

Sickness or Sin?

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One thing distinguishes my home state, Arizona, above all else: the Grand Canyon. Upon first sight, people just stand there speechless, and some breathless. A mile deep, 217 miles long, and four to eighteen miles from one side to the other. How on earth does such an incredible gap, develop? I'm no geologist, but whether you're a young earth or old earth guy, the good of reason tells you that a gaping canyon like this develops a little bit at a time. Not in hours, or days, or weeks. We're talking years, probably lots of them. Gradually, as a result of erosion, things that once fit together and were connected begin to separate. With time, the distance between here and there seems impassable.

We live in an increasingly specialized, compartmentalized culture that is dividing our lives up into separated bits and pieces. Some of this is beneficial and some of it is not. We now have gaps, disconnections in our lives where we once had connecting links. Sometimes things that fit and belong together are separated.

Paul cautions his younger brother in Christ, Timothy, to "Watch your life *and* doctrine closely."¹ Note the conjunction: "and", not or. Life *and* doctrine – connected, no gap, no separation, and no grand canyon. Life, real life, everyday life *and* doctrine are designed to fit together, seamlessly.

But that's not the way it's been working. Compartmentalized American Christians have become comfortable with a canyon that separates some of the problems of life, particularly "emotional problems" and "mental disorders", from the great truths of God's Word. They just don't seem to belong together anymore. Uncle Bob isn't a drunk; he's an alcoholic. He has a disease, a real disease like diabetes; not a life-dominating sin-sickness. Pharmaceutical commercials tell us that anxiety and depression are medical problems; in other words, please check all moral evaluation and personal responsibility at the door before you enter. Simple, straightforward sinners have moral and spiritual problems; chronic or complicated sinners have mental diseases. Never mind the concern of many neuroscientists and some physicians that the causes of these "diseases" still have not been identified.² The once cutting edge theory that depression was caused by a neurochemical imbalance (serotonin deficiency) is viewed by some neuroscientists as simplistic, even "unacceptably rude".³ So, we're left in a quandary. What do we know? Who or what can we trust?

1) We can trust God and His Word *more than anything*. "Every word of God proves true."⁴ "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever."⁵ This doesn't mean there aren't other sources of truth. But it does mean that there's only one totally trustworthy, infallible source of truth.

2) Medical science, especially brain science, is a work in progress. Those who are actually doing the research exhibit much more humility than popular magazines and television shows. "Brain science is difficult and tricky, for some reason; consequently one should not believe a result (one's own or anyone else's) until it is proven backwards and forwards or fits into a framework so highly evolved and systematic that it couldn't be wrong."⁶

3) Since all creation has been infected with sin, including our bodies and brains, we must acknowledge the possibility that some of these problems may be medical. The practical difficulty, for you as pastor *and for physicians as well*, is that we just don't know which of those who are symptomatic are truly diseased. To date, there are no commonly accepted, readily available medical tests to distinguish between sickness and sin.

4) Regardless of the relative degree of health or sickness in our bodies, it is our hearts that are the source of our lives. The body may be sick or diseased, but the Bible says that our hearts are the source of our actions, words, thoughts, intentions, beliefs, attitudes, desires, and delights.⁷ Our bodies do not make us sin. On some level we'd all like to believe that the difficulties in our lives are biological. "I'm not the problem. My body is. Pass the medication, please."

5) The Bible provides a shocking diagnosis: we're all disordered. Sin has infected everybody, everywhere. Before a Holy and Loving God, we're all insane. "Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live."⁸

6) Don't be intimidated by diagnostic labels by mental health professionals; they are not equivalent to explanations. Sin is often complex and comes in many shapes and sizes. Sin is deceptive and sinners are often self-deceived.⁹

7) Oddly, but because of the power and wisdom of God in Jesus Christ, sin is the one diagnosis for which there is a sure cure. "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace."¹⁰

8) Christ-like counselors "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly."¹¹ Troubled people need both truth and grace. Addressing sin in those you counsel is not an act of self-righteous condemnation, but instead an act of compassion, coming alongside a fellow struggler and offering hope! "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."¹²

God's Word is relevant and true to life. There is no gaping canyon between real life, our problems, and Biblical truth. Counsel the Word. It restores the soul and rejoices the heart. Counsel Christ. He is the Wonderful Counselor, from whom we "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."¹³

¹ I Tim. 4:16, NIV

² Stahl, S. *Clinical Psychopharmacology*

³ D'amasio, A. *Descartes' Error: Reason, Emotion, and the Human Brain*

⁴ Proverbs 30:5a, RSV

⁵ Is. 40:8

⁶ Hubel, D. cited in Kalat, J. *Biological Psychology*

⁷ Proverbs 4:23, Mark 7:21-23, Luke 7:45, Heb. 4:12-13, James 4:1-3

⁸ Eccl. 9:3, NKJV

⁹ Jer. 17:9

¹⁰ Rom. 6:14, NASB

¹¹ Micah 6:8, adapted from NIV

¹² Gal. 6:1-2, NKJV

¹³ Heb. 4:16, NIV