

time for a spiritual health check?

Jason Roach urges us to focus on the gospel



The last health check I had was an occupational health screen at the *BMJ*. I passed with flying colours and ate suitably large portions of dessert in the cafeteria for the rest of the week. As far as I was concerned I'd passed and didn't need to worry for a very long time. Health checks conjure up this kind of pass/fail mentality. Either my health is good enough to make me relax for another few months, or something is flagged up that means I need to take serious action.

Unfortunately the Christian life is not that simple. Of course we need to ask ourselves initially if we still believe that we are

sinners in need of a saviour, Jesus Christ. If we fail here then we are spiritually dead and need to repent and believe. But if that belief is genuine it is always accompanied by *ongoing repentance*.

So, in a sense, 'do I pass the test spiritually?' is the wrong question to ask. There is no Christian for whom growing in faith and repentance is not an ongoing requirement that will demand different things at different times. We need to view our churches more like hospitals than country clubs. In a country club you don't expect to see any sick people. In a hospital, intravenous tubes

coming out of people's necks are normal.

Understood properly, the spiritual health check is a good model for the Christian life for two reasons. Firstly, we need to recognise that we are all sick. Despite our spiritual heart transplant,¹ we constantly need to pitch up at God's follow-up clinic because we still need his help. So acknowledging sin and seeking to grow in faith should be normal conversations over coffee in church, not ones that make us wish we'd picked someone else to talk to. Secondly, we need to admit that we are not in the best position to assess our own health, and

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that we need help. When speaking to some of my medic friends, it became clear that we can struggle with this simple yet profound truth. We've all heard the old adage that doctors make the worst patients. Perhaps it is because we are so used to being the doctor that it can be hard to let someone else do the work of analysing us.

The same struggle exists for some of us spiritually. We sometimes wonder if preachers and Bible study leaders really understand the unique pressures we face as medics and so we switch off. But if anyone *can* give us the health check we need, it is not us. The ultimate diagnostician is Jesus Christ. It is his grace and truth, found in his Word, that show us what we really need: 'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'²

getting a spiritual diagnosis

After walking through the outpatient clinic, we need to step into the spiritual X-Ray



watch out: relationships and time management

Perhaps a particular area to highlight is romantic relationships with non-Christians. Biblically speaking, one of the key purposes of marriage is to help each other fulfil God's command to bring all things in subjection to him.³ This is severely compromised by marriage to a non-Christian. Hence Paul stipulates that unless already married before conversion, Christian marriage should be to a believer.^{4,5,6}

We work closely and intensely with people who have values that overlap with ours in areas we are passionate about. However we must guard ourselves from situations that are sinful and would profoundly limit our long term ability to glorify the Lord. Even when we are clear that dating might be wrong, we can become flirtatious is a way that serves our own sinful desires and not only dishonours God but may hurt others in the process.

Another pitfall is being wired (like myself) to take the path of least resistance (and therefore minimal organisation) in life. When we haven't thought beforehand about how we should spend our day, week or month, we quickly find ourselves overwhelmed by the urgent or exciting at the expense of the crucially important. As a doctor it was saying 'yes' to staying behind, which meant I couldn't make something at church. To avoid this, why not factor in church family commitments around other parts of your social life, extra-curricular activities and work? Often there is still enough time to do lots without neglecting the important.

department. God's word makes it very clear where to head to find our diagnosis. Romans 1:25a explains that by nature we are worshippers who have a tendency to worship the wrong thing: 'They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator'.

So a good spiritual diagnostic tool is to ask ourselves, 'what are the things in our lives which take on an inordinately high value?' What, if it was taken away would ruin our lives, or make us doubt our faith? Medics are of course susceptible to all the same influences that any Christian student might face.

The classic temptations are often: perfectionism (loving work and achievements too much); lust (loving bodily pleasure too much); unhealthy self esteem (loving worldly status too much); discontent (loving our ideal of relationships too much); and fear in evangelism (loving people's opinions more than God's). How are these things affecting you? If we're honest, they all affect us to some degree. 1 Corinthians 10:13 makes it clear that there are no problems that are not common

to all of our human hearts; we merely differ in the extent to which we struggle with them.

We often find it hard to do this kind of self analysis. But that is something we were never meant to work through alone! Ephesians 4:11-16 makes it clear that we share responsibility for helping our church community to change. That means investing in our church community so that we have genuine friendships, where we can encourage and be encouraged. Having identified the areas that need work, what's the solution? It's time to enter the spiritual operating room.

going into surgery

John became a Christian in his second year of medical school. It went fine for the first year - great quiet times, a bold evangelist, and really stuck into the Christian Union. But of late John seems more like the 'old' John - before he became a Christian. He's often drunk in the bar, flirting with girls and not reading his Bible. His friends tell him that he needs to sort out his quiet times. But the problem started well before he missed his first morning devotion. He thought progress in the Christian life was up to

him - just a matter of ticking a few boxes. Like the story of the Prodigal Son, where his older brother was so interested in earning brownie points that he lost sight of the grace of God.⁷

This passage reminds us that 'works' won't work. The things we love aren't as good as the promises of God in the gospel. This is what Titus means when he says that the gospel teaches us to say 'no' to ungodliness;⁸ and why Paul proclaims that the daily Christian life is lived 'by faith in the Son of God' who loved us and gave himself for us.⁹

We see this in three ways. Firstly, the gospel reminds us that no matter what sin we uncover in ourselves, the repentant Christian can be assured that 'there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus'.¹⁰ God has watched the DVD of our lives in super slow motion; he has seen our words and actions and every nasty thought we've had. He sees the stuff we carefully tidy up in the editing room before we share our prayer points. Despite all this, he sent his Son to save us.

Secondly, the gospel reminds us that being 'in Christ' means that we have resurrection power

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that enables us to beat sin.¹¹ We all know how unjust it feels when we are wrongly accused of something. Imagine the spotless Son of God's temptation to rebel - when he was treated (spiritually) as if he had slept with his best friend's wife, murdered children and much more - when he bore the sins of the whole human race. And yet Jesus bore it all without sinning, died on the cross, and rose again! Incredibly, we have those resources at work in us.

Thirdly, the gospel reminds us that even when we fail we are on a journey of transformation that will certainly end in our complete perfection.¹² This truth gives us a great encouragement to hang in there for the long haul, knowing that God will complete the work of transformation in us.

No doubt this sounds simplistic, but the Bible suggests that understanding the basics better gets to the root of the deepest problems. We seek pleasure in the wrong places because we don't realise the joy we can have in Christ; we seek security in material things and people because we forget that we are adopted by the God of the universe. It's more of Christ, not

spiritual techniques that we need.

recovery and rehabilitation

The truth is that change is a slow process. We'll be doing it the whole of our lives! There are no quick fixes in the life of ongoing repentance. However, progress comes through the Word of God getting from our heads to our hearts - so we can find ways to encourage that process.

We start with prayer, for all our efforts come to nothing without the work of the Spirit of God through the Word. But why not read Christian biographies that stir the heart with stories of people who lived the gospel out in extraordinary ways? Why not learn bits of the Bible so that they are at your finger tips in times of need, or truths from the Bible you can access quickly?

For example, when I'm struggling with sin or suffering I look at my hand and remember five unchanging spiritual truths: God the Father loves me; God the Son died for me; God the Spirit lives in me; I'm on my way to glory; and all things work together for my good.

If that sounds too much like hard work, why not review your Christian music selection on your iPod and try and get those words churning around your head? You will, I'm sure, think of other ways to preach the gospel to yourself. Reading the Bible, singing songs, and accountability groups are all good 'means' to help keep us on track. But ultimately, it is the gospel of Christ above all else that will ensure we remain spiritually healthy.

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