

INTRODUCTION to forthcoming book, *Toward a Theology of Disease*  
DRAFT 8

While Christians are noted for being kind to people who are already sick, Missiologist Ralph Winter noted, “curiously and ominously, to this day, Christians are not well known for fighting the viruses, the bacteria, and the tiny parasites that cause illness. The fact that Jesus did not talk about germs—which not even Calvin and Luther knew about—does not mean that He wants us to be silent on that subject today.”<sup>1</sup> Winter went on to ask, “What would Jesus have said about fighting germs in the name of Christ had the people of his time known about germs? ... Our theology (unchanged from the sixteenth century) ignores that whole swath of the works of the Devil.”<sup>2</sup>

Winter asked this question as part of his passionate attempt, in the last years of his life, to prompt the theological world to begin working on a theology of disease. Admittedly this came to Dr. Winter’s mind as a crucial need due to his first wife’s fatal bout with cancer. Throughout those and the following years he reflected on the types of inadequate responses to disease that are prevalent in the evangelical world and concluded that this was an obstacle to the spread of the gospel among thinking people in major unreached blocs of the world’s peoples. After his wife’s death he founded the Roberta Winter Institute (RWI) with the mission, “to ignite in the body of Christ a theological shift regarding disease and its eradication.”<sup>3</sup>

Winter often lamented about a blind spot he saw in Western theology:

Our classical theologians interpreting the meaning of the Biblical witness did their work centuries before human beings had any inkling of the dark intelligence invested in the micro world of disease germs. Furthermore, our current theological sensitivities have, amazingly (and ominously), not yet adjusted to this new information. *Notice: we do not commonly attribute the origin of destructive germs to an intelligent evil being. Thus, we have no “theology of mission” for destroying such germs!*<sup>4</sup>

Thinking theologically also means using the Bible to face situations that are wholly new to the Bible. I’m afraid we lag a great deal in applying the Bible to new circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “Getting to Know the Bible” in *Frontiers in Mission: Discovering and Surmounting Barriers to the Missio Dei*, 4th ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2008), 248, <https://www.rdwresearchcenter.org/single-post/2018/11/07/Frontiers-in-Mission-Discovering-and-Surmounting-Barriers-to-the-Missio-Dei>.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “What Is a Christ-centered Church?” in *Frontiers in Mission: Discovering and Surmounting Barriers to the Missio Dei*, 4th ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2008), 168, <https://www.rdwresearchcenter.org/single-post/2018/11/07/Frontiers-in-Mission-Discovering-and-Surmounting-Barriers-to-the-Missio-Dei>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.robertawinterinstitute.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “A Blindspot in Western Christianity?” in *Frontiers in Mission: Discovering and Surmounting Barriers to the Missio Dei*, 4th ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2008), 200, <https://www.rdwresearchcenter.org/single-post/2018/11/07/Frontiers-in-Mission-Discovering-and-Surmounting-Barriers-to-the-Missio-Dei>.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “The Seminary, Whence and Whither?” in *Frontiers in Mission: Discovering and Surmounting Barriers to the Missio Dei*, 4th ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2008),

The fact that Jesus did not talk about germs—which not even Calvin and Luther knew about—does not mean that He wants us to be silent on that subject today. He is here today urging us to know more and more of the truth about the world that reveals His glory as well as the destructive works of Satan.<sup>6</sup>

What would Jesus have said about fighting germs in the name of Christ had the people of his time known about germs?<sup>7</sup>

It is evident that the greatest medical breakthrough in the twentieth century is the discovery that most heart disease, cancer, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer’s disease—even schizophrenia—is caused by infections rather than a poor diet and a toxic environment.<sup>8</sup>

Our current theological literature, to my knowledge, does not seriously consider disease pathogens from a theological point of view—that is, are they the work of God or Satan? Much less does this literature ask the question, “Does God mandate us to eliminate pathogens?”<sup>9</sup>

The least we can do is set something in motion that may rectify our understanding of a God who is not the author of the destructive violence in nature and who has long sought our help in bringing His kingdom and His will on earth.<sup>10</sup>

This book attempts to address Winter’s concerns by showing that preliminary work has been done, some of it since his death in 2009, toward a theology of disease. It begins by providing context, then a variety of approaches to addressing disease as a work of the devil, culminating in Greg Boyd’s preliminary theology of disease in the final chapter.

While N.T. Wright does not directly address the topic of disease as a work of the devil, he comes close to the perspective Winter advocated, in the book, *Evil and the Justice of God*.

The New Testament points to the ultimate future, to the promise of a world set free from evil altogether, and invites us to hold that in our minds and hearts so

69, <https://www.rdwresearchcenter.org/single-post/2018/11/07/Frontiers-in-Mission-Discovering-and-Surmounting-Barriers-to-the-Missio-Dei>.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “Getting to Know the Bible” in *Frontiers in Mission: Discovering and Surmounting Barriers to the Missio Dei*, 4th ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2008), 248, <https://www.rdwresearchcenter.org/single-post/2018/11/07/Frontiers-in-Mission-Discovering-and-Surmounting-Barriers-to-the-Missio-Dei>.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “What Is a Christ-Centered Church?” in *Frontiers in Mission: Discovering and Surmounting Barriers to the Missio Dei*, 4th ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2008), 185, <https://www.rdwresearchcenter.org/single-post/2018/11/07/Frontiers-in-Mission-Discovering-and-Surmounting-Barriers-to-the-Missio-Dei>

<sup>8</sup> Winter, “Seminary,” 69.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “Where Darwin Scores Higher than Intelligent Design,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 20, no. 4 (2003): 113, [http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/20\\_4\\_PDFs/113\\_Darwin.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/20_4_PDFs/113_Darwin.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Winter, “Blindspot,” 200.

that we know where we're going. We are to implement the achievement of Jesus and so to anticipate God's eventual world.<sup>11</sup>

The Christian imagination ... needs to be awakened, enlivened, and pointed in the right direction. ... Christians need to sense permission, from God and from one another, to exercise their imaginations in thinking ahead into God's new world and into such fresh forms of worship and service as will model and embody aspects of it. We need to have this imagination energized, fed, and nourished, so that it is lively and inventive, not sluggishly going around the small circles of a few ideas learned long ago.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to me that what Wright is calling for is precisely the purpose for which Ralph Winter founded the Roberta Winter Institute: attempting to awaken, energize, and nourish the Christian imagination to include a new form of service to bring glory to God in demonstration of what is and is not God's will. Once we acknowledge disease in the category of "evil" (rather than as "God's will") we can see the need to mobilize the body of Christ to seek to eradicate diseases as a means of anticipating "God's eventual world."

Ultimately, what Dr. Winter, as we called him, would have loved to see is someone like N.T. Wright publicly acknowledge efforts to eradicate disease as one of the signs of what the new creation will look like, and getting behind a scholarly movement to work toward a theology of disease. Unfortunately Winter did not live long enough to see most of theologian-pastor Greg Boyd's writing about disease which includes this comment in the conclusion of the last chapter in this book, "We are doing spiritual warfare when we fight disease. ... When scientists discover ways to fight diseases and discover their origins, that is spiritual warfare."

Setting the scene for Boyd's preliminary theology of disease, this book begins with Ralph Winter's description of the biblical story. As part of the context for a theology of disease, the next chapter, "A Theology of Creation," shows how the term "*tohu wabohu*" (Genesis 1:2) describes the opposite of God's creational intent, and the root of human problems around the world, including disease. Humans were created to join God in subduing the disorder of a world that had fallen under the "power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). The Early Church understood very well that the earth was the stage of a cosmic conflict that involved God, human beings, and Satan, as theologian-physician Sigve Tonstad describes in his chapter, "What the Early Christians Believed: The Reality of the Cosmic Conflict."

The entrance of the Kingdom of God into this war-torn world (as Boyd terms it)<sup>13</sup> is described by biblical scholar, Peter Kuzmic, in the chapter, "A Theology of the Kingdom of God." The "Kingdom Era" is how Ralph Winter labeled the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, aptly described by Kuzmic as being "powerfully demonstrated by the person of Jesus in acts of mercy defeating the powers of evil. ... In obedience to his command and empowered by his kingly authority, the disciples carried the message and demonstrated the power of the Kingdom in the same way that he did." In this book we

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<sup>11</sup> N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 104.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Evil*, 126.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, "A War-Torn Creation," in *Evangelical and Frontier Mission Perspectives on the Global Progress of the Gospel*, ed. Beth Snodderly and A. Scott Moreau (Edinburgh: Regnum, 2010), 292.

apply demonstration of the power of the Kingdom to fighting back against disease and its origins, in God's name.

Daniel Fountain, medical missionary, describes in the chapter, "A Theology of Health," what God's Kingdom looks like through the lens of health and wholeness: "Put quite simply, God's plan for the world is this: that all persons everywhere, in every nation, know God's saving health and be delivered from disobedience, disruption, despair, disease, and all that would destroy our wholeness."

This leads us back to the problem of evil: what is causing disease to be prevalent in our world? An Eastern Orthodox perspective affirms that "God is not the author of illness, suffering, and death."<sup>14</sup> Rather the "powers of darkness and malice, the Devil and the demons, . . . became one of the chief sources of illness" when the "Prince of this world" replaced the "King of Creation."<sup>15</sup>

The next two chapters of this book describe practical theologies. Brian Lowther, Director of the Roberta Winter Institute, asks, "Why Did Jesus Heal?" and challenges believers to apply those principles to disease eradication. Carolyn Klaus, M.D., describes how a Kingdom-oriented believer has followed Jesus' example of healing in addressing the AIDS crisis in Ethiopia.

Next, two perspectives on death and disease are represented in chapters by long-term missionary to Africa, Jim Harries, and biochemical geneticist, Richard Gunasekera. In spite of their vastly different approaches to dealing with disease, each acknowledges the role of the evil one in causing disease. Their differences are encapsulated in Winter's comment and question: "Jesus extensively demonstrated God's concern for the sick. Are we today under any obligation to demonstrate even more cogent ways of fighting off illness, due to the additional insight God has allowed us to gain?" This resonates with Gunasekera's insights into genetics and biochemistry, but Harries, on behalf of East Africans, takes exception to this Western approach. "Western scholarship finds secular solutions to the problem of illness and disease. But the assumption that the West can legitimately represent mankind as a whole is, I suggest, grossly overplayed." Instead he proposes that an alternative to global-wide disease eradication is presentation of the Gospel of Christ to the majority world by "vulnerable" Westerners, empowering people to trust one another and so to develop their own approaches to dealing with diseases that they are already well-aware are not from God.

Two chapters deal with the relationship between missions and addressing disease. As Ralph Winter points out in his chapter, "some will say, 'What in the world could microbes have to do with the Kingdom of God or global evangelism?'" Winter's daughter, Rebecca Winter Lewis asks, "what [do] we believe about God's design of nature in relationship to disease, and what [do] we believe we should do about disease as a result?" To quote from Winter's missiology again, "If the Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the devil, then what are the followers and joint heirs of the Son of God supposed to do to bring honor to his name?"

After a chapter on key points that need to be included in a theology of disease, the themes of destroying the works of the devil and honoring God's name are brought together in the final chapter by Greg Boyd. With explicit reference to fighting disease as a theological mandate, Boyd writes, "Jesus and the earliest disciples uniformly *revolted*

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Claude Larchet, *The Theology of Illness* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Larchet, *Illness*, 32.

*against* afflictions as being the direct or indirect product of demonic activity.” When believers fight against disease, including discovering its origins and attempting to eradicate diseases where possible, Boyd concludes, “We are laying the groundwork for the coming Kingdom and we are the firstfruits.”

As part of Ralph Winter’s legacy, and a project of the Roberta Winter Institute, this book is offered as a motivational tool for the mission world to consider an expanded *Missio Dei* that includes intentional efforts by believers to represent God well in how they deal with the origins of disease.

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