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**Deadly Diagnosis: A Virus in the Body!**

By Tal Davis

Believe it or not, I am actually a doctor. No, I am not a medical doctor (nor do I play one on TV). But I do know there are two basic kinds of communicable diseases. One type is a bacterial infection. A bacteria is a living cell that is found inside a human being's body. Some are actually necessary to digest food and to maintain one's good health. Others, however, are toxic and can cause illness or even death. Some examples of the toxic kinds are tuberculosis, strep throat, and anthrax. In most cases of a healthy person, the body's own auto-immune system can recognize a bad cell and destroy it with natural anti-bodies. In other cases, a medical doctor can prescribe an antibiotic that will enhance the immune system to cure the body rapidly.

The other form of communicable disease is a viral infection. A virus is not like a bacteria in that it does not have the complete DNA system of a living cell. It is like a capsule that needs a host cell from which to steal its DNA in order to replicate, destroying the host in the process. Examples of viral infections include HIV, the common cold and influenza, and as we have struggled with over the past couple of years, COVID 19. We also know that computers can get "viruses" from other computers that can eat away at its programming or even destroy it.

The most important difference between a bacterial and a viral infection is that a bacterial illness be cured with antibiotics. However, there are no medicinal "cures" for viruses. It is entirely up to the body's own defenses to overcome them. In many cases, the body cannot do so and the virus can be

deadly. In some cases, however, medicines can be prescribed to mitigate the symptoms of the viral attack so the body can successfully fight it off.

Actually, the best defense for both of these kinds of infections is when a person has a natural immunity to them. Other than that, the best defenses are vaccinations, also called inoculations. Oddly enough, the English word "vaccination" or "vaccine" is derived from the Latin word vacca, meaning "cow." The English term gained common use when, in 1796, Dr. Edward Jenner discovered that farmers who had gotten mild cases of cowpox were often immune to the deadlier disease of smallpox. Therefore, people were intentionally infected with cowpox which immunized them from smallpox. Later, more effective vaccines were developed for this and other viruses. By 1980, smallpox was virtually eradicated from the entire world.

In the recent case of COVID-19, several large pharmaceutical companies rapidly developed effective vaccines. The vaccines either completely immunized people or modified the disease's sometimes deadly effects on them.

Like I said, I am not a medical doctor. But I do have a doctorate in ministry. So I have a certain level of expertise in the Bible, which says that churches are the "Body of Christ." Churches, therefore, like physical bodies, can be infected with viruses which may destroy its fellowship and effectiveness. God's people must be vigilant to diagnose deadly viruses that can infect and destroy the body of Christ. Unfortunately we have seen far too many examples recently coming to light in evangelical churches and denominations right here in America.

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In chapter five of his first letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul warned about a virus of sorts that was infecting that particular body. His advice to them can be highly relevant to churches today as we wrestle with problems plaguing our congregations and denominations. From Paul's letter, we can discern four principles for dealing with spiritual viruses in the church. We will call them "deadly diagnoses."

### **Deadly Diagnosis #1: A virus in the body of Christ must be acknowledged and cannot be ignored! (1 Cor. 5: 1-5)**

*1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, namely, that someone has his father's wife. 2 You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. 3 For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 I have decided to turn such a person over to Satan for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 5: 1-5 NASB)*

Paul laments that he has been getting bad reports of immoral behavior in the Corinthian church. He remarks that it is even worse than what is tolerated among the pagan Gentiles in the city. He had received information that one of the men in the congregation was actually living with his own father's wife! This was an audacious violation of the Scriptural teaching (Lev. 18:8) and was regarded as a grave sin. Apparently

the man (and his step-mother) had no qualms about his sin. If that was not bad enough, Paul chastises the church leaders because they had done nothing about it. He says the man should be immediately removed from fellowship in the body.

Paul further says that, even though he is not there physically with them, he has nonetheless judged the unrepentant man. Notice, he does it in the name of our Lord Jesus. Paul was an Apostle so he had the authority to deliver "such a person over to Satan for the destruction of his body." Paul's demand for correction was actually for the man's own good, "so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord." Paul was hoping the rebuke would cause the man to repent.

Does that seem harsh? Ask yourself this, "If you are feeling bad what should you do?" Do you just ignore it and hope it goes away? In this current COVID-19 pandemic environment that would be foolish. No, you go to a doctor and get tested to diagnose the problem. The doctor can then prescribe the right medicine, or even check you into the hospital, to help you recover. Ignoring the situation could result in your serious illness or even death.

But what about a modern church or denomination? The same principle applies, if the leaders choose to ignore the situation, it will fester and spread causing an even greater disruption.

### **Deadly Diagnosis #2: A virus in the body of Christ must be dealt with quickly and radically!**

*6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? 7 Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let's celebrate the feast, not with old*

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*leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5: 6-8 NASB)*

In this section, Paul uses the illustration of leaven in bread. Paul asks his Corinthian readers "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" Leaven refers to yeast, a living fungus that produces a gas that ferments some juices, or which causes bread to rise. It only takes a small amount to effect the dough. In this context, Paul is comparing leaven in bread to sin in the church. He tells them to clean out the old leaven so they will not be infected. He says they are metaphorically unleavened (pure). This implies that they should remove the source of the sin. Paul says Jesus is their "Passover" sacrifice so they should celebrate with a feast. He is referring to the Lord's Supper which was done with unleavened bread. They should excise the leaven of malice and wickedness, and replace it with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

During a war, thousands of soldiers' lives are saved by the amputation of wounded limbs. Likewise, someone with a severe illness must be treated quickly. Sometimes it requires radical procedures, even surgery. Nonetheless, churches or denominations may need rapid steps to preserve the pure fellowship of the body. Jesus Himself delineated the steps for disciplining wayward church members.

*15 "Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that ON THE TESTIMONY OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY MATTER MAY BE CONFIRMED. 17 And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, he is to be to you as a Gentile*

*and a tax collector. 18 Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. 19 "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20 For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (Matthew 18: 15-20 NASB)*

The sad fact is, Christians must sometimes take action against unrepentant sinners in their churches. The church's authorized leaders should act to confront or even expel such individuals. At minimum, the offenders should not be left in positions of authority or leadership. This does not mean we should practice "shunning." Shunning or "dis-fellowshipping" is the cruel practice of some groups, like the Amish and Jehovah's Witnesses, not only to expel unrepentant members, but to require all members not even to speak to them on the street.

All that being said, we must always keep in mind that the purpose for confronting someone is to restore, not to condemn the offender. That is why it but must be done in love.

**Deadly Diagnosis #3: A virus in the body of Christ must not be allowed to prevent interaction with others who need know about Christ!**

*9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people; 10 I did not at all mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the greedy and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to leave the world. (1 Corinthians 5:9-10 NASB)*

Paul had, in a previous letter which we do not have preserved, told the



Corinthians not to associate with immoral people. Here he makes it clear he did not mean to never be around lost people like sexually immoral people of this world, or with the greedy and swindlers, or with idolaters. He indicates that if they never interacted with sinful persons they would have to completely cut themselves off from the world. If that happened, who would then tell them the gospel?

This is the error of some Christians who cloister in monasteries or convents. It also is the mistake of some fundamentalist groups who practice "separationism." That means they avoid any unnecessary contact with non-Christians or liberal Christians. Some even practice "double-separationism." That is, they do not associate even with other Bible-believing evangelicals who do not themselves practice separationism. But we ask, if Christians are not involved in their communities, how can they influence their society or culture with biblical principles, or share the gospel with lost people? Being around lost people does not mean we have to compromise our moral standards or doctrinal tenets.

#### **Deadly Diagnosis #4: A virus in the body of Christ, if not immediately quarantined, will threaten the well being and life of all the members!**

*11 But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is a sexually immoral person, or a greedy person, or an idolater, or is verbally abusive, or habitually drunk, or a swindler-not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what business of mine is it to judge outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? 13 But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE EVIL PERSON FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.* (1 Corinthians 5: 11-13 NASB)

Paul makes it clear he is talking specifically about someone in the church, "any so-called brother" who is sexually immoral, greedy, an idolater, abusive, addicted to alcohol or drugs, or a swindler. He says we should not judge unbelievers, God will judge them. But we should hold those in the church accountable. In some cases, he says, the only cure is to "REMOVE THE EVIL PERSON FROM AMONG YOURSELVES."

In many instances, the only way to defeat a communicable disease is to isolate the patient and treat it accordingly. In my home town of Tallahassee, Florida, there used to be a hospital dedicated to treating tuberculosis (TB). TB is a bacterial lung infection that can have deadly consequences if not treated adequately. Many patients with that highly contagious disease had to stay quarantined in the TB hospital away from other people, often for months. Thankfully, as better treatment methods reduced the number of TB cases, the hospital was eventually closed.

Recently an Archbishop in a major denomination said he would refuse to allow a certain politician to take communion in his diocese because of her public support for abortion. She simply ignored his chastisement. Sometimes Christian churches and denominations must take actions to quarantine those in their fellowships who engage in unethical behaviors. In those cases, they must be handled by church or denominational leaders (Pastors, Bishops, Superintendents, Elders, Deacons, Personnel Committees, etc.) with sensitivity, prudence, and compassion. Remember, the aim is restoration, not condemnation.

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Discipline in church is hard and is rarely exercised. We need to keep in mind, however, such sins are not confined only to sexual immorality or abuse, drunkenness, drug use, or financial embezzlement. Other sins that should not be overlooked, but often are, include racism, unethical business practices, or political corruption. In every case, we must follow Jesus' process outlined in Matthew 18, and remember His words to Peter: Then Peter approached Him and asked, *"Lord, how many times must I actually forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?"* *"I tell you, not as many as seven,"* Jesus replied, *"but seventy times seven."* (Matthew 18:21-22 CSB)