

Dare To Be A Healthy Christian

Acts 20:7-10

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him."

The Christian Church has been lulled to sleep by the current American culture of self destructive health behaviors. Christians are dying a self induced death of obesity, diabetes, stroke, and heart disease. But, just as Eutychus, there is still life present. Christians have an Almighty God who can overcome any human weakness, the Holy Spirit as the guiding force in their lives, and the power of prayer which can keep them connected to God. Only by utilizing these Christian principles can the current plague of poor health be overcome. Christ – the resurrected Lord – lives on within the heart and life of the true believer. We have a strong stewardship responsibility to take care of our body – God’s Temple. As Christians we must realize that if anything is to be done on Earth for Jesus it must be done by us. We think in Spiritual terms, but while on Earth we act through our physical bodies. Whether we are spreading the Good News, ministering to the poor and sick, or helping our fellow Christians, we need our physical bodies. So if we are to be effective Christians we must do everything in our power and control to care for our bodies.

Dare To Be A Healthy Christian is a church based health program focusing on 4 proven Health Principles:

1. Do Not Smoke.
2. Maintain a Body Mass Index (BMI) < 30.
3. Exercise 150 minutes/week. (30 minutes 5 days a week of some form of aerobic exercise)
4. Eat 5 servings of fruits or vegetables daily.

Currently it is estimated that only 8% of Americans practice all 4 of these health habits which offer a reduction in overall mortality, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, stroke, congestive heart failure, and cancer. The overall goal is to advance these principles within each church and within 1 year have over 50% of individual church members practicing all 4 habits, thereby dramatically improving the overall health of the South Eastern United States. Also, by linking these health habits to the Christian beliefs in

1. An All-powerful God,
2. The power of rebirth,
3. The guiding force of the Holy Spirit,
4. The power of prayer,

the informed, inspired, and supported Christian Church will be able to sustain these health changes where the rest of society has failed.

The Health Of The Church

Look at your church's prayer list. Think about what prayer concerns are listed. In most churches the major prayer concerns relate to health issues – cancer, surgery, heart attacks, strokes – the list is endless. Health (poor health) is on everyone's mind and as Christian physicians we see firsthand the suffering that health problems cause for individuals and for the Church as a whole. Some of the problems that we see are unavoidable – the woman with breast cancer, the man with pneumonia, the elderly person with dementia. But, what is concerning is that the majority of problems we see are largely avoidable. The majority of health problems we see are brought about by choices people make; choices about how they treat their bodies; choices to be careless with their health or to be good stewards of their God given physical bodies.

According to an analysis released July 28, 2008, by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the quality and future of American life is under the weight of a populace wasted on a massive scale. Through footprints on the move to tables groaning with food, millions of religious folks are digging early graves with spoons and forks.

According to three prior reports, major Christian denominations are leading the nation down this self-destructive path. First, Ken Ferraro, professor of sociology at Perdue University, reported in the Scientific Study of Religion for June 2006, his results of a longitudinal study extending over eight years. He found obesity to be more prevalent in evangelical denominations than in the general population, with Baptists in the lead.

Second, in 2005 a survey conducted during the Southern Baptist Convention found that among the messengers 75.6 percent were overweight or obese, 39 percent were sedentary, and 39 percent had elevated cholesterols.

Third, in 2006, a study from Duke Divinity School found that 76 percent of clergy were overweight or obese, a higher percentage than the nation as a whole.

If one envisions the evangelical church as a living organism of over one hundred million members one must, from the data, conclude that the organism is sick. Thus, this institution, of such immense value in creating a hospitable environment for children and their parents to become creative, innovative, and versatile citizens, finds its foundations giving way to dry rot.

The Modern Plague

What health problems are currently killing and disabling Americans?

A study in JAMA 2004 looked at the Actual Causes of Death in the United States and found that tobacco abuse and obesity from poor diet and physical inactivity lead the list with 835,000 (435,000 due to tobacco abuse; 400,000 from obesity) Americans dying each year from these causes. That is 35% of all US deaths. In comparison, alcohol use, unsafe sexual behavior, and illicit drug use combined account for only 5% of US deaths. And with the increasing trend of obesity in the US it is expected that poor diet and physical inactivity will overtake tobacco abuse as the number one killer in the US. Many physicians currently consider the health problems of tobacco abuse, obesity, physical inactivity, and poor diet as The Modern Plague.

Tobacco Abuse

Twenty-one percent of all US adults currently smoke and an additional 21% have smoked in the past. Smoking rates tend to be lower in people who attend Church, but smoking is more common and accepted in the South Eastern United States – the Bible belt. Viewed medically smoking is unacceptable. There is no known benefit to smoking, while the destructive effects on health are overwhelming. Eighteen percent of all US deaths in 2004 were directly linked to tobacco use. More deaths are caused each year by tobacco use than by all deaths from HIV, illegal drug use, alcohol use, motor vehicle injuries, suicides, and murders combined.

Smoking is highly addictive. After smoking only 1 pack of cigarettes the structure of the brain actually changes to cause a further “craving” of nicotine. Only 10% of people who start smoking ever quit and it takes on average 10 attempts to stop before success.

How does smoking harm the body?

Here are some facts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- On average, smokers die 13 to 14 years earlier than nonsmokers.
- For every person who dies of a smoking-related disease, 20 more people suffer with at least one serious illness from smoking.
- Smoking causes about 90% of lung cancer deaths in men and almost 80% of lung cancer deaths in women. The risk of dying from lung cancer is more than 23 times higher among men who smoke cigarettes, and about 13 times higher among women who smoke cigarettes compared with persons who have never smoked.
- Cigarette smokers are 2–4 times more likely to have a heart attack than nonsmokers.
- Cigarette smoking approximately doubles a person's risk for stroke.
- Cigarette smoking is associated with a tenfold increase in the risk of dying from chronic obstructive lung disease (emphysema). About 90% of all deaths from chronic obstructive lung diseases are attributable to cigarette smoking.
- Children whose parents smoke are more likely to start smoking as teenagers.
- Secondhand smoke exposure causes respiratory symptoms in children and slows their lung growth.
- Secondhand smoke causes sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), acute respiratory infections, ear problems, and more frequent and severe asthma attacks in children.
- Each year in the United States, secondhand smoke exposure is responsible for 300,000 new cases of bronchitis and pneumonia in children aged less than 18 months. This results in 15,000 hospitalizations, annually.

Obesity

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2004 data:

70% of all Americans are overweight or obese (up from 47% in 1980).

30% are Obese – BMI of 30 or greater (up from 15% in 1980).

The main medical measure of a person’s weight is his or her Body Mass Index (BMI). BMI is a measure of “body fatness” that looks at a person’s weight in relation to his or her height. For

example, a person 5 feet tall who weighs 200 pounds will have more body fat than a person 6 feet tall who weighs the same weight; therefore, the 5 foot person will have a greater BMI indicating more body fat.

BMI < 25 is considered a healthy weight

Between 25-29 is Overweight

30 or greater is Obese

40 or greater is Extreme Obesity

What does this mean for your health?

Overweight – If you are overweight your risk for developing health problems increases (diabetes, health disease, arthritis, stroke, high cholesterol, etc.), but you are not at a greater risk of dying.

Obese – This is associated with a higher overall death rate. Obese individuals are at greater risk for:

- Diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease and heart failure, strokes
- Gallstones, acid reflux, erosive esophagitis and esophageal adenocarcinoma
- Blood clots, dementia, arthritis, sleep apnea, kidney disease, depression
- Cancers - obesity in the U.S. could account for 14 percent of all cancer deaths in men, and 20 percent of those in women. The following cancers are seen more with obesity - Esophagus, Colon and rectum, Liver, Gallbladder, Pancreas, Kidney, Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Multiple myeloma, Prostate, Stomach, Breast, Uterine, Cervical.
- Death - Among 3457 subjects in the Framingham Study, those who were obese at age 40 lived six to seven years less than those who were not; and those who were both obese and smoked lived 13 to 14 years less than normal-weight nonsmokers.

Not only is obesity killing Americans, but, it is causing increased rates of disability with severely obese individuals having a 300% increase in the chance of being disabled. The skyrocketing increase in diabetes cases can be attributed to obesity with 80% of all cases of diabetes coming from obesity. Also, US health care spending for obesity is now estimated at over 100 billion dollars each year (compared to just 150 MILLION for childhood cancer research). It is expected that as the amount that the US spends each year on obesity increases the amount of money spent on other medical problems will decline.

Most concerning is the dramatic increase in childhood obesity from a low of 4% in 1960 to 18% today. This increase in childhood obesity over time has mirrored the increase in adult obesity rates. Not surprisingly, children are following the example of their parents. Adult's poor health choices are having severe effects on the next generation of Christians. The consequence of this dramatic increase in childhood obesity is that our children today have more chronic health conditions (high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes), conditions previously seen only in adults. A study in the Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics November 3rd, 2008, found that between 2002 and 2005 the number of children ages 5-19 taking medications for high cholesterol and diabetes doubled (especially among girls). Children who are overweight today will suffer more health problems as they get older. 80% of children who are overweight at ages

10-15 will be obese when they turn 25 and will suffer all of the health problems that come with obesity.

Obesity is not just an isolated personal problem. A New England Journal of Medicine study in July, 2007, showed that obesity is like a virus that spreads among friends and family. This study looked at how the relationships we have influence our health choices, and how we influence other people. The researchers found that a person's chances of becoming obese increased if he or she had a friend, sibling, or spouse who became obese.

Physical Inactivity

The overall health benefits of regular aerobic exercise are overwhelming:

Reduces the risk of dying prematurely, dying from heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, colon cancer, depression.

Reduces the risk of developing diabetes and diabetics who exercise have less heart disease.

Helps reduce blood pressure in people who already have high blood pressure.

Helps control weight.

Helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints.

Helps older adults become stronger and better able to move about without falling.

Promotes psychological well-being.

While we tend to focus on weight (BMI), medical studies have shown that how much you weigh is not the only factor that determines how healthy you are. Exercise is important no matter how old you are, or, what your weight might be. This was proven by a study in 2007 published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. This study looked at individuals over age 60 who were healthy weight (BMI <25), overweight (BMI 25-29), obese (BMI 30-34), and extremely obese (BMI >35). They found that no matter what people's weight was, if they were physically fit - walked briskly 30 minutes every day - they had a lower chance of dying. So, if you are overweight or obese and you exercise your health will improve, even if you do not lose a single pound. No matter what happens to your weight you WILL be healthier, more alive, and live longer. Also, just being thin is not enough. A person who is thin, but sits on the couch eating chips and smoking cannot expect any better health than a morbidly obese person.

Poor Diet

The typical American diet is rich in high fat fried foods, an abundance of sweets, and limited amounts of fiber, fruits, and vegetables. While there are many theories on what a healthy diet includes the one proven fact is that a diet high in fruits and vegetables consistently leads to better health.

What are the benefits?

Reduces heart disease and stroke.

Possible reduction in cancer risk.

Protects against the development of diabetes.

Filling up on fat free fruits and vegetables decreases the amount of high fat foods you will eat, aiding in weight loss.

A recent study in the journal *Circulation* (Oct 21,2008) found that while the typical American diet of fried foods, salty snacks, eggs, and meat led to a 30% increase in heart attacks, a diet high in fruits and vegetables led to a 35% reduction in heart attacks.

The Failed Solutions

Recognition of these poor health habits as the cause of poor health is not a new observation. The medical profession and the private sector (alternative medicine, supplements, diet plans, etc) have brought in billions of dollars researching and treating the consequences of these health habits for decades. However, these efforts have failed to turn the tide of declining health. Let's look at what has not worked.

Weight Loss Plans (Weight Watchers) – The only study that has looked at the long term success of weight loss plans looked at the Weight Watchers program and found only 3.2 % weight loss at 2 years. (approximately 7 pounds lost).

Prescription Medications – In 2007 Americans spent 12.5 billion dollars on oral diabetic medications (remember, only 150 million was spent on childhood cancer research). Many medications designed to treat obesity and diabetes are consistently linked to heart problems.

Alternative medications, tonics, miracle juices – Americans spend billions each year on these quick fixes, most of which have absolutely no evidence showing benefit and when studies are performed they often show only harm (such as with Vitamin E which was once sold as a cure for heart disease, but, in randomized studies actually causes heart failure and an increased risk of cancer).

Personal responsibility – Despite public knowledge of the adverse consequences of tobacco abuse, obesity, poor diet, and physical inactivity Americans continue to live a destructive lifestyle leading to skyrocketing rates of health problems and out of control spending on health care. Clearly, the strategy of focusing on personal responsibility alone is failing.

The 4 Principles of Healthy Living

In order for individuals, families, the church community, and the nation to improve overall health we must get back to the basics of good health. We need to know more about our bodies than we do about our cars. We need to quit worrying about the rare diseases and learn the basics of good health. We need to quit looking for easy answers to improve our health – tonics, miracle juices, vitamins, supplements – unproven quick fixes - and focus on the proven basics known to improve health. We need to quit relying on the health care system to fix our self induced health problems. It is estimated that the health care system (doctors, hospitals, medications) only affects American health by 15-20%. The other 80% is dependent upon the choices people make about caring for their own bodies. So, what can you do today to improve your health?

Multiple medical studies have shown conclusively that by taking on four simple health habits you can have a reduction in overall mortality, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, stroke, congestive heart failure, and cancer. This means that without taking any pills, vitamins, tonics, etc. – without spending a single penny – you can live a longer, healthier, more productive life in service to Christ.

The 4 Principles of Healthy Living

1. Do Not Smoke.
2. Maintain a BMI<30.
3. Exercise 150 minutes/week. (30 minutes 5 days a week of some form of aerobic exercise)
4. Eat 5 servings of fruits or vegetables daily.

The Reality

While committing to the Principles of Healthy Living may appear simple on paper, practical application in the real world is difficult. With over 50 combined years of caring for patients we can honestly say that very few people ever make sustained improvements in their health habits and the health care system has a poor record of empowering people to change. While the health care system is made up of well intentioned individuals, it is obvious that health care is ineffective in overcoming the self destructive tendency of this world. Studies show that even when people are told the health benefits of the Healthy Principles and encouraged to adopt them only 8% of people will do so.

Why? What is it that gives us such a self-destructive nature?

Ignorance? – NO. Even the best educated (teachers, lawyers, doctors) have poor health habits.
Lack of resources? – NO. We are the wealthiest nation in the world, yet have some of the worst health.

Time? – NO. Often when people retire their health gets worse.

It is primarily an issue of the mind and spirit. AN ISSUE OF WILL.

Jesus himself can't make you change unless you are willing to let Him, through faith, get you in shape. It is going to take a joint effort between the health care system and the Christian Community to change the current downward course of our society's health.

The Secret of Christian Power

What if the world's best-kept secret was given to you? Would you allow yourself to embrace the secret, to study its use, to understand it and then to turn it to your dreams, your goals and your needs and let it guide you to a life of destiny?

Legendary Christians such as Dwight A. Moody, Carey of India, Livingston of Africa, Lottie Moon of China, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Billy Graham, Bill Bright and thousands of others discovered and embraced the secret and became what God had in mind for them. The Great Commission was emblazoned on their hearts leading them to consider the world as their theater of operations. The secret burned within, creating enthusiasm, vitality and energy.

The secret?

The personal power of the Holy Spirit.

The mysterious comforter Jesus left behind is the giver of the Abundant Life Jesus promised. Life is abundant when your muscles surge with energy as you face whatever mountains you want to move. Life is abundant when your mind crackles with imagination and determination. Life is abundant when your heart beats with force and your days are met with purpose.

The secret promises these and more!

Your body can easily go 80 years or more with minimal maintenance when you treat it as the temple for the Spirit. Set a goal right now to outlive your doctor. Avoid doctor visits. Refuse to let stress rule your life. Avoid hospitals. Rev up your immune and endocrine systems. Avoid sicknesses that require potent, expensive medicines that have undesirable side effects. Don't be passive about your health. It is a valuable jewel.

The power of the Spirit gives you the keys to the kingdom. Open the doors before you. The doors are in your mind. The keys change the way you think. As you believe in the power of the Spirit, the power becomes a creative force within you and, whatever you conceive, you can achieve.

The power of the Spirit opens the windows of your mind so that what your eyes behold and your ears hear is interpreted as it really is, not as someone else wishes you to believe. Thus, you have the power of discernment. The power of discernment is used to crack open the lies and deceit of the culture we live in. Society will blind you and seduce you and capture your attention, robbing you of the destiny the Spirit promises.

The secret contains the meaning of important laws such as the Law of Sowing and Reaping. The secret will teach you how to pray effectively and many other valuable skills. The secret will rid you of robber emotions such as worry, fear, denial, anger and procrastination, which result in lives of regret, not destiny.

The secret gave birth to science as the Spirit was in power in the minds and hearts of men and women who believed what Jesus said and vowed to follow him. Their discoveries launched the power of knowledge which is now ours to use because all science is connected to Heaven. The power of knowledge teaches us how to eat, how to exercise, how to lose weight, how to shop for food, how to cook, how to avoid fat, how to calculate the number of calories you need and gives us thousands of other useful habits of information.

The secret has the power to search your heart, to weed out harmful habits. Habits that harm are those that sabotage your journey, that make you settle for less than a truly remarkable journey. No other group of humans has been given the Great Commission to carry out. It is ours and ours alone. The journey is worthy of our full attention and all our energies.

You may be called to be in business or to become a professional. Or, it may be that your journey will be to care for the sick in a hospital or a nursing home or it may be that you will help children of despair cross the threshold of hope. Whatever it is, we have been given the power and the commandment to love our neighbors because God has called us to be special.

We are free from bondage to systems of law or thought that arise from the minds of little persons who seek to ensnare us. We are free to find our own horizons. We can rise to the challenge and become one of the exceptional Christians, now that we know where the power is.

In every era God has raised up men and women of destiny to address the mess of the moment. He unfetters their minds, expands their imaginations, and makes history come alive. Try to imagine the unthinkable - a world without people of the Spirit, without people of power. In the final analysis all that matters is that we choose to accept the power and that we accept it fully. Then, look forward to an unbelievable journey.

If as a Christian you truly believe in the power of the Holy Spirit and look at all of the miraculous wonders done by the Spirit of God throughout time, you will quickly realize that taking on 4 simple health habits is an easily attainable goal. The issue for the Christian is not changing their health habits from those of destruction to regeneration, it is believing that the Holy Spirit - the Spirit of Almighty God - has the power to change and sustain your physical life.

4 Weeks To A Healthier Christian

Dare To Be A Healthy Christian is a one month program consisting of 4 one week lessons focusing each week on one of the 4 Principles of Healthy Living. Each week will start with a Hope and Healing Healthnote (to be read on each Sunday) detailing practical medical advice about how to incorporate each principle into your daily life. The weekly program includes daily devotional readings featuring all of the New Testament scripture verses which reference the Holy Spirit. You will find much inspiration in simply reading and pausing to reflect on what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit. These writings will challenge you to trust in and use the power of the Holy Spirit to do what the rest of the world cannot do – change your health habits from those of destruction to regeneration, from death to life, from darkness to Light, from a life conformed by this world to a life transformed by Jesus.

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Each person will have a different emphasis so pick the order of the lessons depending on your need. Even if you are not having a problem with one of the Health Principles (ex. you do not smoke or are not obese) make sure you spend a week studying each of them. The weekly spiritual study focusing on the Holy Spirit will help to sustain you through your individual challenges. Also, you can share the information with someone you know who might need help (such as a friend or family member who smokes).

Consider forming a church based support group for the month long study. Come together as a group to talk about your challenges, setbacks, and victories. Also, talk together as fellow Christians about the work of the Holy Spirit in your daily lives. Consider starting a church based exercise program as an outreach opportunity to bring people from your local community into the church. Start with a short Bible study focusing on the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

Use this program as an example to the rest of the world that the Spirit filled Christian can overcome the self-destructive nature of this world. After all, if Christians cannot overcome the common sins of self-destructive eating, gluttony, and sloth, how can we expect the rest of the world to overcome drug addiction, sexual immorality, and greed?

We must be the example.

We must be the witness

We must be Light.