

The Truth About AIDS

- [Introduction - the truth about AIDS](#)
- [Chapter 1: The Extent of the AIDS Nightmare](#)
- [Chapter 2: What's so Special about an AIDS / HIV Virus?](#)
- [Chapter 3: When Cells Start to Die](#)
- [Chapter 4: How People Become Infected by HIV](#)
- [Chapter 5: Questions People Ask about AIDS / HIV and a Christian response / church programmes](#)
- [Chapter 6: Condoms Are Unsafe](#)
- [Chapter 7: Moral Dilemmas in AIDS / HIV work](#)
- [Chapter 8: Wrath or Reaping? Is AIDS the wrath of God? Is AIDS the anger of God?](#)
- [Chapter 9: Some Life and Death Issues](#)
- [Chapter 10: When Church Members Need Help about AIDS](#)
- [Chapter 11: Others Need Help about AIDS Too](#)
- [Chapter 12: Saving Lives - preventing HIV infection](#)
- [Chapter 13: Needle and Condom Distribution to stop HIV spread?](#)
- [Chapter 14: Special AIDS / HIV Issues in Africa and Asia](#)
- [Chapter 15: A Ten Point Plan for the Government](#)
- [Chapter 16: A Global Christian Challenge and a Christian Response to AIDS](#)

We have looked at how churches can care, save lives of young people and develop community programmes for different cultures and situations. However, we need to look again at the call of Jesus. Is this enough, or is something missing? Is this the sum total of a global response to AIDS, or is there another dimension?

Care and prevention are not enough

Many would say the work is complete. We are expressing love to our neighbour and we are also teaching people the medical facts about AIDS, so what more do you want? Surely that is more than enough?

If Jesus had just lived on the earth as a remarkable man, occasionally healing people or using his carpentry business to help people out, he would never have been crucified. If Jesus had merely mobilised great numbers of people to help the poor, to help feed the hungry, to care for those who were oppressed, he would have lived till a ripe old age.

The problem people had with Jesus was not what he did, but what he said and who he was. They loved him for what he did and hated him for what he said. Jesus said he was the light of the world. John's Gospel tells us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it. Light is always visible, always directional. Its source is obvious, threatening to darkness. In a dark cave you can strike one match and be blinded. The greater the darkness, the brighter the light.

The darker the city, the brighter the light

Jesus said we should let our light shine so that people could see the good works we are doing and give glory to our Father in heaven. Being light then is about explaining, about proclaiming, about being prophetic, about high profile. Jesus said that no one places a light under a table, but we should hold it up so the light can shine on a wide area. While we are to be filled with humility, we are to take every opportunity to explain and show what God is doing so that people give honour and glory to him.

Letting the light shine

This means being happy to be known as believers, identified very publicly as belonging to Christ, willing to teach what he says. It means we welcome it when in a media-dominated world we find press, radio or TV wanting to report what we are doing, describe what we are, or broadcast what we are saying, recognising that if everyone followed a Christian lifestyle, HIV would disappear as an epidemic in thirty years.

Huge reaction to Christian view of sex

Christian views on sex can provoke a huge reaction. Recently I was approached by a major

publisher and invited to submit a one-page idea for a book, challenging the supposed benefits of the 'sexual revolution', based on a survey of scientific data on AIDS, other sex diseases, and on the economic, social and psychological consequences of the breakdown of marriage and family life.

The editorial meeting rapidly became a highly-charged debate, with passionate heated arguments over personal lifestyles and personal morality. Clearly the idea had touched a raw nerve, a deeply painful area. They realised such a book would cause a massive media storm: 'AIDS expert calls for new moral code'. But they feared big publicity might not result in sales of a book 'no one will want to read'. One participant was unable to recall such a fierce and stormy debate over any other book. Another publisher took it. It is called "The Rising Price of Love".

Many people are very sensitive to hypocrisy, double standards (for example, church leaders falling into immorality), attempts to put behind closed doors the reality which has only recently come into the open, bigotry, lack of reasonableness, and blind negativism, which they may suspect is based on a fear of sexuality, prudery and a lack of normal, healthy, emotional and sexual development.

Some psychologists might say that the stronger an anti-Christian reaction, the more they might also suspect that deep dark shadows of latent guilt are being disturbed. In my experience, many of those who fight the most seem to be people who feel insecure and threatened by another world view. Those secure about their own values and lifestyle are generally far more relaxed in open discussion.

Some who have rejected the Christian faith may also be angry for the guilt they still feel, blaming the church for a moral code they are unable to shrug off from their childhood. However, many Christians would argue that God's framework for living is constant and absolute, and that even without the teaching of the church there is a 'natural law' of conscience which is an innate part of every person. A sense of right and wrong is a God-given part of our being.

Where is the body of Christ?

So who is the voice of Jesus today? Who are his hands and feet? No single person has the

capacity to represent the heart and mind of God. We are told that together as believers we are his body. That is why Jesus prayed so much that those who believed in him would be one. Together we show his love, together we seek to express his voice, together we seek to present his challenge to the world and together we seek to reconcile the world to God.

That is why I am so encouraged to see God's people joining together across the nations, with barriers breaking down, whether as millions of people praying for our world as in March for Jesus, or whether it is at the sharp end of providing unconditional care to those with AIDS who are dying.

Daring to be different

We are called to fight discrimination, stigma, prejudice, bigotry, intolerance, oppression, injustice and cruelty. We are to encourage love, care, consideration, compassion, understanding, responsibility, commitment, faithfulness, truth and righteousness.

Jesus promised we would be identified, targeted, challenged, mocked, misunderstood and persecuted. The trouble with the church is that so often we have deserved a rapping on the knuckles for strident moralism based only on an empty call to stand as light, without being prepared for the loving sacrifice of being salt. The more fully we represent Jesus, the more we may find that some people love what we, but sometimes hate what we .

Called to be wise and innocent

We need to be sensitive and wise. For example, when ACET started home care in London, it became clear from comments made by members of other groups that a number of people were hoping a volunteer would overstep the mark; that we would be 'caught' as it were, insensitively 'Bible-bashing' someone with Christian faith in the home. We acted with integrity: what we said we did in public was what we actually did in private. But we took great care to ensure this really was so. These things are very culturally dependent. In some parts of Uganda you might be more likely to be criticised for NOT offering to pray with someone sick at home, than for offering to do so.

Criticised for being Christians

At the end of the day quality of care is critical, and so is the quality of training and prevention. If mud starts flying, you want the only accusation that sticks to be that you are followers of Jesus and have perhaps a different worldview and a different motivation.

We need to be clear about our purpose: if it is to publicly challenge the moral climate of our nation, then we had better watch out. If this is more than just an occasional comment about lifestyles or other sensitive issues, we may find we have caused so many insecurities in the minds of those we care for, that they do not want us to look after them any more. It may be better sometimes to leave such weighty matters to other church leaders.

Once said, comments cannot be unsaid. Off-the-cuff public remarks can be a disaster: you need expert advice from those experienced in media matters and used to handling sensitive issues as Christians in the area of AIDS.

An alternative view of AIDS

If our purpose is to present a clear, common-sense, no-nonsense independent view of the epidemic, then that is relatively straightforward. I am often asked for an accurate informed comment on AIDS by press, radio and television. People seem to want a fresh and different perspective from the rest of the AIDS industry---much of which is beginning to look very tired after years of predictable and increasingly irrelevant responses.

Jesus was always something of a puzzle: people could never quite work him out, or predict how he would respond. If we are to be his light, then we will find we are like that too. We have a God-given responsibility to contribute to public debate, just as Jesus did in his day, for example, over the emotive issues of imperial taxation and allegiance to the Roman occupying forces.

In conclusion then, a growing number of believers are waking up to the explosive destruction of AIDS. They have clearly heard God's call to care unconditionally for all those who are ill,

regardless of how they came to be so and to do all they can to save lives, challenging societies to think again about what is ultimately important and the future of life on earth.

Time for a confession

In many countries I believe the church needs to acknowledge its own failure to give a clear moral lead in situations where it would have been possible in the past. We need to confess our corporate neglect of the oppressed, the poor and the marginalised, many of whom have turned to dangerous lifestyles in their isolation and need. We need to confess our apathy and slowness to respond to the AIDS crisis, our blindness to the needs of other nations, and our judgemental attitudes to those outside the church, particularly in view of the frequency of divorce and sex outside marriage in many church networks and denominations.

We need to honour the work of those who have a very different worldview to ourselves who got involved years ago, starting AIDS initiatives and setting standards of excellence at a time when the church was wallowing in its own confusion as to how to respond.

Hope and comfort in tragedy

We need to recognise the part we must now play. We can begin to mobilise the vast network of church resources around the world, bringing hope and comfort at a time of terrible tragedy. We can speak of the God of love who never intended the beautiful world he made to end up in such a mess as this. We can continue to do all we can to fight injustice, fear and prejudice. We can speak of God's purpose in creating us, and of friendship and forgiveness.

A global movement

We need to see the church's response to AIDS in the context of rapid church growth. There has never been a time in history when so many have turned to Christ each year, at a much faster rate than the growth of the population. In almost every continent of the world the church is growing rapidly, as idealism and faith in political systems have died, where in many people's lives there has been a spiritual vacuum. It is no coincidence that both HIV and faith are

spreading so fast: in different ways both are temperature gauges of sick societies which have lost their way.

While HIV spread can be an indicator of the loss of traditional values that have held societies together for centuries, spiritual awakening is an indicator of recent rediscovery of purpose, meaning and ultimate destiny.

The pendulum of history is moving

The lesson of history is that fashion and behaviour both change constantly. What one generation counts odd or foolish is often seen as sensible orthodoxy to the next. The great pendulum is never still for more than a moment. It swings from side to side with unfailing regularity, surprising and shocking each generation which is ignorant of all that has gone before. It turns as it swings---tomorrow is unique.

Therefore it seems inevitable to me that we will see in many parts of the world the emergence of a new sexual culture at some point in the new millennium. Unless a widely available vaccine or cure is found fast, the effects of AIDS will be long lasting on the psyche of many of the worst affected nations, with a ricochet effect in many other countries.

Even if a cure is found in ten years, it will not be in time to prevent a scarred generation which has learned through painful experience that having multiple sex partners is an efficient way to kill yourself and those you love.

Children born in the new millennium are inheriting a new kind of world with scarce resources, a tendency to epidemics, and with the increasing threat of organised crime, terrorism, civil wars and ecological disaster. They may see worrying pressures grow in some places for a new national, regional or world order almost totalitarian in strength, to give security in a world increasingly torn apart by market and military forces beyond the control of democratically elected governments.

In all this we are called to pray that 'God's kingdom will come and his will be done'. I believe

the church needs to take hold of God's answer to AIDS with confidence; to tell people about the God who invented the wonderful gift of sex and who loves it when we love and are faithful to each other. It is time to proclaim a clear message based on facts and God's purpose for us all. It is time for us to reach out and care for those who until now we hardly realised were there.

Writing words is easy, and reading them is even easier. How are you going to respond? What is your church going to do about AIDS? Are you going to put this book away now on the shelf, or are you going to respond to what you believe God is calling you to do? For perhaps tens of thousands around the world, this is a call to move out of the secure comfort of our churches and into the problems and pain of the city, a world stricken and dying with AIDS.

You are either part of the problem, or you can be a part of the answer.

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