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978-0-521-51593-1 - The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church

Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn

Excerpt

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I



Bodies or Souls?

A MODERN (GNOSTIC) PARABLE

Jeremy was running late for church. He had been out late the night before and had overslept, but he wanted to get there on time to attend his young professionals Sunday School class. Although he did not have many good friends there, he still felt it important as a Christian to be there.

But he could not leave without attending to some urgent business email messages from his accountant. He first checked over the attached financial statements from his small manufacturing business. The picture he saw was a bit worrisome. There was enough money for the month's payroll, but he was still uncertain about sales in the coming months. The email from his accountant recommended that they lay off a couple of people to save money. One of the persons in line to be laid off was a single mom who would be struggling financially without the job. What to do? He quickly made the decision to go ahead. As Jeremy sent the email, he was feeling a little bit sorry to have to do it, but he was trying to run the business on a sound financial basis and did not want to let emotions cloud his judgment.

Driving to church allowed Jeremy time to think about the class discussion he was about to join. His Sunday School class had been talking for several weeks about how to develop a deeper personal relationship with Christ and cultivate a more meaningful spiritual life through prayer and personal devotions. They had even branched into some discussion of contemplative spirituality and centering prayer as ways to cultivate their inner spiritual lives. The thought of this evoked conflicting feelings. On one side, this sounded unrealistic and distant from his daily life (and

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also a bit “fringy”). On the other side, he was concerned and motivated regarding the state of his spirituality and his soul.

When Jeremy arrived, it was prayer time and the class was sharing requests. One person asked prayer for Roger who was still going through chemotherapy. Jeremy had gotten to know Roger recently through the class and he was glad to have come in time to hear about Roger because he hadn’t known that Roger had cancer.

Another person shared that a member of the class named Marcie was worried about losing her job. As the story was told, Jeremy was increasingly drawn into concern for her. Although what was being said suggested that she had been attending for a while, he did not think he knew her . . . but somehow the name seemed familiar. Then the name slowly came into focus – he had just sent an e-mail confirming that she would be laid off from his company on Monday.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SPIRITUAL?

This fictional vignette illustrates a problem that many of us face. On the one hand, we wish to be more spiritual. In the hope of making some progress, we do things such as going to church, attending retreats, or reading devotional books that we hope will help us cultivate our inner spiritual lives. On the other hand, although we hear a certain amount about Christian love and charity, we have a hard time bridging the gap between our spiritual lives and the demands of day-to-day life. How does spirituality relate to behavior and decisions in our everyday physical and social existence – decisions about business, time caring for friends, or commitment to the church?

Jeremy is a person of orthodox Christian belief. He believes very deeply in God, Jesus, and the Trinity. He believes the Bible is true and attends church faithfully. If you ask Jeremy to define Christianity, he would say it is “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” Christianity is a spiritual thing – a matter of the heart. Growing in the faith comes about by the renewing of one’s heart or mind – meaning that the inner self or soul is made increasingly holy by the Holy Spirit working within one’s heart. Jeremy believes that his first-line Christian responsibility is to engage in inward acts of piety, prayer, and Bible study. The ultimate goal for the Christian is for the soul to make it to heaven.

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Jeremy would also say that taking care of persons who are homeless, sick, or distressed is an important thing for Christians to do. However, because he believes that faith is an inner spiritual matter, concern for others is regarded as a hoped-for outgrowth of an inner spiritual life. But he finds it difficult to figure out exactly how this happens. What is the relationship between inner spirituality, the routines of daily life, and the physical or social needs of others?

For Jeremy, as for many of us, spirituality is *disembodied*. It is about the state of the soul – a nonphysical thing dwelling inside, but separate from his body and behavior. Thus, his primary focus should be on the state of his soul – everything else is filtered through this individual, inner, disembodied lens. From this perspective, it is hard to get a clear view of the importance of community, or of the priority to be given to caring for those in need.

Generally, most modern religious persons (Christians and non-Christians) believe that spirituality is something that occurs inside themselves and that is experienced individually and privately. Many individuals today hold to this same belief. In part, it is what lies behind the currently popular phrase, “I am spiritual, but not religious,” which usually means that the person making the statement does not attend a church or subscribe to a set of denominational doctrines. Such folk do, however, cling to the idea that they can access some kind of spirituality individually and internally, particularly when they are alone in some quiet and aesthetically beautiful place such as the mountains, listening to music, or reading spiritual books.

Christians have always felt in their bones that there is something important about attending church (check out Heb. 10:24–25). But for most of Christian history, the church was thought to be important because the sacraments (offered only by priests) and the experiences of worship (available only in the church) were the only avenues through which a person could encounter God. As modern Christians increasingly forsake such thoughts in favor of individual, inward spirituality, the role of church becomes less and less clear.

Of course, the church itself is not at all clear of its own fundamental value. As church members we often cannot describe in a convincing way why church is important, other than, (1) we get a kind of warm internal feeling from it (suggesting that we are, for the moment, closer to God),

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and (2) we believe that, through regular attendance, we will somehow grow as a Christian (but we are vague about how this occurs). Pastors tend to view the value of church attendance, at least implicitly, as a context for enlightening parishioners through their preaching. None of these arguments for church have much traction for many in modern culture who believe that spirituality is an entirely inner and private matter.

Thus, in the predominant modern view of spirituality, neither one's physical body, nor other persons, nor church communities, are relevant. Spirituality is both disembodied (that is, manifest in the inner state of the soul, which we experience as emotions and feelings) and disembedded (an entirely individual state not directly relevant to any other person). Spirituality is an inner reality – one that is only distantly related to ourselves as physical/social beings, or to the nature of our relationships with other people or communities.

HAVING A BODY OR BEING A BODY

In this book, we will argue that one's view of *human nature* is critical in understanding the nature of Christian life. What sort of creatures are we? In what way are we to be considered spiritual?

Somehow we Christians have come to believe that we *have* bodies, not that we *are* bodies. We act as if the “real me” is not our own body, or even our own behavior, but is something spiritual (not physical) inside – our mind or soul. Thus, it is considered possible to be spiritual inside without being religious in what we do – without participating in a communal religious life. We believe we can be good persons inside, even though we are often inconsiderate, unethical, or even immoral in what we do.

But there are events and experiences that directly assault this idea. As Christian theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas tells us, “Sickness makes it impossible to avoid the reality of our bodies. When I am sick, I am not a mind [or soul] with a suffering body; I am the suffering body.”¹

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Sanctified Body: Why Perfection Does Not Require a ‘Self,’” (1999), 29, in S.M. Powell and M.E. Lodahl, eds., *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 19–38.

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When we are racked with the aches and pains of the flu, or half delirious with fever, we are pretty sure that we are a body. If, because of an auto accident, a friend is brain damaged, and his or her mental capacities, personality, or behavior is dramatically changed, we realize ever so clearly that we are a body.

The issue regarding whether humans are composed of a body and a soul, or are simply a body, has a long history in philosophy and theology. We called the story above a Gnostic parable as a reference to the heresy called Gnosticism that plagued the early church. Gnosticism held that humans are souls trapped in fleshly, sensual, and sinful material bodies, existing in a corrupt and polluted material world. To be spiritual we must escape from the impact of both our bodies and this imperfect world. In order to escape and free ourselves from the influence of the material body and world, we need to obtain special spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*, in Greek) through a direct (mystical) experience of the transcendent world of the spiritual. Combating the impact of this heresy on the development of Christian faith was a major focus of New Testament writers, particularly in the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul.

Very generally, the idea that humans are composed of two parts – a material body and a nonmaterial soul (or mind) – is called *dualism* (indicating a dual or two-part human nature). The alternative, that we are only bodies, is called either *monism* (indicating a single, unified nature) or *physicalism* (emphasizing the physical constitution of human-kind). Monism asserts that human nature is *embodied*, in that all that we are as persons involves characteristics emerging from our bodily makeup. We believe there is much to be said in favor of this view and a great deal to be learned about Christian life by considering its implications. The intent of this book is not to present a convincing argument in favor of monism-physicalism, although we will present a glimpse of the rationale for this position. Rather, we wish primarily to explore what it would mean for Christians, and for the church, if this were true – that we are physically embodied.

However, human nature cannot be entirely explained by our embodiment. It is also critical to take into account the social embeddedness of persons. Since our brains are highly malleable in response to situations – which we commonly call learning – our ongoing interactions with our

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social world continually and progressively shape and reshape who we are as persons. Thus, a rich account of human nature also requires an account of the impact of families, social relationships, groups (churches), and cultures.

The idea that humans are physically embodied beings can be problematic if not properly understood. Some have argued that the idea that human beings are bodies, not souls inhabiting bodies, implies that the rules and laws of atoms, molecules, or basic biology entirely determine all of human life. If this were in fact the case, it would make free will impossible and all human relationships meaningless, because everything in human life and experience would be nothing more than physics and biology. Such a view could not stand the scrutiny of Christian theology.

However, others (ourselves included) have proposed that the idea that human beings are bodies does not necessarily lead to this conclusion.² That is, due to the incredible complexity of bodies, new properties emerge in human and animal life that transcend, but do not eliminate the rules operating on atoms, molecules, and basic biology. So, we believe a very convincing case can be made that humans have very high level properties that emerge from biology that endow them with the capacity to think, make decisions, relate meaningfully to one another, and to know and love God. In this context, being “soulless” is not the same as being a physiological robot without human feelings and experiences, without free will, and incapable of genuine love.

Some believe that the idea that humans are bodies (not souls occupying bodies) is problematic from the point of view of scripture. In what follows, we will deal with the issue of a scriptural understanding of human nature with respect to bodies and souls. However, beyond this, we do not intend to review and critique all of the philosophical and theological arguments for and against dualism or monism.³

² Warren S. Brown, *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, ed. Warren S. Brown, H. Newton Malony and Nancey Murphy, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

³ For the reader interested in the issue of monism versus dualism, we recommend books by Joel Green, Nancey Murphy, and N. T. Wright, among others, cited throughout this book and found in the Resources section at the end.

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WHAT IF WE ARE BODIES?

This book is about bodies – human bodies and church bodies. We hope to show not only the critical implications for Christian life of the bodily nature of humans, but also how much this view can deepen our faith, enrich the life of the church, and allow us to grow as Christian persons. It really makes a significant impact on the way we think about Christian life if the essence of a human person is not a ghostly, immaterial substance (such as a soul or spirit or mind) that is temporarily trapped in a fleshy body. We believe that we are simply bodies, but made and designed that way by God. We want to explain how this idea really matters for how we live our lives and how we understand and participate in the church.

When, like Jeremy, we believe that spirituality is about something inside of us that is separate from our body, we have good reason to focus our attention on the state of our soul and to be less attentive to our actions as whole persons in the world. We also have good reason not to be overly concerned – perhaps just mildly concerned – about the physical, social, or economic distress of other persons. However, if we are wholly a body, we must think differently about the nature of Christian life. We must focus our attention outward toward God rather than inward toward our own soul. *Spirituality* would be understood as an ongoing relationship with God who is spirit, but outside of the person, and not as the cultivation of a particular form of experience inside of the person. Christian life would not be about the inner “me,” but about a bodily person in relationship to that which is outside of the person – God, my neighbor, and the community of believers.

If we are wholly bodies, we also would need to think differently about our life together in the church. We have to reconsider why we need the church. The primary activity of the church would not be saving souls or fostering inner spirituality. Rather, church would be about redeeming persons from a life focused on themselves (even on their own spirituality) to participating in a life focused on what God calls the church to be and do in the world. The goal of church would be to become a community – a closely interrelated network of physical persons – that could itself come to function as the embodied presence of Christ in the world. Members of the body would come into relationship with Christ and grow primarily

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through the Spirit being manifest in ongoing interactions with other Christians within the church.

A SUMMARY OF WHAT IS TO COME

This book will describe the nature of embodied human life and relate this view to what we believe should be the nature of Christian formation, community, and the church. The book is divided into three parts:

In Part I we set the stage by focusing on the issues of dualism in Christian faith. We argue that the origins of body-soul dualism are mostly in Greek philosophy and that this view of human nature has been read into scripture, rather than taken from scripture. In Chapter 2, we also give a brief look at how the church came to be mostly dualist and to the issue of Gnosticism in both the early church and in modern understanding of spirituality and Christian faith. In relationship to this historical and scriptural background, we summarize in Chapter 3 some of what is currently known about the physical basis of human nature and human life – that is, the neurological basis of mental processes, interpersonal relationships, moral decisions, and religious experiences.

Part II begins with a description of the principal forces that govern our mental and social development during infancy and childhood, resulting in the formation of our personality and character as discussed in Chapter 4. Our focus is how physical human beings become *persons*, in the richest sense of that term, and that the critical forces in the development of personhood are social and interpersonal. We are not only embodied (physical beings), but also *embedded* in human communities. Chapter 5 considers how the forces that shape child development continue to shape us as adults, allowing for the possibility of continued growth in wisdom and Christian maturity. Finally, in Chapter 6 we describe how persons can change and be transformed in their personhood, even in the face of inadequate prior social development. In general, this part of our book describes what embodiment implies for understanding the development of persons and the continuing process of maturity and formation.

In Part III we consider what it would mean to take seriously our embodiment and the processes of human formation and change described in Part II in the context of the church. Thus, we attempt to translate these perspectives on human beings as bodies into an

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understanding of the nature of the body of Christ – the church. We focus particularly on the dynamic interactions and influences between persons and communities. Chapter 7 makes the argument from the perspective of forces that contribute to the formation of mature Christians. How do the social and interpersonal forces inherent in communities work toward the continued formation of Christian persons? Why do embodied persons need to be embedded in the church? Chapter 8 considers the church itself as a network of persons. How do we understand the church as a body? How do churches form and reform into that which can increasingly become the Body of Christ in a very literal sense? Chapter 9 highlights the critical role of the narratives that are explicitly told or implicitly manifest in the church as they form the body that is the congregation. As an example of how narratives form imagination and action, this chapter takes up issues of disability and dependence as they are encountered within the church. Chapter 10 serves as a recap of our entire argument. There we summarize the points we have tried to make throughout the book to provide readers a concise review. Here we also explicitly differentiate our views from others that readers might assume are implied, but that we clearly do not mean to endorse or imply.

Thus, this book raises issues with far-reaching implications for Christian life. Do we minister to immaterial souls or to embodied whole persons? How are people formed and how do they change? What does it mean to be spiritual? How should the church conduct itself so as to be maximally transformative to those who participate? How is the Body of Christ to respond to persons within its community with physical, mental, economic, or psychological needs and disabilities? What should be the church's response to injustice in the world?

We hope that in reading this book, you, our reader, will begin to have a new appreciation for Christian persons as *whole-embodied-persons-embedded-in-the-church*. With this view in mind, you can come to better understand the processes of personal and spiritual development, maturity, and change, as well as the processes involved in the growth of a church into a Body of Christ. Perhaps you will begin to rethink, as we have, the nature and the mission of the church with respect to its call to foster the Christian formation of persons, to be continually formed into a genuine Body of Christ, and, ultimately, to be transformative in its influence on the wider community in which it exists.

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