using butter, grease, cheese, and such foods. When friends would ask why his diet had simplified, eliminating such foods as it had, he would gently respond: “I have eaten my share of them.” He was eager to share when asked and gratified when others followed his example, impressed by the leading of God’s Holy Spirit.

A much more strident advocate of “Health Reform” was Sylvester Graham. Born July 5, 1794, he became a Presbyterian minister. He became interested in nutrition, and in 1837 wrote his ideas in the *Graham Journal*. He advocated that the chief foods should be fruits and vegetables, that bread should be unrefined, the use of cream instead of butter, the avoidance of flesh meat and fish, avoidance of tea, coffee, wine, and tobacco in all forms, the taking of a daily bath/shower, and exercise in the open air.²

Ellen White’s Health Reform Visions

In 1848 Ellen White had been shown the harmful effects of tobacco, tea and coffee. In 1860, the fledgling “Movement of Destiny” formally adopted the name Seventh-day Adventist. It was not until 1863 that Ellen White received the major vision on health, which she did not write out until 1864. In its principle content, it focused on the need for James White to guard his health. The vision was given in Otsego on June 6, 1863, at the home of Brother A. Hilliard. The vision was given during the Sabbath hours, reinforcing the importance and interconnectedness of Christ-centered spirituality and health. Of the vision, she wrote, “I saw that now we should take special care of the health *God has given us*, for our work was not yet done.”³

In the ensuing months with growing work pressures, Ellen White delayed writing out the contents of her vision. It was not until the following year that she wrote six tracts on *How to Live*. The ideas expressed were very close to those expressed by Sylvester Graham, Russell Trall, and Jackson, but when asked, she stated: “that I had not, neither should I [have] read them till I had fully written out my views, lest it should be said that I have received my light upon the subject of health from physicians, and not from the Lord.”⁴

Finding concordance with her ideas and those of others expressed in *The Laws of Life* (Trall, Jackson and others), she then published *How to Live*, incorporating into it material “largely extracted from the works referred to.”⁵ We can, therefore, trace the beginning of Adventist Health Ministry and the unique health message to 1863. This would later be hailed by Time Magazine as “the Adventist health advantage” in 1966, over 100 years later!⁶

Although others were emphasizing some of the physical aspects of health reform, the Otsego vision brought the clarion message that it is a spiritual duty to care for the body temple and the wholistic integration of body, mind and spirit was clearly revealed. The principles Ellen White presented following her visions have stood the test of time unlike numerous errors propagated by other reformers of her time. Even John Harvey Kellogg enthusiastically endorsed her writings as being of divine origin, emphasizing later in the nineteenth century that they were concordant with science as if they had come from scientific journals, albeit written long before the publication of these erudite studies! Additionally, the principles of rest, sunshine, balanced nutrition, trust in God, exercise, temperance and breathing pure, fresh air have stood the test of time and scientific scrutiny, and continue to do so! Another important emphasis that

emerged from the Otsego health vision is that our duty to care for our health is to fit and enable us to better serve God and our fellow beings. Although it is a wonderful blessing to enjoy good health, this health is not the end in itself. We are saved to serve. Both James and Ellen White needed to make important changes in their lifestyle in order to maintain and enhance their ability to serve and this, too, was revealed in the 1863 vision.

On Christmas Day, 1865, Ellen White was given another health vision. This time, far more than the health of her husband and specific individuals was outlined. The social and mission aspects of Health Ministry were emphasized. The philosophy for operating healthcare institutions was now enunciated. Our institutions would speak to physical needs, but also to spiritual and moral needs. The “whole person” care so pivotal to Adventist Mission was emphasized. A few weeks after the GC Session in 1866, she again wrote of the need for ministers and members to lay hold on the message of Health Reform and urged that Seventh-day Adventists have an institution of their own. This served as the impetus for a healthcare initiative that now has a footprint over much of the globe.

“We have come to a time when EVERY MEMBER of the Church shall take hold of Medical Missionary work. The world is a Lazar house filled with victims of both physical and spiritual disease. Everywhere, people are perishing for lack of a knowledge of the truths that have been committed to us. The members of the Church are in need of an awakening, that they may realize their responsibility to impart these truths.”⁷ As true as this was then, it is even more urgently so now. This is a call to comprehensive health ministry, personally and corporately as a Church, graciously sharing and caring while preaching, teaching, healing and discipling.

The Leadership Now

But what of the leaders of God’s end-time Church? Do we need to take stock of our leadership role and, importantly, our example? Some would define leadership as the ability to influence others thereby bringing about change. Modeling what one teaches is key to positive influence, leadership and becoming the architects of people’s choices. With this in mind, and taking stock of our own personal lives, let us examine the practical implications of personal and corporate health reform in the Church we so dearly love.

As one reviews the writings of Ellen White on the subject of health reform, one is drawn into an understanding that for her, and the Church, health reform is intended to be of global proportion and with very specific goals. Health reform is also firmly grounded on Biblical and theological understandings.

Health reform addresses fundamental issues of the human experience and existence, namely disease and resultant suffering. It does not merely revolve around what to eat and what not to eat, although as we know, this has importance in the bigger picture. And yes, “although there

were other health reformers in her day, there is nothing in the history of Christianity comparable to the magnitude of the health reform program formulated and promoted by her"⁸ (and subsequently the Seventh-day Adventist Church). Let us briefly consider the purpose and scope of health reform.

Ellen White's statement of purpose for health reform is clearly outlined in the following statement:

"In teaching health principles, keep before the mind the great object of reform – that its purpose is to secure the highest development of body and mind and soul. Show that the laws of nature, being the laws of God, are designed for our good, that obedience to them promotes happiness in this life and aids in the preparation for the life to come."⁹

This summarizes that the health message is theocentric, transforming it from information about health into a fully integrated philosophy of health originating with the Creator and designed for our benefit and well-being. This also highlights the moral component of obedience to God's laws of health: we have been entrusted with the precious gift of life and are stewards thereof. "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." 1 Corinthians 10:31, NIV.

Ellen White affirms the biblical teaching that we are sustained and also healed by the power of God; any wholeness we enjoy comes from Him. Through His grace we can even enjoy wholeness in our brokenness. This concept is clearly recorded by the apostle Paul through his own experience where the Lord reassured him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9, NIV.

Sister White directly answers the question as to why we as humans need to develop to our full potential despite our brokenness:

"Our first duty toward God and our fellow beings is that of self-development. Every faculty with which the Creator has endowed us should be cultivated to the highest degree of perfection, that we may be able to do the greatest amount of good of which we are capable. Hence that time is spent to good account which is used in the establishment and preservation of physical and mental health."¹⁰

An important pitfall when looking at the value and importance of health reform is to look at it purely from the point of view of one's own well-being and, as it were, from a selfish perspective. Rodriguez qualifies this position in his very insightful paper with the following description: "Self-development is not narcissistic neither is it an attempt to merge with the positive nature in pantheistic mystical rapture. This is to be done for the benefit of others. We owe it to God and to others to develop our potential as much as possible in order to increase the amount of good in the world."¹¹ This lends additional impetus to the notion and posits that

a major reason for the gift of the health message to the Adventist church was in order to fit its members and leadership for service to others. When one considers the state of James White's health at the time of the Otsego vision, one fully understands that there were changes that needed to be made then and changes that we would do well now to make in our lives that might extend our usefulness and longevity in service. It is interesting to note that James and Ellen did not find the changes easy or even palatable in the beginning.

One of the commonest excuses proffered by patients and colleagues when encouraged to exercise, rest, and take time for recreation is "I simply don't have the time!" Time taken in caring for our physical and mental health is time well spent! We do not have time not to care for our health! It goes without saying to emphasize that it is of vital importance that we take good care of our spiritual health; this is the whole thrust of the Revival and Reformation and ultimate transformation which takes place. Based on our understanding of the balanced development of body, mind and spirit, it is essential for us to include health reform in our daily journey. This is a key characteristic of the Adventist health message and also the Adventist health advantage: addressing the needs of the whole being! These concepts are aptly summarized in the following statement from the Spirit of Prophecy:

"Since the mind and the soul find expression through the body, both mental and spiritual vigor are in great degree dependent upon physical strength and activity; whatever promotes physical health, promotes the development of a strong mind and a well-balanced character. Without health no one can as distinctly understand or as completely fulfill his obligations to himself, to his fellow beings, or to his Creator. Therefore the health should be as faithfully guarded as the character."¹²

We are all the more stewards of our health because we have been redeemed. Redemption was achieved at a huge price - the blood of Jesus Christ. The whole of heaven was emptied for our salvation. It is again the apostle Paul who reminds us that we have been "bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies." 1 Corinthians 6:20, NIV.

As one studies the miracles of Jesus during his healing ministry on earth, it becomes very clear that healing from disease and illness was almost always inextricably linked with salvation of the one being healed. This continued in the ministry of the disciples and is beautifully illustrated in the story of Peter and John and the healing of the lame man at the gate called Beautiful. After the man was healed and went walking and jumping and praising God in the Temple courts, the interest and curiosity of the Pharisees were aroused. Peter and John were arrested and put in jail and following a night in prison they testified of the power by which they performed the miracle mouthing those magnificent words of salvation found in Acts, chapter 4: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12, NIV. As we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, our pattern man, as we

share the good news of health, we will be instruments in sharing the grace and love of Jesus, awakening a desire in the hearts of the recipients to follow Jesus too.

Ellen White counseled "as we near the close of time, we must rise higher and still higher upon the question of health reform and Christian temperance, presenting it in a more positive and decided manner."¹³ This advice is even more pertinent than ever as we see the burgeoning amount of illness brought on by the noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) which are mainly diseases of lifestyle. The world is facing unprecedented challenges both in the developed countries and in the emerging economies by the issues of obesity, type II diabetes, hypertension, tobacco-related diseases and coronary artery disease. We are called not only to practice temperance in our lives, live the health advantage that has been so generously given to us but also to share it with a broken and dying world. We are familiar with the tremendous mission that lies ahead of God's church in proclaiming the three angels' messages. We intellectually assent to the fact that the health message is part of the great warning and also a means of meeting the needs of the community, as well as preparing for the harvest. Do we believe it enough to live it?

It is interesting to note that as in the days of the beginning of health reform in the early to mid 19th century, there is right now a resurgence of interest among many churches, especially in North America, in meeting the health needs of the community. There are those pastors who are addressing the issue of the "heavy holy"! A church in Tennessee opened an exercise facility in 2006 and had 200 members at the time. That same church now runs a health center and has grown to 3000 members! In 2011 Pastor Rick Warren challenged his church when he stated that he had gained 3 pounds each year over the thirty years he had been pastoring his church and was going to try and get rid of this weight. He asked if anyone would want to join him in this venture that became known as "The Daniel Plan". Just two years after it all began, Saddleback congregants have lost more than 270,000 pounds!¹⁴ These are just two examples of much that is happening in the world of, if you will, health reform, outside of our own church. I cannot help but wonder what would happen if I, if you, if each one of us were to lay hold on the Adventist advantage that we have been acknowledged to have, which has been publicized in *Time* magazine, *National Geographic*, *CNN*, *US News Today* and various other media, and to live it, model it and to share it?

Of course we need to be wary that we do not just produce another measure to "assess" the spirituality of others – the size of your jeans, the intensity of your workout, the strictness of the diet or even one's energy level. However, we really need to come to the point where we understand that allowing Christ to take control of every aspect of our lives as leaders and as a people is a matter of the heart. In his book "Dramatic Prophecies of Ellen White", Herbert Douglass shares the following challenge including an excerpt from *Counsels on Diet and Foods*,

page 35: "Heart reform comes before health reform. Ellen White kept her priorities straight-preserving health is primarily a spiritual challenge: 'Men will never be truly temperate until the grace of Christ is an abiding principle in the heart... No mere restriction of your diet will cure your diseased appetite.... What Christ works within, will be worked out under the dictation of the converted intellect. The plan of beginning outside and trying to work inward has always failed, and always will fail.'"¹⁵ In the same vein, the challenging words of Hudson Taylor are echoing in my own heart "Christ is either Lord of all, or is not Lord at all! ... If He is Lord, let us treat him as such."¹⁶ This means that he takes control of every aspect of my life - the physical, emotional, spiritual and social with free access to all I am, and all that I have, and all that I will become.

"As we add the Christian graces we are being prepared to assist others in the divine life, and present to them the true principles of the religious life. I have made it my duty to instill into the minds of my children true principles that they may escape the corruption that are in the world in order to be successful in character building. We must begin at the very foundation and carry the mind upward in knowledge, for every capacity is to be used in glorifying God. In addition to the principles mentioned, temperance is enumerated. Have you seen the importance of principle, and combined with this we must be temperate or else we shall make a failure. Therefore we must add grace to grace."¹⁷

"Men will never be truly temperate until the grace of God is an abiding principle in the heart."¹⁸

Conclusion and Appeal:

As a Church, we have been blessed with a privileged revelation of how to live life to the full. It is a sacred duty for us to care for the body temple and to then spend and be spent in service to a broken world that is crying out for a grace-filled revelation of Jesus Christ through His followers and the precious truths entrusted to them all these years. Will you answer that call and honor Him in body, mind and spirit, thus "preserving the best conditions for highest service to God and man"¹⁹?

¹ D.E. Robinson, *The Story of Our Health Message*, (Southern Publishing Association, 1965), p. 13

² George R. Knight, *Lest We Forget*, (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2008), p. 65

³ E.G. White, *Selected Messages III*, 279 (Italics supplied)

⁴ *ibid.* 277

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *Time*, October 28, 1966

⁷ E.G. White, *Testimonies*, volume 7, 62

⁸ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *The Theological and Practical Significance of Health Reform in the Writings of Ellen G. White*, BRI, March 2013

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- ⁹ E.G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 146
- ¹⁰ E.G. White, *Counsels on Health*, 107
- ¹¹ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, BRI, March 2013
- ¹² E.G. White, *Child Guidance*, 360,361
- ¹³ E.G. White, *Counsels on Health*, 69
- ¹⁴ Christianity Today, *The Fitness-Driven Church*, June 2013, p. 38
- ¹⁵ Herbert Edgar Douglass, *Dramatic Prophecies of Ellen White*, (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2007)
- ¹⁶ Roger Steer, *Hudson Taylor: Lessons in Discipleship*. OMF International, 1995, 34
- ¹⁷ E.G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, volume 3, 83.2
- ¹⁸ E.G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, volume 5, 64.4
- ¹⁹ E.G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 319