**Can religion make you sick? **

**by Gerard Feller**

These days many psychologists are getting numerous sincere questions resulting from the effects of Christian faith. A few examples: Can faith in Jesus Christ make people sick? Is religion an opium for people, meaning does faith in Christ lead to an unhealthy dependence? Does it result in sickening relationships with other people? Is faith not simply an escape from an improperly dealt with reality into irreality?

At Promise we are involved in promoting healthy faith and the use of the preventive possibilities of faith. Even then these many questions involving illness and instability as a result of oneâs experience in his Christianity make it necessary to take this into consideration. This is important because it is possible to use good therapy to prevent some of these unhealthy aspects. When we ask the question if religion can make one sick then we must always make this distinction: the church, or religious dogma can; faith can not. Naturally the church and dogma are related to faith. But if we follow the history of the church we will easily see that liturgical forms and dogmatisms continually departed from Biblical truth. For this reason as we pursue our topic âCan religion make you sick?â we will seek to discover the difference between unhealthy teaching and a few fundamental truths.

1) **Social sicknesses.** Most people are at the present time not aware of the widespread unhealthy factors with which we are confronted. In this case we are talking about social sicknesses or symptoms. The modern human being has 60% less active movement than those of the former century, this due to motorized transportation. This has very serious poor influence on our complete organic functioning and our mobile structure. This is further endangered if for âhealth-improvementâ measures people use their untrained bodies for wrong fitness programs or exaggerated sport activity.

It is obvious that present-day extreme measures cause more illnesses than we realize; most times these involve strenuous, hectic situations combined with continuous stress. It would be particularly helpful if in preaching and religious teaching attention would be given to these contemporary harmful circumstances, and a Biblical perspective given to this development. Paul and the other apostles were diligently active in opposing the situations of their age. The various problems and contemporary themes should be confronted openly in the churches, to encourage believers to properly deal with these issues at an early stage and with serious thought. As a result of the fact that religious teaching repeatedly concerns itself with only a few selected problems, followers of Christ usually end up crowding out or bluffing over the problems which they face.

2) **Unilateral (one-sided) gospel.** (perhaps âshallow gospelâ says it better) There are a number of means which are used to proclaim certain teachings to be perfect and completely final (while this is in contradiction to the Biblical fact that âwe know in partâ) In this way dogmas are often declared which offer an one-sided and hardly differentiated gospel. It is possible that there are some truths sited but they mostly do not represent the total picture of truth.

Totally dangerous and misrepresentative is the conclusion that if one has enough faith everything in life lies within his reach. Such simplistic readymade formulas may have some validity in certain individual situations, but those who accept this position as the full gospel sooner or later will discover the fallacy of this standpoint and end up psychologically disturbed. It is also dangerous to see it from a passive point of view, for example believing, praying and then receiving the answer. Passiveness has always been the instrument through which people open themselves up to strange messages and being manipulated. Esoteric techniques often build their total teaching on passiveness. (esoteric = only for insiders).

**3) Idealistic concept.** Often the weekly Bible study or Sunday sermon speaks only about the ideal believer. Too little is told about the way to reach that goal. The result is that the listener wants to be as he is told every Sunday, but he never makes it. There is also the danger that a Christian becomes unreal, that he thinks he is better than others, because he is busy copying an image. Such an unreal attitude can easily lead to becoming a mask and this leads to appearing as a Pharisee.

If one rejects this and recognizes his non-accomplishment of the concept, then he is confronted by this preaching with a tremendous gap between the idealistic concept and the actual situation. This often causes serious depression. This as a result of the fact the honest person seriously experiences his condition as failure, defeat, backsliding, etc. It is our opinion that people should not **only** hear about the idealistic concept (the last step in following Christ) thereby missing the true comfort and do not understand that it is available. They often come to an erroneous idea of sin consciousness which can finally lead to the conclusion: I have sinned against the Holy Spirit, otherwise why am I so rebellious and without success?

**4) Silenced Voice.** An actual problem, in reality possibly one of the most important, is that the church-goer of today has no voice when it comes to certain liturgical forms or an absolute dogma. Everything is so fully developed, so completely seasoned, and so perfectly packaged so that all one has to so is sit and consume. The spiritual package, as it presently is offered, often resulting from desire for ease, only leads to passive consummation, through which active personal thinking and testing are eliminated.

In this way the content of the Bible, as the most important channel of information for man, is lost. Personal knowledge of the contents of Scripture is losing ground. In unpublished research I have been able to discover that the individual Christian today has no real Bible knowledge. Numerous books and cassettes are consumed, but Bible knowledge is steadily diminishing.

In difficult times, and these are part of Gods process of training us, the believer who is experiencing trial, has no spiritual means of coping and is once more dependant on others. A whole army of uncertain and helpless Christians who need pastoral help and health seminars is growing. The Bible teaches us repeatedly how important it is that the believer has his own knowledge of the Bible, which he can use in practice and assimilate through continual serious study of the Holy Scriptures.

**5) Manipulation.** Many teachers misuse their position as a âspecialistâ and manipulate their listeners consciously or unconsciously. The following authentic example illustrates this: In a sermon about âforgivingâ it is repeatedly stated that forgiveness is equal to forgetting. This is proven with several verses from the Bible which say that God remembers our sin no more. âNo more rememberedâ is then unquestionably made to be the same as âforgottenâ. In his explanation the preacher has only spoken about ONE of the Biblical aspects. This happens when the text is taken out of its context and is not seen in the light of the whole Bible. In this way the speaker is manipulating and the listeners are expected to do something they cannot possibly do. Except if they by trying to forget something they simply suppress it. The Bible teaches us that, with reference to forgiving, our attitude needs to be one of dropping the charge. In this way the âno more rememberingâ gets a different meaning. But the speaker has fixed the attention on âno more rememberingâ as forgetting and in this way opens himself up to the unanswerable question âIs God not all knowing?â It would seem that the speaker wants God to voluntarily surrender His omniscience by making âno more rememberingâ to mean the same as forgetting. This example of unspiritual explanation leads to a serious situation in which the Bible is undermined and an unhealthy development results. The manipulative element in this example occurs when the speaker introduces his remarks with âWe see here thatâ¦â. In this way the suggestion is made without argument that all listeners understand it in the same way and who would then dare to speak up and say: âI see it differently.â

There are more examples that could be cited showing how easily preaching and teaching can have a manipulative character through which God and man are not treated properly.

**6) Extreme spiritualizing.** That which we have already discussed lets us in part see, that when one loses contact with worldly realityone easily escapes into a form of extreme spirituality. We see this especially in interpersonal relationships. If someone can no longer cope, he can readily hide in his extremism, so that he no longer is responsible to his partner or family because he then can claim in his exaggerated spirituality that God is doing it, it is Godâs will or the Holy Spirit has spoken, etc.

Too often this kind of attitude in a relationship conflict finds the approval of church leadership or members. But extreme spiritualizing really has the character of fantasy. This must always be recognized since the person has lost his feeling for worldly reality. When this occurs, the fantasies soon become a sickly disorder, which prevents this person from having a normal life.

7) **The test for reality** In the present evangelical world there are numerous unusual phenomena. The âPower-Gospelâ is very much in fashion. We have no objection to the power of the Holy Spirit, but as this gospel proves to have no Biblical ground but already has tempted particularly weak people it can end up being very problematic. This because they have not been able to achieve something big in life and have therefore tried to compensate for this with a false power spirituality.

We may not forget that unbelievers very quickly and relatively accurately are able to discover what is real and isnât. (Intrinsic or extrinsic religion) The result of an unreal spiritual show is usually based on manipulation of weak persons and people who have left their critical (discerning) thinking. In this, as well, we need to remain critical and continually discern what is right or wrong and not allow ourselves to be drawn into something that is not good for our soul.

**8) An appeal to our feelings**. We have experienced that even good evangelistic activities can lead to problems. In some cases of a decision for God a strong appeal has been made to emotions and a person in great need is lead to believe that having faith in God is their only solution. When this person comes for psychological counselling and personal help it often turns out that before their conversion they didnât have that many problems. But afterwards more problems developed because they became overwhelmed with the form of faith expected and experientially they were confronted with dissension between spiritual dimension and the practical life.

This is why under these circumstances the potential convert should be well instructed about the nature of his personal decision. And of course is all such situations adequate follow-up in a Christian local church is essential. This should not be deep dogmatic stuff of a high level but an orientation by which problems can be confronted from a new fundamental basis.

**9) The Performance Principle.** A dogma that requires performance can be a danger that produces sickness. It is a fact that not all Christians need to be performers. For example: A real Christian is one who reads his Bible and prays for 15 minutes every day. While this sounds good, it is a danger if the person involved in spite of his good intentions, constantly fails to measure up. The performance principle, which in our western civilisation has produced success and prosperity, can never be compared to the spiritual principle of grace. A Christian who is counselled to deal with his specific problems directly will eventually develop a naturally healthy hunger for Gods Word. Then he will look for his own personal manner to discover the needed Biblical information.

**10) Freedom** With the use of various books as the source Christian preaching places more emphasis on the âyokeâ which a servant wears, than on his freedom. Scripture declares âYe have been called unto libertyâ. Liberty should not be a dogmatic guardianship in which the Christian is submerged in the masses. On the other hand, Biblical liberty is not a synonym for total freedom but it always directs our thinking to Godâs purpose for individual leading in our faith. In the situation where freedom to contribute to thinking or to have critical thoughts by church members is suppressed or even not allowed, those who are responsible for this are guilty of violence. Freedom means at least freedom to express opinions and participate in dialogue, because many church members, influenced by increasing secularisation, have only limited information and do not understand many matters to the degree that church leaders expect. That is why it is important to seriously listen to their expressions of freedom and from there go further with them on their own level of faith.

**11)Individual leading.** The freedom which has been mentioned contains elements that make individual leading difficult. Paul recognized that there is no complete uniformity in faith that can be proclaimed as dogma. What is good for one is for another hardly good. (Romans14:20-23) This is naturally not true with regards to the fundamental doctrines of faith, but especially for individual instruction in faith with regards to progressive sanctification. Individual instruction involves guiding the individual to freely make personal difficult decisions about Godâs will. The intention stated here means that guidance is given for making individual decisions in life. Particularly because preaching about growth is often too theoretical and thereby offers little practical help. The teaching about growth should always serve to prepare the believer to solve the daily problems he encounters and in this way, when it becomes more difficult, not to be afraid of failure.

**12) Uniformity** Preaching and personal counselling that immediately presents a clearly defined pattern can also lead to illness. The Word of God projects exactly the opposite. That is, He is with the person in the state in which he finds himself and this means in the manner in which he functions; spiritually, physically and psychologically. Set patterns often exist because of limited time. They are exhibited when the well known tendency to maintain established formulas is practiced and in this way keep everything unchanged. This is only really possible if all men were alike. Since God deals with us personally and knows all our problems, why do we not function this way in our teaching and counselling?

**13) Concealment and withholding**. Earlier we saw under the heading of uniformity, special themes which are continually projected in different forms. Often, however, teachers will omit speaking about certain subjects because they are in opposition to their own dogmas. Letâs be careful not to limit Godâs working in areas where the Bible gives more leeway. Proverbs 14:30 reads, â*A sound heart is the life of the flesh, but envy, the rottenness of the bones.â* This soundness leads us to deliverance from a puritanical view of the gospel which has invaded our churches in the form of a new piety.

The author is a member of Christian church where they teach that Jesus never drank fermented wine, but only grape juice. This leads to the use of grape juice instead of wine for the Communion Table. Of course, grape juice does not make one happy and drunk like we read in the Bible and unfermented grape juice would not keep good in the heat of Palestine. But a number of church authorities insist that the dogma be consistent with their suppositions and in this way they give a very one-sided view of what the Bible teaches. Probably the author has never heard a sermon on Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 â*Go they way, eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works...Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of vanity, which He has given you under the sun all the days of thy vanity, that is thy portion in this life.â*

These texts do not give us room for loose morals and absolute freedom in conduct. They do provide a Scriptural basis for the spirit of freedom but at the same time remind us that the purpose of enjoying freedom always is bounded by reasonable borders. The theme of âwith moderationâ receives quite a bit of attention in the New Testament, because this aspect continually has to do with our individual way of life and guidance. The Bible warns us in this matter clearly for abuses about which God is displeased and which do not honor Him. I Cor. 11:20-22.

**14) Personal weakness** Errare humanum est (Lat.) means to err is human. This means that everyone is capable of making mistakes. This principle is supported by the Bible. If this principle is never exhibited in the practice of counsellors then it is likely that a wrong conception results. The idea can be given that the other never is wrong, that everything he says is absolutely true and never mistaken. The counselee is then always the weak, the needy one, the failure; the other, from his lofty spiritual position, has a (unspoken) halo of absolute infallibility of deep spirituality. Such a situation is not only unloving, but also unmerciful and heartless.

Preaching of the Word, personal care and therapy, in the spirit of love and sympathy, should always portray the possibility of its own fallibility. In Acts 21:8-14 Luke tells about the arrival of Paul and his departure to Caesarea. A prophet named Agabus came there from Judea. He brought with him Paulâs leather belt and, binding his hands with it, said âThe Holy Spirit says: The man to whom this belt belongs will be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem and delivered into the hands of the Gentiles.â Those present, including the evangelist Phillip, begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. This warning was a reasonable, human reaction. If the Holy Spirit says that Paul is going to be persecuted in Jerusalem it is logical not to go to Jerusalem. These advisors of Paul supposedly knew better than the Holy Spirit what he should do. Out of fear for persecution they were prepared ignore the Holy Spirit. This is clearly a situation in which the teachers, evangelists and elders were mistaken, or in Biblical terminology, acted in the flesh. Errare humanun est!!!

**15) Monocausalism**. The monocausal thought process, (the thought that ONE single factor is the cause of something) also in spiritual matters, is a process that causes sickness. The argument is often heard: because you did this or neglected that, this or that other thing happened in your life. This may seem logical at first, but a lot of injustice and lovelessness is perpetrated by Christians is this way. As a rule, situations are more complicated. Many times God does not reveal the actual reason. But it is often easier to come lup with a simple and undifferentiated example or calculation and then just give the other person the plain (subjective) truth. Many Christians have been severely harmed by this kind of monocausal treatment, something from which they never recover.

**16) Limited freedom of choice**. Minimizing the ability AND the freedom to make choices can cause sickness in a person. The believer should be lead into maturity (see Eph.4:13) and not into dependence on brothers and sisters It is therefore seriously dangerous and harmful if a person is seeking this form of maturity or if he even has it to some degree and then perhaps speaks up with criticism (about business matters), or mentions some irregularity in a Christian church and then is not taken seriously and maybe even accused of sinning. (quote from a letter: âI think that this is sinâ¦â) Disdaining the freedom of choice of another appears to be a form of manipulation. Manipulated and doctrinally faulty declared persons in most cases can no longer think for themselves. In a crisis situation they will always need help from these manipulators and generally not make their own choices and decisions

**17) Superspirituality** An escape into superspirituality has its own dynamic. It is dangerous if we do not recognize the motives that involved. God is in every sense logical. If spirituality is used as a method of escape, this will always eventually lead to disappointment. The fruit (blessing) does not come; everything that has to do with faith and the church is discarded, because in the specific crisis situation it didnât help. In this way faith and spirituality work like a drug, and bring on a temporary good feeling (high), but in the end result in a letdown, the failure syndrome. This means that corporately creating spiritual emotions on Sunday becomes very frustrating and troublesome for the rest of the week. (frustration as the cause of depressive attacks.)

**18) Troubled conscience** The fact that sermons and Bible studies are regularly silent over emotions and conflicts of the will (the theme of Romans 6,7,8) as being normal has a harmful result in the inner life of many. When a person comes to faith in Christ and God, and the reality of a spiritual life truly has been accepted and therefore will conduct his life according to the new spiritual principles, this results in a tremendous broadening of his horizons. The danger is that this person is not made aware of the dilemma arising from the conflict between worldly and spiritual realities. In this condition he will quickly become confused and strive to achieve superspirituality as a solution for this problem. Usually this works temporarily, but this superspirituality can only be maintained by falseness. Sooner or later he has to give up. As a result of the superspirituality he projects an objectionable superiority complex that comes across as an intangible Pharisetical attitude and results in destruction for the individual.

**Conclusion** Anyone or any combination of the above described situations can and probably will cause sickness â physical or psychological or both â in an individual. This is especially unfortunate and should be avoided because it not only is harmful to the individual, but it also sheds a negative light on true Christianity and is therefore not honoring to the Lord.

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(Originally translated by Gerard Feller from âZwischen Wahn en Wirklichkheit, Macht Glaube Krank?â

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