

Aids, Some Theological Co-ordinates

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One problem facing Christians confronted by a new phenomenon is how to plot it on our existing map of human experience. Without such a framework of reference we find the moral dilemmas of contemporary life harder to understand. We are then exposed to the peril of accepting the secular presuppositions of those around us without having any consistent alternative as a basis for our pastoral decisions.

It is here that our evangelical perspective comes to the rescue. Biblical Christianity provides a total world-view within which all events and circumstances are subsumed. Not neatly, of course. Life is too complex for that. But the timeless principles of evangelicalism do provide some theological fixed points within which today's problems can be considered. In this article I am suggesting six such co-ordinates to assist our understanding of the Aids pandemic. Elsewhere I have expanded some of them as the only 'good news' we have to offer to a generation confused by this heady mixture of sex and death (BEC Annual Conference 1987, tape available). This is not the place to look for an explanation of the technical details of Aids. Medical laymen seeking help at that level could consult 'The Truth about Aids', Patrick Dixon, Kingsway, 1987, or 'Medicine and Moral Absolutes', Elliott Larson, Rutherford House Tape RHT 152.

Readers will readily recognise that there is nothing original or unfamiliar in the doctrines themselves. They are the bread and butter of our evangelical preaching. What we are attempting is to show the relevance of these to the personal, pastoral and practical challenges presented to our generation by Aids. The six theological co-ordinates are our view of **God as Creator; Man as fallen; Scripture as sufficient; Eternity as real; The Spirit as active and Grace as unqualified.**

God as Creator

This is God's world. Everything in the universe is under his control. In Christ 'all things hold together' (Col 1:17). There is an absoluteness about his sovereignty which brooks no rival. The great depths of astronomy's black holes and the complexity of the tiny substances uncovered by bio-chemistry, all are equally part of Biblical cosmology. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) has no independent existence apart from its Creator. Some of the alarm about this virus hypes up the language of battle almost as if it has a corporate personality. Its sinister characteristic of hijacking those blood cells which should be defending the body and changing them into factories to reproduce itself is no surprise to God. His divine theodicy either includes

everything in all creation-history or he is not Lord of all.

Our problem, of course, is that creation is marred. Elements alien to God's goodness are now commonplace. Death, as well as life, is an every day occurrence. Some diseases have yielded to modern treatments and are eminently curable. Aids is not. Infected people may feel well for up to five years but they are not mere 'carriers'. They are capable of passing on the virus to others, and all the existing evidence is that they themselves are certain to develop symptoms in the long term. Patrick Dixon prefers to speak of people with Aids feeling well and people with Aids feeling sick. Aids Related Complex (ARC) can include damage to the brain cells alongside debilitating distress calling for regular treatment. Death is usually the result of one of the opportunistic infections which the body is by then unable to fight off. The public health problem of this disease is genuinely horrific, with the World Health Organisation projecting between 50 and 100 million cases by 1991, of whom 75% are expected to die by the year 2000.

Aids is the **problem of suffering** writ large. Very large. The long time-lag between infection and the terminal stage of the disease means that present statistics give only a hint of the time bomb ticking away beneath the surface. UK figures suggest 2 million people infected by 1991. The cost to the National Health Service is reckoned as £100 million for 1988. No one knows how many cases there are in Africa. Everyone knows that from a technical and an economic point of view many developing countries are frighteningly ill-equipped to cope with Aids. The need is greatest where the resources are poorest.

It is never easy to cope with suffering. But unless we start with God and his often inscrutable theodicy we have no hope of coping with the intellectual problems raised. Thank God that scripture has given us some previous glimpses behind the curtain. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament humbles us with reminder that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. That is where our consideration of Aids must begin, bowed down before the throne of the sovereign Creator. Did we ever expect to understand all he permits to happen to us?

Man as Fallen

From the fallenness of all creation we must move to the spiritual condition of the individual. As rebellion against the authority of God-given norms was the nature of sin in Eden, so it is today. Where HIV originated we do not know but how it is transmitted we now know only too well. The virus is present in body fluids with greatest concentrations in blood, semen and vaginal secretions. Although traceable in saliva, there are no known cases of transmission by kissing on the mouth or sharing a cup (not even a communion cup). 88% of cases in the UK are male homosexuals or bi-sexuals. Aids is medically classified as a sexually transmitted disease. The large number of sexual partners common among male homosexuals and the way in which anal intercourse frequently breaks the lining of the anus, mixing semen with blood, accounts for these figures. Prostitution and the macho image of the profligate

male have spread Aids more widely into the heterosexual communities in Africa. This is the route now being traced in the USA and, to a lesser extent yet, in the UK where figures for female infection are rising steadily. Sharing needles among drug addicts has accounted for only 1.5% of cases in the UK.

The abuse of the body in ways the Creator never intended and expressly forbids remains the overwhelmingly major factor in the **spread** of Aids.

Two further aspects of man's fallenness, however, call for comment. One is the limited expectation we can have that education alone will prevent the spread of Aids. Just because someone knows the danger of promiscuity does not incline his evil heart to avoid it. Millions know the risk of lung cancer yet persist in smoking. So perverse is the sinner that numerous cases are now reported of people reacting to the news that they are 'body-positive' with HIV by deliberately going out to infect someone else. Government policies based on the provision of information should be encouraged, but they can have limited effect. Death from Aids is not the result of ignorance, it is almost always the consequence of sin.

That is the second aspect of fallenness to consider. The innocent do suffer with the guilty, and sometimes because of the guilty. There are 1,200 haemophiliacs in the UK who became infected by contaminated blood products, and 45 have already died. 1,000 babies will be born in New York this year infected by the Aids virus. Drug addiction among prostitutes in British cities means that married men place their own wives at enormous risk by their unfaithfulness, even more so if they are servicemen off duty in Africa or businessmen 'relaxing' in the Far East.

Recent theological work has placed more stress on man's solidarity with his community. He is not a moral island. God does deal with nations and with society at large. Paul Brown has already indicated in a previous issue of *Foundations* (Romans 1, Homosexuality and Aids, Issue 18, pp 2-7) that this is the best way to regard the difficult expression, 'due penalty' in Romans 1:27. God punishes an idolatrous society by removing the restraints of common grace and giving them over to the lusts already present in the human heart. The consequences of this are felt by the whole of society, by some individuals who are culpable and by others who are the victims of such circumstances.

Scripture as Sufficient

To say that 'Scripture is sufficient' obviously begs an important question. Sufficient for what? Certainly not to give one verse solutions to every modern problem. Not even to give such clear guidance that every Christian will come to the same conclusion on disputed matters. What is being preserved in this phrase is the evangelical insistence on the final authority of Scripture. Where contemporary life throws up new social issues it is wrong to discount Biblical teaching as so culturally conditioned that it is no longer relevant, as some have attempted to do (D Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, Longmans, 1955). During the Pope's visit to the USA in 1987 he was confronted by 'gay Catholics' disputing his traditional moral stance. But neither contemporary culture nor Church tradition is sufficient for these

issues. Scripture is.

From biblical revelation we shall find the principles from which to approach our **pastoral practice**. Our Lord's readiness to touch the leper will be our guide for shaking the hand of, or even hugging, the Aids sufferer. His readiness to consort with the tax-collectors who had made themselves social outcasts by their free choice of life-style will indicate that we should be willing to share a meal with homosexuals who have Aids. His refusal either to condemn or to condone the sin of the woman taken in adultery will indicate the moral stance which we should take with our fellow sinners. Study and reflection may be needed to find these principles, but God knew the problems even the 20th Century was going to face when Scripture was given 'so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.'

Students of hermeneutics are right to remind us that beneath the moral dilemmas facing the Church lie difficult **exegetical questions**. Aids is an example of this fact. There is earnest debate about whether drug addicts should be allowed to inject each other with HIV by sharing dirty needles or whether a lesser evil would be for the Health Service to provide clean needles. Norman Geisler (Questions in Contemporary Ethics, Baker 1981) dislikes the term 'lesser evil' and prefers to speak of 'graded absolutism'. His approach does not provide pre-packaged ethical solutions but he does show a high regard for Biblical authority in his references to higher and lower moral laws (see Mt 5:19; 22:36; 23:23 etc). An exhaustive list of the exegetical issues raised by Aids is beyond the scope of the present article. All we are insisting on is that neither gut reactions nor the gutter press should determine our attitudes to those living with Aids. It is Scripture.

Eternity as Real

Few things so sharply distinguish our evangelical world-view from that of the secularist as our deep awareness of eternity. The awesome realisation that our conduct in this world is absolutely determinative of our destiny in the world to come is a sure indication that we are learning the truth of God. Materialistic thinking sees Aids as a physical problem to which latex rubber is the technological answer. (But see Gavin Reid's devastating exposure that the only UK manufacturer has no condom they can recommend for anal intercourse! Beyond Aids, Kingsway, 1987). Human beings, however, are not reproduction machines, nor pleasure machines. We are souls made for eternity and for God.

To reduce even the vexed discussion of **judgment** to the mechanistic level of 'playing with fire will get you burned' is just not biblical thinking. As Donald Macleod pointed out in his Rutherford House lecture (Tape RHT 149) the moral order of God's universe is not a concept which exists merely in the heads of theologians, it has objective reality in the world where men cannot sin with impunity. Judgment in Scripture is always related to God's personal moral nature, even when warning sinners of the consequences of their behaviour. Sometimes the Bible speaks of judgment in terms of God's temporal chastening to awaken a sinner to his spiritual need and to lead him to repentance. The term is too varied in its use to admit of the simplistic

generalisations of the tabloid newspapers. (See R T Kendall, Rutherford House Tape, RHT/151.)

What is unambiguously clear from Scripture, however, is that all of us must face a just God when we die. 'According to Jesus, even those who are celibate, whether homosexual or heterosexual, indeed those who are shining examples of marital fidelity, will eventually perish under God's judgment if they don't repent' (Kendall on Luke 13:1-5). The reality of this eternal challenge must qualify all that Christians rightly say about the need to back up Government public health programmes and the need to exercise compassion for those who are dying. Yes, it is too late to moralise with the sufferer once the deed is done, as any pastor knows when he counsels the unmarried pregnant girl. But eternity awaits us all.

Very few cases of what is called 'full-blown' Aids survive more than four years. Most of them are young men. The Terence Higgins Trust, the homosexual agency named after the first person in the UK to die of Aids, has a scheme of 'buddies' to help sufferers through the terminal stages to a dignified end. Such genuine friendship is to be admired. But it cannot be adequate for the Anglican booklet, 'Aids, some guidelines for pastoral care', to report, 'Frank lost the battle against Aids, he bravely fought and won the battle to be fully himself and thoroughly in charge of his life before he died' (page 9). Who will be in charge of his life after he died? That is of even greater moment. Ultimately death must be seen in the light of eternity.

What good news it is that evangelical Christians are taking the initiative in **terminal care**! The former Mildmay Mission Hospital in London already has a specialist nine-bed unit sponsored by CARE Trust, and the Shaftesbury Society are co-operating with Youth With a Mission to provide a hostel with 25 beds for Aids patients. Few places will more need the balance of speaking the truth in love than these hospices. Their unique ministry will be that those facing death will be treated by those who do know what lies beyond death. This is another evangelical distinctive. It must colour all that we say or do about Aids.

The Spirit as Active

It is a weakness of liberal theology that deism is not far below the surface. 'Nature', even if it is viewed as God's creation, is regarded as a self-ordering system into which God occasionally intervenes. But the world is not like that. Christ is the head over everything for the church (Ephesians 1:22). God's Spirit is always at work in human affairs if only we can trace his hand.

In the secular realm, some good things are happening about Aids. By overruling the circumstances and responses of those who make no profession of Christianity, 'common grace' can be discerned. Representatives from 140 countries were present at the conference on the global impact of Aids held in London at the beginning of 1988 and opened by the Princess Royal. Researchers looking for a vaccine to combat HIV have warned us that theirs is a long, and so far unrewarding, search. But it is surely better that they co-operate rather than compete. Publications are mushrooming on Aids. If only

to provide a forum within which Christians may work for the good of their fellow man, exercise the gifts God has given them and express the compassion of Christ, all this secular activity we must welcome.

This compassion is also being seen in the specialised Christian services now emerging to help churches develop a ministry relevant to these issues. **The Evangelical Coalition on Sexuality (ECOS)** co-ordinates the work of bodies like CARE Trust, who have a telephone counselling scheme for parents discovering that one of their family is involved in homosexuality, and two evangelical groups, Turnabout and True Freedom Trust, which can provide appropriate literature and confidential ministry for those concerned to break with their former way of life. The Christian Medical Fellowship have a full-time Aids researcher and lecturer. The Shaftesbury Project have produced a valuable Study Pack containing fact sheets, taped discussion starters and the excellent monograph, 'Aids, a Christian Response'. What may perhaps prove the most fruitful of all is the Wellspring Trust, aiming to encourage a positive, caring ministry at a practical level. Such a body will qualify for Government grants to combat Aids, much of which is currently being used by agencies blatantly furthering their so-called positive image of homosexuality. (For details of all these ECOS bodies, write to the BEC office.)

At another level, it is the Spirit who is prompting Christians to grasp the **evangelistic opportunities** of the Aids crisis. Questions are now being asked about whether the free sex of the swinging sixties went too far. Morality is no longer a forbidden subject. In December 1986 The Times newspaper ran a long piece on how monogamy might be made socially acceptable again! But evangelicals have something much more important to do than point out the pragmatic value of God's creation ordinances. Christians are taking up this challenge, publishing tracts, writing books or preaching sermons which point to Christ as the answer to this and every other contemporary question. We of all people do have some good news to share. We can be thankful that the Holy Spirit is stirring up some of his people to reach out with relevance to our hurt and confused generation.

Grace as Unqualified

By definition, grace is undeserved. No one has to qualify for God to show mercy to him. This must be the distinctive note of our message of hope. Unfortunately, that is not how we have been perceived. We have become known as negative about homosexuality and promiscuity and dismissed as irrelevant. It is the Terence Higgins Trust and the Gay Christian Movement who are the good guys in the public eye, whereas we are seen as unsympathetic and judgmental. Concern that a kingdom theology is drawing some away from evangelism to a new social gospel must not be allowed to inhibit our practical compassion. Our major premise is that **God loves sinners**. While we were still sinners Christ died for us. He came, 'not to judge the world but that the world through him might be saved'. The declaration of the love of God in word and action does not require prior penitence from the person with Aids, however he or she contracted the disease. It is nothing short of tragic that this note has not been more clearly sounded.

This is not to condone sin. His is the grace of a sin-hating God. But it is precisely because he has decisively dealt with sin that we can offer an unconditional gospel which justifies the ungodly. It is by being joined to Christ that sinners receive power to repent and change their life-style. Carol Bebawi on one of the Shaftesbury discussion tapes shows how unrealistic it is to expect those in the grip of homosexuality easily to break with their ingrained habits. She rightly says they need a great deal of supporting care to fill the huge emotional vacuum in their lives. For us merely to preach chastity as a limit to the spread of Aids is not enough. We must also preach the Christ who can change the heart and renew the will, making obedience to God's creation order both possible and pleasurable.

It is the grace of God which enables Christians to get involved in the **service** of Aids sufferers. The shock of a positive antibody test is where the trauma begins. It engages the families of those infected as they wait, perhaps for years, to see if and when Aids symptoms appear. The hostility and discrimination of their former friends and colleagues only add to their pain. Anyone who is in regular contact with them faces some degree of risk right from the beginning if their cuts and scratches are not covered. Most at risk are medical workers and those assisting with personal hygiene in the terminal stages. This is the point at which the motivation of Christian compassion comes in. Suffering is suffering however it was contracted. Even Christians are capable of sin and there is no place here for the patronising Pharisaism which thanks God that we are not as other men are. Our attitude to those suffering the consequences of breaking God's moral laws must be, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I.' Without such humility we are hardly qualified to approach them. Those who do face the risks and pressures of unselfish caring can rely on the promise, 'My grace is sufficient for you.'

The Aids crisis is going to get worse. How are we to regard it? The ECOS statement admits that, 'As Christians we recognise Aids as a warning to ourselves. The Church must be relevant to a society that is confused, frightened and gripped with a sense of helplessness.' When the prophet Daniel expressed his solidarity with God's reproach against his nation, he confessed, 'All this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favour of the LORD our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth' (Daniel 9:13). Aids is our problem too. If God is permitting it as a judgment on society then that judgment must begin at the house of God. Are our consciences clear? Have we taught our young people a positive sexuality, giving them biblical grounds for it? Are our churches providing sympathetic strength for lonely single people? What about our duty to pray for our lawmakers and our support for Christians in the caring professions? Do we display a clear example of how to shun the subtleties of the entertainment media?

Yet not even the failures of the Church should deter us from praying for God to avert his judgment. His grace in regeneration is for the undeserving. So is his grace in **revival**. A fresh flood of his blessing is not what we deserve. But it would magnify God's grace to grant it. And this is what we can and should be

praying for.

Conclusion

Many evangelical churches have yet to see Aids as a problem for them. But what we can see is not the tip of the iceberg. That is an inadequate model because only nine-tenths of the bulk of an iceberg remains hidden from sight. It is now reckoned that for every patient displaying symptoms of Aids there may be not nine but ninety-nine more already infected and infectious to others. The trouble for the master of the Titanic was that he did not know the co-ordinates of the monster danger waiting to sink his unsinkable liner. Plotting the progress of the Aids pandemic is no mere academic exercise for evangelical Christians. We have a ship to steer.

The Rev Alan Gibson is General Secretary of the British Evangelical Council. This article is based on his address at Pontefract in 1987 entitled, 'Aids, is there any good news?', a shortened version of which was published in 'Evangelicals Now' in January 1988.

Statement on AIDS by ECOS

In the last Parliament Mr John Biffen, then leader of the House of Commons, appealed to the churches to emphasise the moral dimension in the fight against AIDS. In response, the Evangelical Coalition on Sexuality, representing more than one million evangelical Christians from all denominations, are challenging Christians to demonstrate compassion, calling for social behaviour that recognises God's authority and pointing the nation to Jesus Christ.

They say AIDS is a warning to us all.

As Christians we recognise it as a warning to ourselves. The Church must be relevant to a society that is confused, frightened and gripped with a sense of helplessness. The Christian response to AIDS is not to be uncaring condemnation, but love expressed in particular ways.

Genuine love will involve working to hold back the spread of AIDS through education and by continuing to warn of the results of behaviour that ignores any of God's moral laws.

Christians must also demonstrate active concern by providing nursing and counselling for the victims and their families whether the disease has been contracted innocently or promiscuously. This involvement may be risky, costly and will demand self-sacrifice from Christians. But there is no other way to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

AIDS is also a warning to society at large. Our inability to counter the AIDS virus warns us that man is not the self-sufficient controller of his own destiny. Its spread demonstrates the peril of disregarding God's plan for sexual intercourse in the context of life-long commitment of one man and one woman.

Our society promotes casual sex through its education system, by examples in the media and through the entertainment industry. It is now spending millions of pounds trying to cope with the consequences. Society is lighting forest fires, trying vainly to put them out and getting fatally burned in the process.

We are convinced that the whole of society — Government and governed, healthy and sick — faces God's displeasure for our wilfulness and apathy about him. No wonder he calls for an entirely different attitude towards him.

Our hurt world desperately requires a clear declaration that Jesus Christ is the rescuer and friend we need. From him we learn what God is like and what is positive and good in this life, sex included. In him there is the capacity to change what must be changed and the strength to suffer what can't be. Best of all he gives confidence to face death and the judgement to come.