

should Christians care about physical health?

Rebecca Horton considers the value of human bodies





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the debate: why is this contentious?

'Practising medicine is simply a means to bring salvation to people's souls.'

This statement immediately feels incorrect, outrageous even... but how do we know that? What is our rationale for healing bodies that will die anyway and be resurrected? What if Jesus' healing ministry was all about drawing crowds in? If we could get alongside people in a different way, would we? How much does the physical body matter? What is the absolute value of healthcare today?

These initial thoughts are not too far removed from the 'original' mission paradigm. 'You're not strictly speaking a missionary'¹ was the attitude when medical work was first proposed as a part of global mission. This was perhaps due to an extrapolation of the dichotomy believed to exist between body and soul: a concept that is partially true² but does not mean that man is wholly dichotomous and can be separated into a physical and spiritual form. To put it plainly, we are neither ensouled bodies or embodied souls: but whole people who are greater than the sum of these parts. This understanding is important. If mankind was regarded as a soul that needed saving with the body almost irrelevant, there would indeed be no absolute reason to practise medicine other than to gain entry to preach the gospel or as some way of demonstrating God's love.

The whole story of the Bible affords dignity, respect and honour to physical human bodies. This begins in Genesis, continues throughout the Old Testament, is made abundantly clear in Jesus's ministry and is revealed fully in biblical descriptions of the new heaven and new earth. It is indeed true that healthcare *can* be a means of demonstrating God's love and through this some may be brought to faith. But this is not where all the value lies. The Bible gives compelling reasons to treat physical humans with the utmost care and dignity: the eternal, physical nature of human beings is at the core of this. Considering the Bible as the true story of the entire

world³ explains to us what we instinctively know: physical health matters.

created: physically

'The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.' (Genesis 2:7)

Although created for a different purpose to animals, man is of the same continuum, made in unity with the physical universe. Physical human bodies are made of the dust of the earth, heavenly bodies from heavenly material.⁴ Each have their own glory. Man is not, therefore, simply a spiritual being trapped in an earthly body. The created 'living being'⁵ is a unified body, soul, mind and spirit and this is also the pattern for the resurrection,⁶ where we will be fully resurrected with our mortal bodies becoming immortal as well as our souls.

God asserts the importance of his physical creation ('*and it was very good*', [Genesis 1:31]) and gives man special responsibility over it, known as the Creation Mandate. '*God blessed them and said to them, "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*' (Genesis 1:28) Man is distinguished from the rest of creation by his relationship with God, but not to the exclusion of his physical body. Man is described as a 'living being': encompassing body, mind, soul and spirit into one seamless being. The stewardship commanded over the earth extends to stewardship over the bodies of ourselves and others. In caring for bodies, we also play an important part in God's restoration; the coming of the new (perfect!) creation.

The story continues when physical brokenness enters with the fall.⁷ Critically, this mandate to care for the earth is not revoked. A new day is promised when evil will be defeated, and the world restored, but in the meantime man and woman are to continue their role of stewardship. The later promises of

re-creation are not a contradiction to the importance of caring for the physical world now, but rather encourage us to work to restore broken physical bodies as we play a part in foreshadowing God's restoration. The promised re-establishment of peace (in Hebrew, *shalom*) refers to wholeness and reiterates the creation of man as mind, body, soul and spirit, beautifully intertwined. Neither the story of creation, nor the promise for restoration of God's people, present an argument for humans being merely embodied souls.

The hygiene and cleansing parts of the Law⁸ primarily demonstrate God's holiness, and the holiness of his people as a nation set apart. But they also protect (and certainly do not jeopardise) their physical health. God does not command practices that harm physical health, but he protects the bodies he's made. He shows his concern for physical needs through providing food for his wandering nation in the desert,⁹ so his people can be sure he will provide for them. A wonderful example of God's personal, holistic care is found in 1 Kings 19. Elijah is distraught, he 'came to a broom bush, sat down under it and then prayed that he might die' (1 Kings 19:4). The Lord reacts with gentleness and first cares for Elijah's physical needs by providing sleep, bread and water before meeting his emotional and spiritual concerns.

God did not 'give up' on his physical creation after the fall, and indeed is still sustaining it. The mandate in creation that we too should care for the physical beings of this world still stands.

Jesus healed: physically

'Which is easier: to say to this paralysed man, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Get up, take your mat and walk"? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the man, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' (Mark 2:9-11)

1. not just to draw the crowds

Healing forms a huge part of Jesus' ministry. Although he is clear that heavenly matters are paramount,¹⁰ we 'do not have a high priest who is

unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses' (Hebrews 4:15) Jesus himself has a physical human body. As he heals the woman who is bleeding,¹¹ weeps with Lazarus's sisters¹² and gives back the sight to the blind man,¹³ Jesus demonstrates that his healing is out of love, not simply to draw crowds to hear his name. His tears for Lazarus proclaim that suffering and death matter. Caring for the physical health needs of others is an outpouring of godly love. More than that: it is part of the restoration promised, as we get a glimpse of this heavenly restoration in Christ's ministry.

2. command to care physically

Whether or not the miraculous healings seen in Acts are to be expected today is widely debated.¹⁴ But the command to care for those who suffer, and specifically for their physical health needs, is not a matter of debate. Our attitudes towards the physical needs of others reflect our attitude towards God. If we tell people the gospel without attending to their suffering, can we really claim to love them? *'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me'* (Matthew 25:35-36). Christ loves and cares for the physical needs of his people so much, that when we care for them, it is as though we are caring for him personally.

3. inwardly groan for physical restoration

Christ attending to both spiritual and physical needs is demonstrated in the story of the paralysed man.¹⁵ We're not told why this man was paralysed, or even much about him. Jesus attended to his spiritual needs first, making it clear that our sin is more serious than our physical sufferings now. Jesus *first* forgives his sins. But, as Jesus also cares about this man's physical suffering, he then tells him to *get up and walk*. He came to bring us into relationship with God. But this doesn't mean that he thinks our physical suffering is unimportant. We should also consider what this doesn't say about healing. First, we know

from the rest of Scripture that physical sickness is not always a result of *individual* sin¹⁶ that will disappear when sins are forgiven. Physical healing is not promised to everyone who comes to faith,¹⁷ nor is it only given to people who have come to faith: natural and supernatural healing can happen to saints and sinners alike. Additionally, the Bible demonstrates that physical healing can happen miraculously, but it is not *guaranteed* before heaven.

That longing for final healing is captured by Paul as he ‘groan(s) inwardly’, awaiting ‘*redemption of our bodies*.’¹⁸ Healing is promised in the new creation where there will be ‘*no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*’. Sickness and death will no longer be the order of the day. Although in God’s grace we see a foreshadowing of this healing now, a correct theology will help keep us from stumbling when we do not always see the healing that we groan for on this earth.

4. incarnation demonstrates dignity

Finally, Jesus being himself fully human proclaims the importance of physical bodies. In Jesus’s incarnation, God bestows his own glory on the human body and this alone is enough to tell us that all human bodies should be treated with honour, respect and dignity.

we will be recreated: physically

‘Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him “My Lord and my God!”’ (John 20:26-28)

Far from being a reason to ignore our physical bodies, Jesus’s resurrection in human form is an

endorsement of the physical body, the ‘final yes’ to the pinnacle of his creation.¹⁹ If physical matter was just to be done away with in the new creation, something we would no longer see, then the argument for its value is lessened. *‘But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep’* (1 Corinthians 15:20) and we will also have physical resurrection bodies.

As God asserted that the physical body was ‘very good’ at creation, he now demonstrates that it is good enough for the new creation. Our physical bodies will *‘be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable’* (1 Corinthians 15:52) with a physical new creation.

concluding thoughts: how does this affect us practically?

How we consider the human form has implications for us as doctors and nurses. The Bible, throughout its story, affords a great deal of dignity and respect for the human form. Yes, the eternal souls of mankind deserve the deepest outpouring of our hearts. But this eternal significance of our souls *does not* diminish the respect our bodies deserve. Indeed, we were created whole, redeemed whole in Christ, and will be restored whole on that final day. In all these states physical matter plays a part. It is easy to dismiss the human body when what we see daily is its weakness. We yearn for the time when ‘the new is here’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Let’s rejoice in the beauty of wholeness. Let’s delight when we see a glimpse of restoration now. And let’s look forward to when the physical world is made new, asserting now the utmost respect for the human body, knowing that God himself has indeed given it the ‘final yes’.²⁰ ■

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