

The Theological and Practical Significance of Health Reform in the Writings of Ellen G. White¹

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I. Introduction

For Ellen G. White, health reform is an ambitious and aggressive program of global proportions with very specific goals and firmly grounded in biblical-theological convictions. It addresses one of the most fundamental problems of the human experience, namely, disease, illness, and their concomitant human suffering. It is not simply about what to eat or not to eat; it is about the impact of sin and evil on human beings as well as on their rationality and physicality. It is about the apparent absence of divine sovereignty in the presence of sickness and suffering. It is about God's justice in the setting of the cosmic conflict. Although there were other

¹ The following abbreviations are used for the books of Ellen G. White: CCh—*Counsels for the Church*; CD—*Counsels on Diet and Food*; CG—*Child Guidance*; CH—*Counsels on Health*; CME—*A Call to Medical Evangelism and Health Education*; COL—*Christ's Object Lessons*; CT—*Christ Triumphant*; CTBH—*Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene*; Ev—*Evangelism*; HL—*Healthful Living*; HP—*Heavenly Places*; Hvn—*Heaven*; MH—*Ministry of Health*; MR—*Manuscript Releases*; PHJ—*Pacific Health Journal*; PP—*Patriarchs and Prophets*; RH—*Review and Herald*; SM—*Selected Messages*; T—*Testimonies for the Church*; TMK—*That I May Know Him*.

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health reformers in the days of Ellen White,² there is nothing in the history of Christianity comparable to the magnitude of the health reform program formulated and promoted by her.

Under the influence of Jesus' concern for the sick, the Christian church has always cared for the sick. In the early church deacons and deaconesses were appointed to care for them and after the conversion of Constantine hospitals were established to provide for the sick.³ This is still the case among Catholics and Protestants. Most Christians consider rational medicine to be the primary means to care for the sick although charismatic healings are promoted by many. Disease is considered to be an evil to be opposed by finding ways to overcome it. But little attention has been given to a theology of healing. Prevention is to some extent promoted but we rarely find Christians aggressively speaking against, for instance, the use of tobacco and the consumption of alcohol.

Ellen White is interested in healing, but she looks at the complexity of the problem and emphasizes prevention in order to bring healing and not only to avoid sickness. For her prevention is a means of healing and restoration. Her program integrates science, religion, and moral responsibility, that is to say the rational, the spiritual, and the ethical dimensions of human beings. Since her interest in health is grounded in biblical theology, it has become part of the Adventist message. Never before in the history of the Christian church has such significance been

² For a study of the health reform movements in the times of Ellen G. White and their contribution to the Adventist emphasis on health reform see, among others, D. E. Robinson, *The Story of Our Health Message* (3rd edition; Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1965); John B. Blake, "Health Reform," in *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 30-49; Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), who concentrated so much on the trees in the forest that lost sight of the beauty of the forest—the health system promoted by E. G. White and its theological significance. A response to his book was prepared by the Ellen G. White Estate, "A Critique of the Book *Prophetess of Health* Prepared by the Staff of the Ellen G. White Estate," 1976. Others who have written on the reform movements are, George W. Read, *A Sound of Trumpets: American, Adventists, and Health Reform* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982); and Rennie B. Schoepflin, "Health and Health Care," *The World of Ellen G. White*, ed. Gary Land (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1987), 143-158.

³ For an introduction to the Christian interest in caring for the sick see, Norman E. Thomas, "Medical Missions," *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley (5 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 483.

attached to the question of health. In what follows we will explore the goals White sets for her program and the theological presuppositions that undergird it.⁴ We will also discuss other theological concepts that contribute to the foundation of the health program promoted by her.⁵

II. Purpose of Health Reform and its Theological Foundations

Ellen White provides a clear statement of purpose for the health reform envisioned by her. The statement also includes elements of a plan for action in the implementation of the program (notice the use of the verbs “teach,” and “show”). We will carefully examine the statement in order to explore its implications and theological assumptions. We will do this by examining other places in her writings where these ideas are further developed. Here is her statement of purpose:

In teaching health principles, keep before the mind the great object of reform—that its purpose is to secure the highest development of body and mind and soul. Show that the laws of nature, being the laws of God, are designed for our good; that obedience to them promotes happiness in this life, and aids in the preparation for the life to come.⁶

The simplicity of the statement is deceiving. It highlights the significance of the subject and provides the underlying assumptions upon which the program itself is built. I will begin the analysis with the first part

⁴ Because of the purpose of this paper, we will not discuss the specifics of the health reform. But perhaps it may suffice to say that, although she promotes the ideal of a vegetarian diet (lacto-ovo vegetarian diet), she supports the biblical law of clean/unclean animals, and rejects the use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea. She emphasizes physical exercise and the moderate use of that which is good. White also writes about the dangers of overeating, the use of highly seasoned foods, rich desserts, and the benefits of light and fresh air. For a useful summary see Reid, *Trumpets*, 132-140.

⁵ For a study on a theology of healing in Ellen G. White see, Read, *Sound of Trumpets*, 116-122. For an earlier reflection of the topic see, T. R. Flatz, “Health and Gospel Message: Our Bodies a Living Sacrifice,” *Our Firm Foundation* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953), 339-364; and J. Wayne McFarland, “Health and Gospel Message: The Laws of Health,” *ibid.*, 365-390. For a discussion of a theology of health in the Bible see, George W. Reid, “Health and Healing,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 751-778.

⁶ MH 146.

of the second sentence: “. . . the laws of nature, being the laws of God, are designed for our good.”

A. Health Reform is Theocentric

For Ellen White health reform is not a secular or humanistic program but a fundamentally religious one that integrates religious convictions and the scientific study of the laws of nature. White uses the phrase “law of nature” in a religious-scientific way meaning by it the laws that regulate the operations of the natural world under the guidance of God.⁷ According to her these laws are an expression of God’s will for His creation, including humans.⁸ For her, God constitutes the center around which the program is developed thus transforming it into a well-integrated health system and philosophy of health.⁹ Without a center we would not have a system of health but pieces of information about health. She offers at least two main arguments to support a theocentric understanding of the health reform program.

1. God is the Creator of the Laws of Nature

The theocentric nature of health reform is *first* manifested in the fact that God is the creator of the laws of nature: “In infinite wisdom, the world which God had newly formed was placed under fixed laws. Laws were ordained, not only for the government of living beings, but for the operations of nature.”¹⁰ The fact that God created these laws as an expression of His will imbues them with a moral content—they are to be

⁷ She also refers to the laws of nature as “the unchangeable principles of nature” (CTBH 109).

⁸ She writes, “The material world is under God’s control. The laws of nature are obeyed by nature. Everything speaks and acts the will of the Creator. Cloud and sunshine, dew and rain, wind and storm, all are under the supervision of God, and yield implicit obedience to His command. It is in obedience to the law of God that the spire of grain bursts through the ground, ‘first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.’ Mark 4:28. These the Lord develops in their proper season because they do not resist His working” (COL 81-82).

⁹ She writes, “Those who study and practice the principles of right living will be greatly blessed, both physically and spiritually. An understanding of the philosophy of health is a safeguard against many of the evils that are continually increasing” (CG 362).

¹⁰ PHJ February 1, 1901, par. 2.

obeyed. Since they are an expression of love, they aim at the well-being of humanity.¹¹ They were designed “for our good.”

In the context of her discussions on health reform she specifically uses the expression “laws of nature” to refer to the laws that God implanted in our being in order for it to function properly.¹² She encourages us “to study that marvelous organism, the human system, and the laws by which it is governed.”¹³ These laws are “the manifestation of God’s love and wisdom in the works of nature.”¹⁴ Her understanding of natural law as established by God and aiming at our well-being lays close to the center of the health reform program she is promoting and removes it from any secular approach to the study of health.

2. Only God/Christ Can Heal

We find in her writings a *second* argument supporting the theocentric nature of health reform. This argument rejects any understanding of nature along the lines of deism and pantheism. She writes,

Through the agencies of nature, God is working, day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, to keep us alive, to build up and restore us. When any part of the body sustains injury, a healing process is at once begun; nature’s agencies are set at work to restore soundness. But the power working through these agencies is the power of God. All life-giving power is from Him. When one recovers from disease, it is God who restores him.¹⁵

¹¹ She comments, “But God’s laws are not merely an expression of His selfish or arbitrary authority. He is love, and in all that He did, He had the well-being of humanity in view. He would have been glorified in the work of His hands had man retained his first perfection, and had all his varied capabilities of mind and soul and body been developed so as to reach the highest possible degree of excellence” (Ibid.).

¹² CH 39.

¹³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ MH 112-113. See also PP 114, where she states: “Many teach that matter possesses vital power—that certain properties are imparted to matter, and it is then left to act through its own inherent energy; and that the operations of nature are conducted in harmony with fixed laws, with which God Himself cannot interfere. This is false science, and is not sustained by the word of God. Nature is the servant of her Creator. God does not annul His laws or work contrary to them, but He is continually using them as His instruments. Nature testifies of an intelligence, a presence, an active energy, that works in and through her laws.”

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The *first* thing to notice in this statement is that in a world of sickness and suffering God is always actively working to keep us alive and to restore us to health. He is dynamically involved in restraining the damage that sickness and suffering are inflicting on the human race. It is indeed amazing to observe the human body fighting diseases through built-in systems of defense. These are “nature’s agencies set at work to restore soundness” to our bodies. They are part of the laws of nature established by God for our good. *Second*, for Ellen White the power to heal observable in the operations of nature is not inherent in nature itself. The system is there but it lacks the power needed to heal. Healing power exclusively resides in God who makes it available to us through the agencies of nature. In other words, nature lacks life-giving power because it is part of creation itself and, more specifically, because it has also been damaged by sin and is consequently sick (cf., Rom 8:19-23). To the superficial observer it would appear that it is the forces of nature that bring healing but, according to White, what we witness in the operations of nature is the power of God preserving and restoring human life on the planet. This is an unapologetic rejection of a secular and of any mechanical understanding of the operations of nature.

The theocentric nature of the health reform promoted by Ellen White is at the same time Christ-centered: “There is in nature the continual working of the Father and the Son. Christ says, ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work,’ John 5:17.”¹⁶ He came to give us “health and peace and perfection of character.”¹⁷ She adds, “From Him flowed a stream of healing power, and in body and mind and soul men were made whole.”¹⁸ The healing power of God that is active through nature’s agencies is indeed the power of Christ manifested on the cross. The physicians try to work with nature to bring healing but the truth is, White says, that Christ is the one who imparts health and life.¹⁹

¹⁶ PP 114; for a fuller discussion on the Ellen White’s Christ-centered understanding of the health reform see below under “Soteriology.”

¹⁷ MH 17.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 111.

For her ultimate reality and knowledge or truth are found in God; a personal God. It is through His self-revelation that we come to understand Him, creation, and ourselves. Any approach to nature and healing based on rationalism and/or humanism is considered to be too narrow and ultimately ineffective in bringing true healing. Only the one who created nature and who, in the context of sin, sent His Son to redeem us is capable of preserving and restoring life to the human race. True healing is always a manifestation of the power of God.²⁰

B. Health Reform and Biblical Anthropology

Let us return to Ellen White's statement of purpose for the health reform program. The second theological element present in the statement is biblical anthropology. Her understanding of health reform is incontestably grounded on the biblical understanding of human nature. We are dealing now with the object of healing—the human being. Who is this creature in need of healing? It is impossible to develop a theology of healing or a system of healing without first understanding the nature of the person who needs healing. In the statement of purpose this is made quite clear: "Its purpose is to secure the highest development of body and mind and soul." It is assumed that humans, as created by God, are in need of development in an integrated way because they are an indivisible unity of life in bodily form (body, mind, and soul). We will develop these ideas under two main headings: Humans as embodied potentiality and humans as embodied life.

1. Humans as Embodied Potentiality

In biblical anthropology humans were created with a potential to be developed. In a sense they came from the hands of the creator as "unfinished" beings. Without this quality they would have been frozen pieces of art to be admired by other creatures but lacking freedom. Perhaps it could be said that humans were beings heading to a fuller expression of their beings. At creation they possessed all the characteristics that defined

²⁰ See, Reid, *Trumpets*, 118-125.

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them as human beings and as such they were perfect.²¹ But the potentiality that also defined them constituted them into free beings that in the exercise of their freedom were becoming, in union with God, what they would want or like to become. This capacity for further development belongs to the very essence of human nature and should not be identified as a post-fallen condition.²² White writes, “He [God] would have been glorified in the work of His hands had man retained his first perfection, and had all his varied capabilities of mind and soul and body been developed so as to reach the highest possible degree of excellence.”²³

God created humans as a potentiality that could actualize itself through self-development “reaching the highest possible degree of excellence.” In other words, “every man has the opportunity, to a great extent, of making himself whatever he chooses to be.”²⁴ This is indeed about human freedom, but it is also about assuming responsibility for our actions as beings traveling to a fuller expression of our beings. Since development belongs to the essence of being humans, it should not surprise us to find Ellen White indicating that the goal of the health reform is precisely the development of the potential that God granted us at creation. God has not changed His plans for the human race. This potential has been damaged by sin and can only be

²¹ Notice how Ellen G. White describes the condition of humans immediately after creation: “Man came from the hand of God perfect in organization and beautiful in form. All his faculties of mind and body were fully developed and harmoniously balanced. His nature was in harmony with the will of God. His affections were pure; his appetites and passions were under the control of reason. His mind was capable of comprehending divine things. He stood before his Maker in the strength of manhood, the crowning glory of the creative work” (PHJ, February 1, 1902 par. 1). When she states “his faculties of mind and body were fully developed” she is not denying the need for further development but affirming that the faculties did not lack what was needed for them to be humans.

²² White writes, “If it were possible for created beings to attain to a full understanding of God and His works, then, having reached this point, there would be for them no further discovery of truth, no growth in knowledge, no further development of mind or heart. God would no longer be supreme; and men, having reached the limit of knowledge and attainment, would cease to advance. Let us thank God that it is not so. God is infinite; in Him are ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’ And to all eternity men may be ever searching, ever learning, and yet they can never exhaust the treasures of His wisdom, His goodness, and His power” (CCh 88).

²³ PHJ, February 1, 1902 par. 1, par. 2.

²⁴ CH 107.

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restored through the power of Christ. He is the one who could motivate us to take proper care of our bodily existence.

Perhaps the questions we should address now is, why do humans need to develop the potential they have? Ellen G. White provides a direct answer:

Our first duty toward God and our fellow beings is that of self-development. Every faculty with which the Creator has endowed us should be cultivated to the highest degree of perfection, that we may be able to do the greatest amount of good of which we are capable. Hence that time is spent to good account which is used in the establishment and preservation of physical and mental health.²⁵

She has raised the issue of personal development to the level of a moral responsibility. Self-development is not narcissistic neither is it an attempt to merge with the powers of nature in a pantheistic mystical rapture. This is to be done for the benefit of others. We owe it to God and to others to develop our potential as much as possible in order to increase the amount of good in the world. When humans look around they tend to see the evil that is there, but Ellen White challenges us to look for and increase the good in the world. The value of self-development is not grounded on ethical egoism, whereby the person seeks to increase personal benefits, but it is grounded on ethical universalism according to which everyone should seek the increase of good in the world for the benefit of others. Ethical decisions related to self-development are to be made in answer to the question, would this increase the amount of good in the world? According to White, personal development enables us to increase the amount of good in a world of sickness and suffering in accordance to our personal capacities.

She also identifies another important ethical value: “Hence that time is spent to good account which is used in the establishment and preservation of physical and mental health.” In other words, it is ethically correct to spend time studying the laws of nature and taking care of our physical and mental health because in doing such things we are aiming at doing maximum good for others. Therefore the health reform is not incompatible with the gospel, the three angels’ messages (Rev 14:6-12) or with the

²⁵ Ibid.

Christian life.²⁶ This same value was manifested in the life of Jesus and consequently “our Lord Jesus Christ came to this world as the unwearied servant of man’s necessities.”²⁷ The potential we received from the Creator is to be developed in order to benefit the human race.

2. Humans as Embodied Life: Wholistic Anthropology²⁸

The goal of health reform, according to Ellen White, is “to secure the highest development of body and mind and soul.” Humans are defined by her as an indivisible unity of body, mind, and soul. According to the Scriptures, humans were created by God as a fragment of indivisible life in bodily form.²⁹ Humans do not have body, mind, and soul but they are body, mind, and soul. This biblical view provides an unshakable foundation for what Ellen White has to say about the importance of the health reform she is endorsing and promoting. Since these different dimensions of the human being are deeply interconnected in the one person, whatever damages one

²⁶ She is very explicit on this matter: “As a people we have been given the work of making known the principles of health reform. There are some who think that the question of diet is not of sufficient importance to be included in their evangelistic work. But such make a great mistake. God’s word declares, ‘Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.’ 1 Corinthians 10:31. The subject of temperance, in all its bearings, has an important place in the work of salvation” (CH 443).

²⁷ MH 17.

²⁸ For a brief history of wholeness in Adventist thinking and life see, Ginger Hanks-Harwood, “Wholeness,” in *Remnant and Republic: Adventist Themes for Personal and Social Ethics*, ed. Charles W. Teel (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University Center for Christian Bioethics, 1995), 127-144.

²⁹ For the biblical evidence see, Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Health and Healing in the Pentateuch,” in *Health 2000 and Beyond: A Study Conference of Adventist Theology, Philosophy, and Practice of Healing*, ed. Eugene Durand and Gary Swanson (Silver Spring, MD: Health and Temperance Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1994), 17-29; and Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, “Death: Origin, Nature, and Final Eradication,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 314-334. Christian anthropology is basically dualistic (humans have an eternal soul that exist by itself independent of the body). Neuroscientific studies are providing evidence to support the wholistic anthropology found in the Bible and that evidence is beginning to have an impact in theological circles. For a discussion of the evidence from neurology as well as from the Bible and how the two could interact see, Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul and Human Life: The nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

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of them would also damage, at least to some extent, the unity of the person. She comments:

Since the mind and the soul find expression through the body, both mental and spiritual vigor are in great degree dependent upon physical strength and activity; whatever promotes physical health, promotes the development of a strong mind and a well-balanced character. Without health, no one can as distinctly understand or as completely fulfill his obligations to himself, to his fellow beings, or to his Creator. Therefore, the health should be as faithfully guarded as the character.³⁰

This connection is so intimate that:

They react upon each other. In order, then, to reach a high standard of moral and intellectual attainment, and to secure a strong well-balanced character, the laws that control our physical being must be heeded; both the mental and the physical powers must be developed. Such a training will produce men of strength and solidity of character, of keen perception and sound judgment,—men who will be an honor to God and a blessing to the world.³¹

White refers to the human *body* as “a living machinery” in which “every function is wonderfully and wisely made” and which, among the works of God in the natural world, is “the most wonderful.”³² It is a “marvelous organism.”³³ It is the dwelling place of God³⁴ and is to “be presented to Him a living sacrifice, fitted to render Him acceptable service.”³⁵ In order to keep it in good health it is important to study human physiology and practice the laws of nature that govern it: “The Lord desires us to obey the laws of health and life. He holds each one responsible to care properly for his body, that it may be kept in health.”³⁶

³⁰ CG 360-361.

³¹ PUJ February 1, 1902 par. 14.

³² CG 103.

³³ CD 457.

³⁴ CH 382.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁶ Ev 261.

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“Mind” and “soul” are closely related. The “mind” emphasizes the rational dimension of human beings while the “soul,” in the context of the discussion of health in Ellen White, seems to point to the inner life of the person and in particular to the spiritual aspect. According to her, *mind* was created by God on the sixth day. “It was a wonderful thing for God to create man, to make mind. He created him that every faculty might be the faculty of the divine mind.”³⁷ “Mind” is on this planet a unique a piece of matter. Endowed with self-awareness and the abilities to reason and feel, humans were to rule over the world and to be able to communicate and commune with the Creator. Every faculty of the human mind was to “be the faculty of the divine mind,” that is to say the point of contact or access between the human mind and God. He was interested in using it to communicate with us and in allowing us to talk to Him. The divine Mind was to touch the human mind: “The brain nerves which communicate with the entire system are the only medium through which Heaven can communicate to man and affect his inmost life. Whatever disturbs the circulation of the electric currents in the nervous system lessens the strength of the vital powers, and the result is a deadening of the sensibilities of the mind.”³⁸

The deterioration of the reasoning powers of the mind as a result of bad eating habits and the indulgence of evil passions has done serious damage to the human race. Ellen White specifically states:

The bad eating of many generations, the gluttonous and self-indulgent habits of the people, are filling our poorhouses, our prisons, and our insane asylums. Intemperance, in drinking tea and coffee, wine, beer, rum, and brandy, and the use of tobacco, opium, and other narcotics, has resulted in great mental and physical degeneracy, and this degeneracy is constantly increasing.³⁹

³⁷ HL 12.

³⁸ CG 446. She also writes, “It must be kept before the people that the right balance of the mental and moral powers depends in a great degree on the right conditions of the physical system. All narcotics and unnatural stimulants that enfeeble and degrade the physical nature tend to lower the tone of the intellect and morals. Intemperance lies at the foundation of the moral depravity of the world” (CME 38).

³⁹ CH 49. For her, intemperance meant lack of self-control and more specifically the “indulgence of perverted appetite” (CME 39).

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She considers this condition to be a threat to our humanness. The rationality with which the Creator endowed humans—the mind—is at risk and consequently the existence of the human race is also at risk. She states it this way:

The present enfeebled condition of the human family was presented before me. Every generation has been growing weaker, and disease of every form afflicts the race. . . Satan’s power upon the human family increases. If the Lord should not soon come and destroy his power, the earth would ere long be depopulated.⁴⁰

Perhaps it would not be wrong to say that the human race is facing a pan-epidemic of mental illnesses. The violence that prevails around the world in the name of religion, political ideologies, financial concerns, or rage testifies to the fact that the human mind, as created by God, has been seriously damage. “Mind” is at risk on the planet. The health reform is one of God’s instruments for the restoration and preservation of the human mind in a world of physical and moral depravity and degeneration. She clearly states, “Abstinence from the things that God has prohibited is the only way to prevent ruin of body and mind.”⁴¹

Therefore, it is required that the principles of health reform be agitated in the public arena.⁴² This work is to go together with the proclamation of the three angels’ messages for at least a couple of reasons (cf., Rev 14:6-12).⁴³ *First*, instructing the public on proper health care will destroy prejudices against the message making people more willing to accept it. The reliability of the health message would tend to predispose people to accept

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18. Notice how intemperance is connected by her with the enemy: “The enemy is trying to drag human beings down by leading them to indulge perverted appetite” (Ev 530). “Intemperance is at the foundation of the larger share of the ills of life. It annually destroys tens of thousands. We do not speak of intemperance as limited only to the use of intoxicating liquors, but give it a broader meaning, including the hurtful indulgence of any appetite or passion. *Through intemperance some sacrifice one half, and others two thirds of their physical, mental, and moral powers and become playthings for the enemy*” (CG 394; emphasis mine).

⁴¹ CH 135.

⁴² “Health principles must be agitated and the public mind deeply stirred to investigation” (RH, Feb 11, 1902).

⁴³ See CH 20-21.

the biblical reliability of the message itself. She points out that “when properly conducted, the health work is an entering wedge, making a way for other truths to reach the heart.”⁴⁴ *Secondly*, and perhaps more important, the mind of many are so damaged that it is impossible for them to understand or perceive the beauty of the message. White states, “He [God] designs that the subject shall be agitated and the public mind deeply stirred to investigate it; for it is impossible for men and women, while under the power of sinful, health-destroying, brain-ennervating habits, to appreciate sacred truth.”⁴⁵ She goes so far as to say that improper diet could lead to animalism and “a development of animalism lessens spirituality, rendering the mind incapable of understanding the truth.”⁴⁶ What these individuals need is not instruction about biblical teachings but instruction on the principles of health reform that will bring healing to their minds and would make them more sensitive to the work of the Spirit and the message of salvation. Thus will the inner life—the soul—be renewed and character developed into the similitude of our Lord.

C. Health Reform and the Value of Human Life

Let us return to the statement of purpose quoted at the beginning of this paper. Let me quote it again in full:

In teaching health principles, keep before the mind the great object of reform—that its purpose is to secure the highest development of body and mind and soul. Show that the laws of nature, being the laws of God, are designed for our good; that obedience to them promotes happiness in this life, and aids in the preparation for the life to come.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., 434; also 487.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ RH, May 27, 1902 par. 4. Writing to Adventists she states, “You need clear, energetic minds, in order to appreciate the exalted character of the truth, to value the atonement, and to place the right estimate upon eternal things. If you pursue a wrong course and indulge in wrong habits of eating, and thereby weaken the intellectual powers, you will not place that high estimate upon salvation and eternal life which will inspire you to conform your life to the life of Christ; you will not make those earnest, self-sacrificing efforts for entire conformity to the will of God which His word requires and which are necessary to give you a moral fitness for the finishing touch of immortality” (2T 66).

⁴⁷ MH 146.

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We will comment on the last clause of the statement: “that obedience to them promotes happiness in this life, and aids in the preparation for the life to come.” For Ellen White life, and particularly human life, is good and extremely valuable. “Life is a gift of God.”⁴⁸ Sin has devalued human life and every evil practice devalues it even more leading many to conclude that life on this planet is a miserable burden; even hell. Sickness damages the quality of our lives and deprives us of happiness. White states, “There is sickness everywhere, and most of it might be prevented by attention to the laws of health. The people need to see the bearing of health principles upon their well-being”⁴⁹ She goes on to say that “the decline in physical vigor and power of endurance is alarming. It demands the attention of all who have at heart the well-being of their fellow men.”⁵⁰ Notice that what should move us to promote health reform is our interest in the well-being of others; a well-being that is being seriously damage by their eating habits and their intemperance.

The health reform promoted by Ellen White procures to improve the quality of life on the planet: “There is a great work to be done for suffering humanity in relieving their sufferings by the use of the natural agencies that God has provided, and in teaching them how to prevent sickness by the regulation of the appetites and passions.”⁵¹ The model offered by her is the ministry of Jesus.

When Christ saw the multitudes that gathered about Him, “He was moved to compassion on them. . . .” Christ saw the sickness, the sorrow, the want and degradation of the multitudes that thronged His steps. To Him were presented the needs and woes of humanity throughout the world. Among the high and the low, the most honored and the most degraded, He beheld souls who were longing for the very blessing He had come to bring; souls who needed only a knowledge of His grace, to become subjects of His kingdom.⁵²

⁴⁸ CH 41.

⁴⁹ CME 32.

⁵⁰ CD 441.

⁵¹ CH 206.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

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This depressing vision of human suffering was one of the reasons for His interest in healing the sick. Humans have ruined their health through intemperate habits and many of them tend to “feel that they are without hope either for this life or for the life to come. . .” Some even “speak of these erring ones as hopeless; but God looks upon them with pitying tenderness.”⁵³ God “calls upon His people to be His helping hand in relieving their wants.”⁵⁴

Health reform is not the final cure for the problem of sickness and suffering, but it contributes to alleviating and preventing suffering; thus helping the human family to enjoy a little more of the divine and precious gift of life. The holy ambition of Christians should be “to make the world better for their having lived in it. This is the work to which they are called.”⁵⁵ We should teach “that health is to be secured through obedience to the laws that God has established for the good of all mankind.”⁵⁶

The enjoyment of life is inseparable from the religious dimension of the human being. The experience of the divine in the human mind, soul, and body brings with it healing power. Our spiritual connection to God is not detrimental to our health but fundamental for it. “The influence of the Spirit of God is the very best medicine for disease. Heaven is all health; and the more deeply heavenly influences are realized, the more sure will be the recovery of the believing invalid. The true principles of Christianity open before all a source of inestimable happiness.”⁵⁷ God wants us to be happy and to enjoy life to its fullest. The following statement establishes a direct connection between the love of God and its healing power in the totality of the human being:

The love which Christ diffuses through the whole being is a vitalizing power. Every vital part—the brain, the heart, the nerves—it touches with healing. By it the highest energies of the being are aroused to activity. It frees the soul from the guilt and sorrow, the anxiety and care, that crush the life forces. With it come serenity and composure. It implants in the

⁵³ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ MH 398.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁷ CH 28.

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soul joy that nothing earthly can destroy,—joy in the Holy Spirit,—health-giving, life-giving joy.⁵⁸

The power of the love of God poured into our hearts is experienced not in the soul as an entity detached from the material body but on the human being as an indivisible unity—the brain, the heart, the nerves. The love of God touches the human body—the totality of the person. We could call this a spiritual-psychosomatic experience of healing. The health reform has the purpose of increasing the well-being of every human being in order for them to enjoy life as much as possible in a world that is still under the tyranny of sin.

III. Other Theological Concepts Associated with Health Reform

In addition to the biblical doctrines of God and humans and the divine concern for the enjoyment of life, there are several other biblical concepts that are directly connected by Ellen White to health reform. We will explore three of them that appear to be particularly important to her.

A. Soteriology

Any attempt to promote health reform should be always connected to the redemptive work of Christ on behalf of the human race or it would lack lasting value. Without Him any possibility of true healing is simply impossible. He is “the Great Healer.”⁵⁹ It should be clearly stated that “it is only through the grace of Christ that the work of restoration, physical, mental, and spiritual, can be accomplished.”⁶⁰ This is possible because He did the unimaginable for us:

Christ alone was able to bear the afflictions of the many. “In all their affliction he was afflicted.” He never bore disease in His own flesh, but

⁵⁸ MH 115. Notice how carrying for others brings healing: “If the mind is free and happy, from a consciousness of right doing and a sense of satisfaction in causing happiness to others, it creates a cheerfulness that will react upon the whole system, causing a freer circulation of the blood and a toning up of the entire body. The blessing of God is a healing power, and those who are abundant in benefitting others will realize that wondrous blessing in both heart and life” (CH 28).

⁵⁹ CME 34.

⁶⁰ MH 142-143.

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He carried the sickness of others. With tenderest sympathy He looked upon the suffering ones who pressed about Him. He groaned in spirit as He saw the work of Satan revealed in all their woe, and He made every case of need and of sorrow His own. . . . The power of love was in all His healing. He identified His interests with suffering humanity.⁶¹

This statement suggests that somehow Jesus vicariously bore on Himself the diseases of those He healed. Vicariously because it is said that “he never bore disease in His own flesh” and yet He “alone was able to bear the afflictions of the many” or “he carried the sickness of others.” His healing miracles were performed in anticipation of His own suffering on the cross. In fact, we are told, that “as He witnessed the suffering of humanity, He knew that He must bear a greater pain, mingled with mockery, that He would suffer the greatest humiliation. When He raised Lazarus from the dead, He knew that for that life He must pay the ransom on the cross of Calvary.”⁶²

Herein lays the mystery of the healing power of the cross, “in coming to the world in human form, in becoming subject to the law, in revealing to men that He bore their sickness, their sorrow, their guilt, Christ did not become a sinner. He was pure and uncontaminated by any disease. Not one stain of sin was found upon Him. . . . He stood before the world the spotless Lamb of God.”⁶³ Yet, He experienced in His own person and as our substitute the ultimate fate of our sickness; death. It could be said that sickness is the incursion of death in the sphere of life in order to end life. It is because the Sinless One, the one in whom there was no disease, took our place that the cross has become the place from which the healing power of God flows to suffering humanity. The one who did not need healing was wounded in order for us to be healed. Atonement is the ultimate solution to the problem sickness, suffering, and death.

Meanwhile, “Christ is no longer in this world in person, to go through our cities and towns and villages, healing the sick; but He has commissioned us to carry forward the medical missionary work that He began.”⁶⁴ Ellen White is referring here to what she calls the health reform

⁶¹ CTr 251.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ TMK 67.

⁶⁴ 9T 168.

program which includes teaching and practicing the health principles, use of rational medicine, and praying for the sick. The Scriptures clearly teach that healing can take place through prayer in the name of Jesus. But we know through personal experience that this is not always the case. In such cases we can affirm that healing takes places at a deeper level: “When the sick pray for the recovery of health, the Lord does not always answer their prayer in just the way they desire. But even though they may not be immediately healed, He will give them that which is of far more value—grace to bear their sickness.”⁶⁵ What is offered here is a *deeper* understanding of healing. The healing power of God is manifested in this situation through His sustaining grace that enables us to carry the burden with courage and full confidence in His love.⁶⁶ “Sickness and pain may test and try our patience and our faith, but the brightness of the Presence [the Shekinah] of the universe is with us and we must hide self behind Jesus.”⁶⁷ The idea seems to be that in such cases we can find refuge in Christ thus strengthening our relationship with Him.

The message of salvation through faith in the atoning work of Christ has in itself healing power. “If all would accept the righteousness of Christ, we should not see so much sickness in our world. Everyone would strive to take care of the house he inhabits. He would purify his soul by obeying the truth.”⁶⁸ This is based on the fact that through His death Christ redeemed us and consequently our body, mind, and soul belong to Him. We are not our own but were “purchased with a dear price If we could understand this and fully realize it, we would feel a great responsibility resting upon us to keep ourselves in the very best condition of health, that we might render to God perfect service.”⁶⁹ Our bodies should be used to glorify our Creator and

⁶⁵ HP 82.

⁶⁶ This idea comes very close to the distinction made in medical anthropology between *cure* and *healing*. Curing “is the strategy of destroying or checking a pathogen, removing a malfunctioning or non-functioning organ, restoring a person to health or well-being;” while healing “is the restoration of meaning to life. It is the strategy of restoring social and personal meaning for life problems that accompany human health misfortunes” (John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical Anthropology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 153, 155. A person can heal without being cured of an illness.

⁶⁷ 2MR 37.

⁶⁸ RH, April 30, 1901, par. 9.

⁶⁹ CH 43.

Redeemer.⁷⁰ We are God's appointed stewards of our bodies because He redeemed us as one unity of indivisible life. From the soteriological perspective our ultimate victory over sickness and death will take place at the Parousia: "When Christ comes, sorrow and sighing will be forever ended. Then will be the Christian's summer. All trials will be over, and there will be no more sickness or death."⁷¹

B. Eschatology

Ellen White, as we should have expected, connects health reform to end-time eschatological expectations. She counseled that "as we near the close of time, we must rise higher and still higher upon the question of health reform and Christian temperance, presenting it in a more positive and decided manner."⁷² She argues that health reform will assist us in growing in holiness before the Lord by bringing into subjection our appetites and submitting the passions of the body to the mind in the power of the Spirit.⁷³ It is the divine intention to preserve our bodies holy and our spirits pure in a world packed with corruption.⁷⁴ At a time when the human body is abused by many, we are exhorted to understand our physical bodies in order to proclaim with the psalmist, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps 139:14). In other words, the study of human physiology as part of the health reform will result in these last days in a recognition and proclamation of God as our Creator. There is healing power in praising the Lord.

⁷⁰ She indicates that "the knowledge that man is to be a temple for God, a habitation for the revealing of His glory, should be the highest incentive to the care and development of our physical powers. Fearfully and wonderfully has the Creator wrought in the human frame, and He bids us make it our study, understand its needs, and act our part in preserving it from harm and defilement" (MH 271).

⁷¹ Hvn 60.

⁷² CH 467.

⁷³ RH, April 30, 1914, pars. 5-6. She specifically states that "God's elect must stand untainted amid the corruptions teeming around them in these last days. Their bodies must be made holy, their spirits pure. If this work is to be accomplished, it must be undertaken at once, earnestly and understandingly. The Spirit of God should have perfect control, influencing every action. The health reform is one branch of the great work which is to fit a people for the coming of the Lord. It is as closely connected with the third angel's message as the hand is with the body" (CH 20-21).

⁷⁴ CH 45.

It is in the context of the last days' deceptions that Ellen White establishes a clear connection between eschatology and health reform.⁷⁵ One of the most important points of controversy at the close of the cosmic conflict will be miraculous healings. Satan will appear to "the children of men as a great physician who can heal all their maladies."⁷⁶ He will appear as "a benefactor of the race, healing the diseases of the people and professing to present a new and more exalted system of religious faith."⁷⁷ Perhaps we can refer to this as a false health reform, probably based on emotionalism, that is totally detached from the rational elements that characterize the true reform that seeks to heal the totality of the person—body, mind, and soul.

The healing miracles of Jesus healed the whole person and brought them into harmony with God's will: "From Him [Jesus] flowed a stream of healing power, and in body and mind and soul men were made whole."⁷⁸ This, the false health reform will not be able to achieve. Jesus "made each work of healing an occasion for implanting divine principles in the mind and soul."⁷⁹ In the ministry of Jesus "deliverance from sin and the healing of disease were linked together" and this ministry has been committed to His people.⁸⁰ The new religion promoted by evil powers does not bring this type of biblical healing because it lacks the power to transform human beings. The end-time confrontation between true and false healing will test the people of God. She seems to be suggesting that it will require from them a clear understanding of the biblical teachings on health and healing that will help them distinguish between truth and falsehood.

C. Theodicy: The Act of Justifying God

Theodicy (*theos*, "God" and *dike*, "judgment") attempts to demonstrate that God is love and all powerful in spite of the fact that there is evil and suffering in the world. The problem of human suffering is complex and only during the final judgment we would be able to gain a complete

⁷⁵ The best exposition of the views of Ellen G. White on eschatology is found in her book *The Great Controversy*, 563-678.

⁷⁶ CH 461.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 460.

⁷⁸ MH 17.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 111.

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understanding of the divine interaction with it. Nevertheless, there are many things we can say to defend the loving nature of God and His power in the context of suffering and death. It is interesting and perhaps surprising to find Ellen White arguing in favor of the love of God in her discussions on disease, sickness, and human suffering. To certain extent health reform is used by her to defend the divine character and to assign responsibility for the suffering caused by sickness to others except God. Her theodicy, if you please, is offered to the reader in the form of a narrative. This is understandable because in the Bible God reveals His character within the movement of history; in the interaction with human beings.

Ellen White takes us to the moment when God *created* Adam and Eve; when humans came from the hand of the Lord. Then the human “faculties of mind and body were fully developed and harmoniously balanced” and human nature “was in perfect harmony with the will of God.”⁸¹ The “appetite and passions” of the first couple were “under the control of reason” and the “mind was capable of comprehending divine things.”⁸² In other words, God brought into existence a human being perfect in body, mind, and soul untouched by the corrupting presence and power of evil and suffering. God established laws to regulate His creation and, since He is love, in everything He did “He had the well-being of humanity in view.”⁸³ The theodicy begins emphasizing the original goodness of God’s creation. There was nothing in the constitution of humans that would by nature lend itself to corruption. The legitimate action of the appetites of human nature “would have prompted health and happiness.”⁸⁴ The goodness of creation was a reflection of the essential goodness of the Creator.

The beginning of suffering and disease on this planet is traced back by White to the *fall*, when humans, influenced by the enemy of God, lost their moral and spiritual uprightness and the appetites and passions were perverted bringing with it death. According to her, “sin is the cause of physical degeneration; sin has blighted the race, and introduced disease, misery, and death.”⁸⁵ The clear implication is that God should not be

⁸¹ PHJ, February 1, 1902 par.1.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., par. 2.

⁸⁴ Ibid., par. 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

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charged with the emergence of disease and misery on the planet. Unfortunately, since then the tendency of the human race has been downward, the effect of sin has become “more marked with every successive generation.”⁸⁶ After the *flood*, the life span of humans began to decrease. By the *time of Christ* “humanity had so degenerated that many endured a terrible weight of misery.”⁸⁷ The situation *today*, she says, is still more deplorable.

Diseases of every type have been developed. Thousands of poor mortals with deformed, sickly bodies and shattered nerves, are dragging out a miserable existence. The infirmities of the body affect the mind, and lead to gloom, doubt, and despair. Even infants in the cradle suffer from diseases resulting from the sins of their parents.⁸⁸

Sadly, this situation has prevailed for so long that many have concluded that this is the “appointed lot of humanity;” the natural condition of every human being. To this she responds, “This is not the case.” She is rejecting fatalism. Then she proceeds to exculpate God—He is not the author of disease and it is not His desire to see His creatures suffering. She also argues that Adam’s transgression “is not the only cause of our unhappy lot. A succession of falls has occurred since Adam’s day”⁸⁹ and consequently we find ourselves in the condition in which we are now. The enemy, who enticed Adam and Eve, has been working to deface the image of God by depraving humanity.⁹⁰ What we witness is the success of his work “in the indulgence of depraved appetites and lustful passions, in defilement and corruption, deformity and sin.” The work of Satan, the fall of Adam and Eve, and the successive falls of human beings are the causes of the mental and physical degeneration of the race and therefore it would be wrong to attribute the present condition of the world to God’s providence.⁹¹ Through the indulgence of perverted appetite humans “have declined in virtue” and

⁸⁶ Ibid., par. 4.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pars. 5-6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., par. 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid., par. 8.

⁹⁰ She clearly states, “Sickness, suffering, and death are work of an antagonistic power. Satan is the destroyer; God is the restorer” (MH 113).

⁹¹ PHJ, February 1, 1902 par. 9.

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become weakened “through their own immoral practices and their violation of physical law.”⁹² She is placing responsibility where it belongs in order for humans to acknowledge and assume responsibility for it. The idea seems to be that one of the ways to assume responsibility is to start practicing the principles of healthful living.

Ellen White passionately argues that the sickness that comes as a result of the violation of natural law is not a punishment from God but something that humans bring on themselves.⁹³ They experience the result of violating natural law. Nature protests against any violation of the laws of life and “bears abuse as long as she can; but finally retribution comes, and the mental as well as the physical powers suffer. Nor does the punishment fall on the transgressor alone; the effects of his indulgence are seen in his offspring, and thus the evil is passed on from generation to generation.”⁹⁴ She acknowledges that in the world in which we live the innocent suffer as the result of the decisions and actions of others.

But, where is God and what is He doing for the human race? The most important thing he did for us was to send His Son as “the great sacrifice made for the uplifting and ennobling of the human race.”⁹⁵ While the enemy of God has been working corrupting humans, God through Christ has been doing the opposite. Today, in the midst of the present chaos of sickness and suffering, God is constantly working to keep us alive and to build up and restore us.⁹⁶ In His providence He has also raised awareness of the need to care for human health and interest in the study of the laws of nature that regulate our physical being and that, if obeyed, would alleviate human

⁹² Ibid., par. 10.

⁹³ RH, May 27, 1902 par. 7.

⁹⁴ PHJ, February 1, 1902 par. 11. She has practically personified nature by describing it as bearing abuse and finally bringing retribution or punishing those who abused her. In the statement, she is obviously referring to the laws of heredity as one of the sources of disease but for her this is not the only one. Her etiology of sickness deserves careful study. One should keep in mind that even those who care for their health would get sick because we live in a world of sickness and death and our bodies have not yet been redeemed. She indicates that human social solidarity contributes to the suffering of the innocent: “You are not the only sufferer from a wrong course. The society you are in bears the consequences of your wrongs, in a great degree, as well as yourselves” (CH 45).

⁹⁵ Ev 530.

⁹⁶ MH 112.

suffering and in many cases illnesses would be avoided.⁹⁷ It would be correct to say that God is using scientist around the world who are studying the issue of health and how to overcome diseases in His battle against illness and suffering. He has also entrusted to believers His self-revelation in Scripture. “Compliance with its requirements will be a blessing to both soul and body. The fruit of the Spirit is not only love, joy, and peace, but temperance also,—health of body as well as health of mind.”⁹⁸

Ellen White is totally aware of the complexity of human suffering caused by diseases. She identifies the primary agent of suffering as Satan, Adam as the initiator of it in our world through the fall, and its increase through the succession of falls by his descendants. The responsibility for the misery and pain that we see today is to a large extent placed by her on the shoulders of human beings who, instigated by the enemy, have chosen to violate the laws of nature. God is not responsible for this situation at all. On the contrary He is constantly working to preserve life on the planet and to alleviate pain and suffering in anticipation of the moment when He will remove them forever from the planet.

IV. Conclusion

It may be good to reexamine the role that a concern for health should play in the Christian church and in the world at large. The purpose of the health reform promoted by Ellen White is broad and universal in scope because the problem it addresses—sickness and suffering—is also universal; no one has been able to avoid its painful sting. For her, health reform is *theocentric* and Christ centered because God is the only one who can truly heal. He is the Creator of the laws of nature that govern the proper performance of the human body and the one who through these laws provides the power needed for true healing. This healing power reaches us through our Lord Jesus Christ. The health reform makes it possible for us to work harmoniously with God in the preservation of human health.

The health program promoted by Ellen White is also supported by biblical *anthropology*. As a being endowed by God with the capacity to reach fullness of being, that is to say, to develop and grow as a single unity of life, humans are to care for their bodies in the realization of that

⁹⁷ CH 21; and PHJ, February 1, 1902 par. 15.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, par. 16.

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potential. The health reform contributes to the preservation of humanness and rationality. This is necessary because humans are an indivisible unity of life in bodily form in which body, mind, and soul are so interconnected that what damages one of these dimensions damages the others. The biblical theology of the *value of life* is also part of the theological foundation of the health reform. God created human life to be enjoyed and not to be a burden and He is doing all He can for us to enjoy it as much as possible in a world of sickness, suffering, and death. The health reform makes a contribution to the enjoyment of life.

The health reform program of Ellen White is inseparable from biblical *soteriology*. Without Christ there is no true healing. He took the ultimate destiny of human disease, death, upon Himself in order for us to enjoy freedom from it. The health reform alleviates the present suffering of humanity while waiting for the moment when Christ's victory over sickness, suffering, and death will be consummated. *Eschatology* is also important in the study of health reform in Ellen White. The forces of evil will offer their own health reform program to the human race. They will offer human beings a new way of overcoming the predicament of sickness and human suffering without transforming the inner being of sinners. The true health reform aims at unmasking this end-time deception. White emphasizes in a unique way *theodicy* in the context of sickness and suffering. God is not the originator of this cruelty and neither is He using it to punish the human race. The health reform program contributes to manifest God's loving concern for humankind.

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