

## 7 - THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND HEALTH

Both the Old and New Testaments encouraged good health practices and rational medical treatment. The early church continued in this Biblical tradition. The early church fathers stressed good health practices involving diet, exercise, hygiene and morality. Medical practice and research reached a high level in the early church. The following are only examples: -

Ignatius (d.107) wrote about wound treatment.

Clement of Alexandria (ca.105) wrote about diet and the physiology of childbirth.

Tertullian of Carthage (155-200) discovered that the function of bile was to aid digestion. Before that time bile was one of the Greek four humours, but nobody knew its function. Tertullian was also the first to differentiate nerve tissue from tendons.

Dionysius wrote a book on the physiology of exercise.

Lactanius Philomenus (250-330) wrote a book, *De Opificio Dei*, in which he covered such topics as anatomy, physiology and psychology.

Gregory of Nyssa (331-396) taught wholism - that body, soul and spirit are inseparable -and wrote that the heart and lungs were ‘intricately connected.’ He described how food was assimilated in the intestines (not the stomach as most ancient writers thought) and “turned into blood.”

St. Jerome (340-420) advocated vegetarianism and abstinence from alcoholic beverages.

Nemesius, Bishop of Emesa (ca.400), studied the circulation of the blood and the nervous system. Nemesius “anticipated Harvey in the discovery of the circulation of the blood.”

Bishop Isidorus of Seville (626-750) wrote a monumental twenty-volume work which covered every aspect of ancient medicine.

Oribasius and Alexander of Tralles were both compilers, systematically listing diseases, symptoms, treatments and expected results.

Paul of Aegina (ca650) wrote a seven-volume set comprising the “most complete system of operative surgery” until modern times.

Aetius of Amida (6<sup>th</sup> century) wrote ninety chapters on ophthalmology, covering the “entire field.”

But under Roman Catholicism this advancement was lost. Because of the belief in an immortal soul, the body was deemed unimportant and pursuing good health practices was considered pampering the body at the expense of the soul. Some Christian saints, to show their holiness, actually bragged that they had never bathed. No wonder the dark ages were associated with pandemics and disease. Life expectancy was only 20. The Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century killed up to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the people. It is described as the worst disaster to ever strike the human race.

The Bible introduced sound health principles. The early church continued these principles which were lost under Roman Catholicism. If we would return to the health principles of the Bible, health in our country would be enhanced.