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A Christian view of the body

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What is a human being? A typical response from our Western culture to this question is the famous line of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) co-founder Ingrid Newkirk, 'A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy.'¹ Keep drawing the line back and a rat is a worm is an amoeba is primordial soup. According to this world view human beings are essentially built from gunge – a miraculous yet mindless coming together of gunge in chromosomes and mitochondria and bones and emotions and brains and personality, but gunge none the less.

We also tend to view human beings through the lens of our current technology. In the era of the industrial revolution and the steam age, human beings were described in mechanistic terms: workers became cogs in the machine; when humans functioned well, they were operating like *clockwork*. In our electronic age, we speak about people being *hard-wired* for certain behaviours; of genetic *engineering*; of the mind as *software* and the body as *hardware*.

Biblically speaking these views of human beings are entirely wrong. The Bible begins in a very different place, defining human beings in relationship to God.

'Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

*'So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'*²

This very different anthropology has profound significance for how we regard and treat one another. If we see people as

machines or as processors, we are likely to treat them in a mechanistic fashion: as means to an end and not as ends in themselves. Genesis 1 tells a far superior story – we are not machines and the human brain is not a computer. As we shall see, the implications for medicine are fundamental.

Today's prevailing view of human beings is not as new as the technology that has given it a new vocabulary. Mind-body dualism has long regarded human beings as a composite of two separate entities: a physical body and a non-physical mind, as argued by Descartes.³ The philosophy is older still, having its roots in the teachings of Plato who presupposed that body and immortal soul are distinct substances.⁴ The result is a form of Gnosticism in which the mind is elevated above the grime of the material; the body seen as something to escape, a mere vessel.⁵

In this view, the body is seen as a shell for the 'real' human, like the hardware of a smartphone. The true self (the mind or consciousness) is the software that inhabits the body, a concept currently being explored in the transhumanism movement.

The Christian understanding of human beings is much better: it is more satisfying, more hopeful and ultimately it has the ring of truth.

According to the biblical, teleological world view our bodies are made of dust, yes, but made with a purpose – somehow *like God*. Body and soul together form an integrated whole, a unity designed to enjoy relationship with God whilst acting to fulfil his purposes on the earth. Scripture speaks of human beings as temples,⁶ bridges between heaven and earth precisely because we are both body and spirit; equally embodied souls and ensouled bodies. We have the unique ability to know upward communion with God, horizontal relationship with other human beings, and downward stewardship of the rest of creation. This gives a unique dignity and

worth to the human body. The body is not merely a shell that contains the 'real' person; rather, the real person is embodied.

A biblical overview

Throughout the biblical narrative we see the significance of humans as embodied beings.

Creation

God created flesh and blood human beings, male and female, in his image as the pinnacle of creation. This act of first creation is echoed in the beginning of every life, as we are known to God in the womb, even from the moment of conception – he has plans for our lives.⁷ Scripture sees body and soul as two sides of the same coin, demonstrated in the parallelism seen throughout its Hebrew poetry.⁸

Fall

Human beings fell not only spiritually but physically, with bodies and souls both subject to disease and death yet crying out for redemption.⁹

Incarnation

God himself took on human flesh, not despising human experience, but bestowing on it a divine dignity.¹⁰

Redemption

Christ bore our sins in his body on the cross, reconciling us to God as holy.¹¹ The sacrament of communion symbolises and remembers Christ's bodily sacrifice until he returns.¹² The sacrament of baptism symbolises our death and burial to sin and union by faith with Christ in his bodily resurrection.¹³ Both these sacraments are enacted bodily, not merely 'spiritually'. Pentecost signifies God coming to dwell in us; our bodies becoming temples of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

Glorification

Christ's resurrection represents the first





fruits of the bodily resurrection for believers and our hope of bodily life in a renewed universe.¹⁵

Throughout the entirety of this story the body is neither indifferent nor marginal. Human beings are embodied, and Christian hope celebrates that this will be true for eternity. Indeed, it is this hope of embodied resurrection life that most helps us understand how we should regard the body now.

The most extended scriptural description of the resurrection is 1 Corinthians 15. There is much that is mysterious about resurrection life, but this passage gives us four points of clarity.

Clarity in mystery

Resurrection life will be wonderfully the same as life today – and cosmically different. Paul relates what is to come to what we already know. Our *protology*¹⁶ (the creation account of Eden in Genesis 1-3) is retold in our *eschatology* (the 'end times' account of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21); the last things will be like the first things, but somehow enhanced. Mankind, in our efforts at self-improvement, is always trying to return to the utopia of Eden,¹⁷ but life in the resurrection will be that much better, as a mature plant is better than a seed.

Clarity about the body

In Paul's illustration, seeds and plants are both the same and different. Without a seed there would be no plant, but the plant is much more glorious than the seed. Our bodies now he likens to seed – which means our bodies now have significance. Neither modernist materialism nor post-modernist relativism gives a satisfying account of the human condition. Our bodies are not the product of blind chance, neither mechanistic nor plastic, open to the interpretation of a fluid culture – they are designed with purpose by a loving Creator. At the resurrection those seeds will emerge as magnificent 'plants', to be experienced in all their glory.

We must recognise that our earthly bodies are neither ultimate – and so are not to become objects of idolatry – nor are they malleable and disposable. Yet they are significant, because they are the seed of what is to come. Nancy Pearcey writes:

'...Christianity assigns the human body a much richer dignity and value. Humans do not need freedom from the body to discover their

*true, authentic self. Rather we can celebrate our embodied existence as a good gift from God. Instead of escaping from the body, the goal is to live in harmony with it.'*¹⁸

Clarity in Christ

The curse of the fall is that, 'dust you are, and to dust you will return'.¹⁹ The resurrection has set the trajectory of this corruption into reverse. Christ did not see corruption in his body.²⁰ Our current bodily experience is that we are perishing, weak and natural. The resurrection experience will be of bodies that are gloriously imperishable, powerful and supernatural.

Because of the resurrection of Christ, the inevitability of a 'dusty', mortal death is swallowed up in a glorious future. Immortality – physical and spiritual – is now inevitable for the Christian:

*'For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.'*²¹

Clarity about how we live now

Understanding this biblical picture of our resurrection hope has very practical implications for how we live as embodied beings and treat other embodied beings. As CS Lewis wrote:

*'It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare... But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.'*²²

Our framework for practising medicine will be informed by this understanding of the resurrection. The seed matters, and the gospel teaches the importance of how we tend to our fellow human beings in the here and now, treating even our enemies with hope, dignity, respect, honour and care.²³ But we do not fight to preserve this seed at all costs: our hope is not preservation of the seed, but the bursting into life of the mature plant.

Some implications for life

Human beings are physically extraordinary.

With nearly two square metres of temperature-detecting, sensation-feeling skin, pairs of eyes and ears, a nose and a tongue all keeping us in contact with our immediate environment, processed via the most impressive brain in the natural universe, we are acutely and permanently body-conscious. These bodies of ours enable us to delight in roast chicken or fresh coffee, to know the joy of holding close someone we love, to feel our emotions soar as we listen to Rachmaninoff, Radiohead or Rihanna. It is our bodies that enable humanity to steward the earth. Bodies are wonderful, but they can also be the source of our problems, and it is our bodily failings that often most occupy us. Our bodies let us down constantly.

We are a bundle of bodily desires, some of which are considered socially legitimate, while others are not. To express our desires can result in social approval, but also embarrassment, or sanction. To repress our desires can lead to mental anguish. Our bodies demand food. We eat and are satisfied but are then hungry again. We want to be energetic and alert but get tired. We look in the mirror and are not happy with what we see. We age. We hurt. We get sick. We die. Our control over our bodies is sadly limited. We cannot prevent the onset of cancer by the power of positive thinking. We cannot change the colour of our eyes or add an inch to our height.

Our problems are bodily ones and we can react in hatred towards the body. Ironically, this hatred often manifests itself in the form of idolatry or narcissism – things that look like delight in the body, but on closer inspection prove to be bodily despair. The body builder obsessed with spending hours in the gym and the glamour model addicted to cosmetic surgery²⁴ might look very different, but both are fighting their bodies. The body has let them down, it is not what they want it to be – and it has to be confronted and mastered. We are caught in a bizarre 21st century Gnostic trap in which our bodily disdain is reflected in body obsession.

Gnosticism is the ancient heresy that draws a division between body and soul, claiming our souls – 'the real us' – needs to be purged of the impure skin, muscle and fat that comprise our physical shell. To the Gnostic, our bodies have let us down, and no end of cosmetic surgery or trips to the





gym or new clothes can fix the problem. We want to escape, are unable to, but constantly strive for the impossible. Envy, disappointment and despair are the inevitable results.

A world view that understands humanity as merely the product of blind chance and evolution inevitably regards human flesh and blood as having no intrinsic value and worth. In this view, our bodies are just tubes of DNA – they are not who we really are and what we choose to do with them is a matter of indifference. Our bodies matter only in so far as they allow us to express what we really want the world to know about us. The body becomes little more than a canvas for our soul – our real, inner selves – not only in the clothes we wear and hairstyles we adopt, but in the tattoos and piercings we sport and the cosmetic procedures we undergo.

Body modifications are becoming increasingly extreme; for example, tongue-splitting, nipple removal and even implantation of ‘horns’ and other animalistic or ‘artistic’ features. Is desiring and consenting to these procedures sufficient justification to allow them to take place? The UK Court of Appeal did not accept that these types of procedures were analogous to piercing or tattoos, but that they constituted ‘medical procedures performed for no medical reason and with none of the protections provided to patients by medical practitioners; ...personal autonomy ...did not justify removing body modification from the ambit of the law of assault.’²⁵ What constitutes a ‘medical reason’ is a matter for further debate beyond the scope of this *File*.

Whenever someone says, ‘As if God would be interested in what I do with my genitals...’ we are hearing Gnosticism given voice. The message is that the body is trivial, of no eternal significance. In matters of sexuality and gender identity, this leads to the belief that we have the moral right (obligation even) to define and categorise ourselves not according to our physical bodies but according to our subjective feelings. The body is regarded as plastic; the emotions as determinative – how odd. Consequently, in our culture gender reassignment surgery is now available on the NHS, but counselling for those who seek to change their unwanted sexual desires to align with the biblical revelation of human sexuality is stigmatised.

Christians believe that what we do whilst *in* the body has eternal significance, and therefore what we do *with* the body is truly significant. According to the biblical world view, our bodies are not our own to do with as we please. They are made to be temples of the Holy Spirit, living sacrifices, living stones, a holy priesthood, and with the ethical imperative that we honour and glorify God with our bodies.²⁶ As the Heidelberg Catechism states in answer to the question, ‘What is your only comfort in life and death?’

‘That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.’

Consequently, Christians should discipline their bodies, as their bodies are no longer slaves to sin but to righteousness.²⁷

Yet, despite the lure of Gnosticism, most people don’t really want to escape their bodies. One of the highest compliments we can pay someone is to say that they are ‘comfortable in their own skin’. This kind of comfort seems increasingly rare, but we know that we want to be at home in the body. However, our culture wants us to be at home in a perfected body, one that looks beautiful and displays no weakness. It suggests that we could all be comfortable in that kind of skin.

All of this means that the very ungnostic gospel of Jesus Christ has immediate relevance for us. The story of a resurrected Christ and the hope of redeemed bodies is powerful. The promise that, ‘Just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man,’²⁸ offers us a wonderful embodiment – one in which our bodies are not our enemy, nor a matter of indifference, but part of the very thing that makes us – and this is breathtaking – somehow *like God*.

Is it any surprise that in a world where humans are supposedly the culmination of blind chance and the *survival of the fittest*, the undesired, the disabled, the decrepit and demented are treated as non-persons, as less than fully human and therefore disposable? The message of the Christian gospel teaches us that matter *matters*, and this must have a profound effect on how we understand the value of men and women and their bodies in the here and now. The way Christians care for the least and the

lowest in society has consistently distinguished them from the surrounding culture. For example, the Roman Emperor Julian commented:

*‘Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers... the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well.’*²⁹

It has often been observed that Christianity is the most embodied, the earthiest, of all religions. Matter is not indifferent. Through Jesus, the embodied God-man, we can discover the dignity that our bodies demand. Our bodies are not distasteful. They are destined for eternal glory!

Some implications for death

The current desire for control over our bodies extends even to the timing and manner of our death. Dignity in Dying has been campaigning for the legalisation of physician-assisted suicide (PAS) in the UK for many years. The campaign is based on the false premise that dying is inevitably painful and undignified. The hospice and palliative care movement counters this narrative. In the words of Dame Cicely Saunders, one of its founders and herself a Christian:

*‘You matter because you are you, and you matter until the end of your life. We will do all we can, not only to help you die peacefully, but to live until you die.’*³⁰

Christians treasure, honour and care for the body, including that of a dying person, ‘For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.’³¹ Intentional killing of the innocent – even the terminally ill – is sacrilege: they are creatures made in the very image of God.

Whilst it is true that the Bible does not give specific instructions about how Christians should dispose of dead bodies, it is clear from the narrative of Scripture that the saints are buried, whether in a tomb, cave or in the ground.³² Burning is a sign of judgment³³ – one reason why burning became the mode of execution for heretics. Burial was one of the characteristics that



distinguished Jews from the Greeks and Romans who practiced cremation. The early Christian community continued the distinctive practice of burial.

For contemporary British Christians the issue of how the bodies of the dead should be treated is often tied to a confused eschatology – that as we are going to be raised to new life then what happens to our bodies after death does not matter at all. While this might seem solid theological reasoning, it may indicate a lack of theological reflection. It suggests we may be thinking as consumers. We may think our bodies are disposable not because of a worked through theology of resurrection, but because we think everything is disposable; we can fall into the Gnostic trap of thinking the ‘real me’ is liberated when set free from the body. This is very different from the world view of the early Christians. David W Jones writes in a helpful article, again referencing Emperor Julian:

‘The last of the non-Christian emperors, Julian the Apostate (AD 332–363), identified ‘care of the dead’ as one of the factors that contributed to the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world. The church historian Philip Schaff, too, identified Christians’ display of decency to the human body’ in showing care for the dead as one of the main reasons for the church’s rapid conquest of the ancient world.’³⁴

Clearly, God can raise to new life all those who have put their trust in him, regardless of whether their bodies are neatly arranged for burial, dissected in the pathologist’s laboratory or the medical student’s anatomy room, or cremated and scattered to the four winds. A preference for burial over cremation is not simply evidence of an overly literalistic approach to guaranteeing a resurrection body. ‘Care of the dead’ signifies the Christian hope of resurrection and our bodily continuity – that it really is this body that will be raised to new life, in the same way that Jesus’ resurrected body left the tomb empty, and that this same cosmos will one day become ‘a new heaven and a new earth.’³⁵

Conclusion

The whole span of redemptive history demonstrates that God designed human beings for a purpose, a relationship with

him. He created us as body-soul beings and bestowed us with great dignity. This has vast implications for how we live our lives, how we practise medicine and nursing, and even how we go about dying. Physical death means a separation of body and soul for a time, whereas spiritual death means a separation of mankind from God. The hope of the Christian gospel is that the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees that

our mortal bodies will be perfected and reunited with our souls to enjoy restored relationship with God forever. Good news indeed!

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