

Toward a Theology of Human Embodiment

Gregg R. Allison

EARLY IN MY career of teaching systematic theology, a student arranged an appointment with me in my office. After the customary small talk, he cut to the quick: He was experiencing multiple physical problems, plagued by insomnia,

digestive and excretory problems, blood in his urine, lethargy, and attention deficit. He wondered what spiritual causes could lie at the heart of these physical symptoms, and he wanted my advice about how to become well again.

I hardly needed to probe much, but my questions caught him off guard because they focused on physical matters: What are you eating? (junk food) Are you scheduling rest periods? (Too busy for relaxation) How are you exercising? (No need for that) Becoming irritated with my line of questioning, he offered the follow-

ing: Because his body was going to be sloughed off at death anyway, he did not need to be concerned about eating well, resting well, and exercising well.

I countered with an observation: His body was (literally) breaking down before his eyes, and he would soon be no good for himself, his family, and the church ministry for which he was preparing through his seminary studies. And, I added, I thought the problem was a physical one, not a spiritual one. But that was not the answer a “spiritually minded” evangelical like him was accustomed to hearing. Besides, this student had come to me with an expectation that I would share something with him from the Word of God. But I was not prepared to do so.

This encounter plunged me into a crisis: As a professor of theology at an evangelical seminary, I wondered what I should have shared with this student from Scripture that would have helped him with his physical problems. If you found yourself in a similar situation, what would you communicate?

The purpose of this article is to sketch a theology of human embodiment, the fruit of years of study flowing from the encounter related above. It is my contention that evangelicals at best express an ambivalence toward the human body, and at worst manifest a disregard or contempt for it.

GREGG R. ALLISON is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Allison has eighteen years of ministry experience as a staff member of Campus Crusade, where he worked in campus ministry and as a missionary to Italy and Switzerland. He serves as the book review editor for theological, historical, and philosophical studies for the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. Dr. Allison is the author of *Getting Deep: Understand What You Believe About God and Why* (B&H, 2002) and *Jesusology: Understand What You Believe About Jesus and Why* (B&H, 2005).

Many people, often due to tragic experiences with the body (e.g., physical/sexual abuse), abhor their body, and many Christians, due to either poor or non-existent teaching on human embodiment, consider their body to be, at best, a hindrance to spiritual maturity and, at worst, inherently evil or the ultimate source of sin.¹ By contrast, in my study of Scripture, I have discovered a remarkable perspective toward the body, one which impacts how we live out our existence as created beings, how we view and experience our salvation, and how we trust and obey God as maturing believers in Jesus Christ. After giving a definition, I will outline various elements of my theology of human embodiment: the creation of the body, the gendered body, the sexual body, the disciplined body, the sanctification of the body, the clothing of the body, the body and the worship of God, the suffering and healing of the body, the death of the body, and the future of the body. For each element of discussion, I will draw some practical application for living our human embodiment.²

DEFINITION: THE HUMAN BODY AND HUMAN EMBODIMENT

Let me begin with a definition. The human body is an essential aspect of human beings during their earthly existence and, following Christ's return and the resurrection of their body, in the age to come. Specifically, the body is the material component of human nature distinct from—but intimately linked with—the immaterial component, commonly called the soul (or spirit). Only between physical death and the return of Christ will human existence be a disembodied one. The soul (or spirit) will survive death and continue to exist while the body is sloughed off, but this is an abnormal condition (2 Cor 5:1-10). Embodiment, therefore, is the state of human existence between conception and death, and again after the resurrection of the body and for all eternity. The normal state of human existence is an embodied existence.

THE CREATION OF THE BODY

Human beings are this way because God designed them to be embodied. This was true of the first man, as “the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:7).³ This was also true of the first woman, as God removed part of the man's body, and “the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Gen 2:22). Moreover, it is true of each and every human being since the original creation, as God is intimately involved in fashioning human life from the moment of conception. As David extols God in a psalm, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.... My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth” (Ps 139:13, 15). Through advancements in medicine and technology, we are now able to understand the development of a human being *in utero*, so what was formerly “hidden ... in secret” has been revealed. Still, human ability to explain this magnificent process genetically and physiologically does not take away from the truth that God is also at work to bring about human development. Moreover, human beings are created holistically, so that in this earthly existence, soul and body are an inseparable unity. Indeed, being made in the image of God entails the embodiment of the image bearers.⁴ Human embodiment, then, is according to divine design.

Accordingly, people should embrace embodiment as a gift from God. In an article in *Books and Culture*, Frederica Mathewes-Green provided a quote from C. S. Lewis that represents a common viewpoint that people have of their bodies: “The fact that we have bodies is the oldest joke there is.” Such disdain for human embodiment is not in accord with Scripture. Mathewes-Green offered a corrective insight: “The initial impression that we stand critically apart from our bodies was our first mistake. We are not merely passengers riding

around in skin tight racecars; we are our bodies. They embody us.”⁵ Embodiment is God’s creative design for human beings, who should be grateful for their physical existence.⁶ Moreover, the church is called to minister to people as holistic human beings created in the image of God. This worldview entails treating all people—both Christians and non-Christians alike—with respect for their inherent dignity. Furthermore, the church should be engaged in helping the poor and marginalized through deeds of mercy, communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone, and discipling Christians by addressing their many needs—intellectual, emotional, volitional, physical, educational, and socio-economic.

THE GENDERED BODY

As embodied creatures, human beings are either male or female (Gen 1:26-27); indeed, gender is a fundamental reality of human existence. Unlike secondary characteristics such as hair and eye color, height, and body type, gender is a primary characteristic. God does not create a generic human being and then add on gender; rather, he creates a human being either as a male person or as a female person. Human genderedness means that a man is conscious of and knows himself as a man, he relates to other human beings as a man, and as a man he relates to God. Similarly, it means that a woman is conscious of and knows herself as a woman, she relates to other human beings as a woman, and as a woman she relates to God. Try as I might, even urged on by my wife, I cannot see life from her—a woman’s—perspective. Human beings are perspectively gendered—as designed by God.

Accordingly, men and women should be thankful for the gender with which God created them, and any sense of superiority or inferiority because they are male or they are female is wrong and dangerous. Gender differences should be celebrated, and men and women should learn to enjoy personal, pure relationships with the other gender.⁷

THE SEXUAL BODY

An important aspect of gender, and hence of human embodiment, is sexuality. Indeed, God created human beings as both male and female so that they could fulfill the cultural mandate to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28).⁸ This universal command means that the majority of human beings will be married, and the general portrait that arises from Scripture is that marriage is between a man and a woman who commit themselves to living in a monogamous relationship. Sexual intercourse is to be enjoyed within the bounds of this covenantal framework and is designed for several purposes, including pleasure, procreation, and unity.

Tragically, the fall into sin wreaks havoc with human sexuality, and Scripture presents instructions intended to help people overcome temptation and failure in this area. For example, Paul denounces sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:12-12), placing it into a category by itself by explaining that “every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (v. 18). This heinous sin wrenches away one’s body—which “is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (v. 13)—from its rightful membership—with Christ and, if married, with one’s spouse—and unites it in membership with the body of someone other than one’s spouse. The result is that the two become one flesh (v. 16), which is a tragic disorientation of the body. In no uncertain terms, Paul warns against sexual immorality, reminding Christians “that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” and urging them to “glory God in your body” (v. 20). The apostle echoes this alert in another place (1 Thess 4:3-8), urging married people to engage in sexual activity in a God-honoring and spouse-respecting manner (vv. 4-5).⁹ Tragically, Christian men were committing adultery with the wives of other Christians, so Paul also warns the church “that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter” (v. 6). The close relationships that church members

enjoy with one another should never be allowed to cross the lines of proper morality so that members defraud one another by taking that which does not belong to them.

The apostle also issues instructions (1 Cor 7:1-9) to ascetically minded Christians, telling them that they cannot pursue holiness before God by refusing to engage in sexual intercourse if they are married. Such proper sexual activity acts as a prophylactic against immorality (v. 2), so spouses are duty bound to enjoy a mutually satisfying sexual relationship (vv. 3-4). Paul concedes—not commands (v. 6)—that regular sexual activity may be interrupted for a time if the two mutually agree, if there is a good purpose, and if they reengage after the period is complete. This abstinence, however, does not make them more holy but can instead lead to disastrous results if not treated properly (v. 5).

In his discussion of marriage, Paul also addresses the reality of singleness (1 Cor 7:7-9). This state, like that of marriage, is a gift of God (v. 7). Paul's preference is that "the unmarried and the widows ... remain single" as he is (v. 8), for celibacy offers many advantages (1 Cor. 25-40), including avoidance of "worldly troubles" (v. 28), freedom from "anxieties" (v. 32), and promotion of "undivided devotion to the Lord" (v. 35). The advantages of singleness are many, yet only those to whom this gift is given should remain single. Paul quickly adds, "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (v. 9). Those with the gift of celibacy are not asexual beings who lack sexual desire, but they are able to control those urges by channeling them in God-honoring ways. Lacking such self-control, people should pursue getting married so they are not overwhelmed by sexual desire and thus fall into immorality.

Anyone reading this article is certainly aware of the many troubles Christians and the church encounter in this area of human sexuality: rampant sexual immorality, adultery, homosexuality, sexual abuse of children and women, pornography, "sexting," prostitution, and other problems. Cog-

nizant of these many challenges, we should never lose sight of the fact that human sexuality, and sexual intercourse between married couples, are wonderful gifts from God for his embodied creatures, gifts that should be celebrated and enjoyed.

THE DISCIPLINED BODY

In the above discussion, Paul's reminder to Christians "that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19), while specifically directed at the problem of sexual immorality, has a broader application: Human beings are to respect and care for their body. Such attention requires physical discipline. Elsewhere, the apostle gives instruction to Timothy: "train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim 4:8). Using the metaphor of athletic preparation for the Isthmian games, Paul urges his disciple to focus on training in godliness, which would include study of Scripture, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines. Pausing for a moment on actual athletic training, he comments that physical discipline, while not as valuable as spiritual discipline, is nonetheless important. Certainly, it does not hold promise for the life to come, but bodily training has value for embodied human beings during their earthly existence.

Such physical discipline does not entail asceticism—for example, prohibiting marriage and forbidding the consumption of certain foods (1 Tim 4:3-5; Col 2:16-23)—for these legalistic rules and regulations "have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgences of the flesh" (Col 2:23). But it does require intentional care for and control of the body, as Paul elsewhere notes, "I discipline my body and keep it under control" (1 Cor 9:26). Specifically, bodily discipline includes regular exercise, good nutrition, proper rest and sleep, and avoidance of body-harming substances. Insights from exercise physiology and nutrition

can be helpful in this regard.

It would be embarrassing to ask when was the last time you heard a sermon on physical discipline or participated in a Sunday school class about diet and exercise. While it is not my purpose to minimize the importance of practicing spiritual disciplines, a proper theology of human embodiment corrects a much-overlooked aspect of Christian living and church education: Physical discipline in regard to eating, exercising, resting, and avoiding harmful substances is an important component of life in the human body. Additionally, when spiritual disciplines call for accompanying physical activities like fasting, solitude, temporary celibacy, and the foregoing of other legitimate bodily pleasures, the goal should always be increased spiritual vitality and never the punishment of the body as an opponent or enemy of spiritual maturity.

THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE BODY

Indeed, the pursuit of spiritual maturity is the process of sanctification, a divine work for which Paul prays, “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23). Holistic sanctification, including holiness of the body, is the goal and blessing for which the apostle prays.

Sanctification consists of two aspects, one negative, the other positive. As for the former aspect, sanctification involves avoiding or ridding oneself of certain sins. If we consider the seven deadly sins—pride, gluttony, envy, sloth, anger, lust, covetousness—three are directly connected to embodiment. Lust has been dealt with above; it is a deadly sin of embodiment. As for a second sin, “gluttony is the immoderate consumption of food arising from the unchecked appetite for something more than, or other than, what the Lord has provided and is therefore judged a sin by God”¹⁰ Indeed, Paul’s comment about enemies of the cross—“their god is their belly” (Phil 3:19)—underscores that this sin is not only about over consumption of food, but also about the idolatry

at the heart of it. Gluttony is often associated with drunkenness, “Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags” (Prov 23:20-21). Biblical portrayals of gluttonous people and the tragic end into which their sin plunged them include Esau (Gen 25:29-34; with comment in Heb 12:16-17), the sons of Eli (1 Sam 2:12-17), and the people of Israel (Numbers 11). Gluttony is a deadly sin of human embodiment.

A third sin is sloth, which is psychological indifference and physical weariness toward the work that God has provided for one to accomplish.¹¹ Sloth results in the lack of resources for living: “Go to the ant, O sluggard, consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man” (Prov 6:6-11; cf. Prov 10:26; 13:4; 20:4; 26:13-16). Paul denounced idleness for Christians: “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies” (2 Thess 3:10-11). Sloth is a deadly sin of human embodiment.

These deadly three sins—lust, gluttony, and sloth—are to be avoided or overcome as part of the sanctification of the body.

Positively, sanctification involves the pursuit of holiness in terms of God-honoring attitudes and actions. As for sanctification of the body, Paul emphasizes that the body is “for the Lord” (1 Cor 6:13), urging Christians to “present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness” (Rom 6:13). In other words, the body is to be used for God’s purposes. Concretely, Christians are to work hard so as to provide for themselves (2 Thess 3:12) and for their family (1 Tim 5:8) and to “have something to share with

anyone in need” (Eph 4:28). Instead of cursing other image bearers, they are to bless the Lord (Jas 9-10); rather than lying, they are to “speak the truth” (Eph 4:25). As sanctification is pursued, Christians should not ignore the important biblical teaching that their body is part and parcel of this process of becoming more like Jesus Christ.¹²

THE CLOTHING OF THE BODY

One concrete expression of dedicating one’s body for divine purposes is the clothing one wears. This seemingly mundane matter actually receives more attention in Scripture than one might expect; indeed, it is an important aspect of human embodiment.

When God created Adam and Eve, they were “naked and unashamed” (Gen 2:25). Their fall into sin, however, introduced a sense of shame and led them to a futile sartorial attempt to rectify their predicament (Gen 3:7-11). In his mercy, God provided appropriate clothing to cover human nakedness (Gen 3:21). Thus, clothing is a post-fall necessity to deal with sin and shame.

Though definitely a cultural matter and thus varying widely, the clothing of the body is addressed by certain principles in Scripture. The prohibition against cross-dressing—“a woman shall not wear a man’s garment, nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God” (Duet 22:5)—underscores the givenness of gender and rebukes anyone who refuses to embrace the gender with which they were created; such rejection of their God-given maleness or femaleness is a heinous sin before their Creator. Accordingly, clothes should reflect a man’s creation as a man and his acceptance of his maleness; similarly, they should reflect a woman’s creation as a woman and her acceptance of her femaleness.

Two passages directly address women’s clothing: Paul desires “that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire” (1 Tim 2:9), and Peter com-

mands, “Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart” (1 Pet 3:3-4). Clearly, cultural perspectives are operative in these instructions (e.g., there is nothing inherently wrong with braided hair, but this hairstyle communicates something evil in some cultures), but rather than overlooking these passages, Christians can learn from their principles. These principles include (1) Understand that clothes communicate something about those who select and wear them. Thus, Christians should dress sensibly, being conscious of their selection in clothing. (2) Avoid ostentatious clothes that draw attention to one’s status of wealth and privilege. (3) Dress modestly, not sensually, avoiding seductive clothes that draw attention to one’s sexuality. (4) Dress properly, using good judgment, and avoiding clothes that associate the wearer with rebellion and evil. (5) Spend wisely and fittingly on clothes, guarding against purchasing so as to overtax one’s budget and considering what is appropriate in light of personal, family, church, and world needs. Clearly, these principles apply as much to men as to women. Even the clothes Christians wear should confirm their profession of godliness.

THE BODY AND THE WORSHIP OF GOD

When most Christians think of worshipping God, they imagine such activities as singing songs of praise and thanksgiving, listening to the Word of God read and preached, praying corporately, and the like. Few would consider the role of their body in worship. Indeed, in a popular definition, Archbishop William Temple described worship as involving a person’s conscience, mind, imagination, heart, and will—with no mention of the human body!¹³

Scripture, however, presents an active, physical involvement in worship: the raising of hands, indicative of both blessing God (Ps 134:1) and pleading for his help and mercy (Ps 28:1-2; 88:8-

10); kneeling, bowing, and falling down, exhibiting humility and abject shame before the Lord (Rev 4:9-11; 5:8-14; Ezra 9:5-6; 2 Chron 6:12-14; Ps 35:13-14; Neh 8:5-6); dancing or leaping, manifesting intense joy (Psa. 149:3-4; Ex. 15:20-21; 2 Sam. 6:14-17); and clapping and shouting praise to God (Ps 47:1-2; 66:1). Certainly, many cultural—including generational, ethnic, geographical, socio-economic, and denominational—realities must be considered in this discussion, but embodied human beings qualified to worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24) are to engage in this activity with the entirety of their being—and that includes their body.

Moreover, Jesus Christ ordained physical, tangible means by which he expresses and grants his grace to his followers. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the two ordinances given by Christ to his church. The initial rite, baptism, is administered to new converts as a concrete portrayal of their entrance into a new covenant relationship with the triune God (Matt 28:18-20); their identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:3-5; Gal 3:26-28); their cleansing from sin (Acts 26:16; 2:38); and their escape from divine judgment (1 Pet 3:20-21). These mighty works of God are visibly depicted through baptism by immersion, a very physical act. The ongoing rite, the Lord’s Supper, is celebrated regularly by church members as a concrete portrayal of the death of Jesus Christ—the loaf split in two, symbolizing his broken body; the cup of the fruit of the vine, representing his shed blood—and their participation in his blood and body (1 Cor 10:16). As the church administers the Lord’s Supper, it proclaims “the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26)—not a verbal proclamation, but an enacted portrayal of the gospel. The mighty work of Christ on behalf of sinners is visibly depicted through the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, a very physical act.¹⁴

Worship, then, involves bodily participation as Christians physically express their praise, confess their sins, plead for divine mercy, and exalt in

God’s blessings, which are also tangibly exhibited by the concrete, tangible rites of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Unsurprisingly, then, Paul urges Christians “by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1).

THE SUFFERING AND HEALING OF THE BODY

Human embodiment is a relatively short-lived existence, as the curse of death due to sin is meted out on all human beings (Rom 5:12; 3:23). Even before this end point is reached, as the human body ages, it wears down, provoking physical suffering. Oftentimes, service for the Lord entails great physical suffering as well (2 Cor 4:7-18). Scripture presents suffering both as necessary, because of living in a fallen world, as well as tragic, because suffering is not the way it is supposed to be. At the same time, the lessons and character-building that Christians can learn and experience from it are very beneficial (Rom 5:1-5; Jas 1:2-4). Indeed, Paul emphasizes the proper perspective on trials and afflictions of all types, including physical suffering: “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:16-18). Christians are to view trouble and heartache as “light momentary affliction.” This attitude is not a denial of the reality of suffering; afflictions are real, not illusory. But compared to what is to come—the glory of a future existence with Christ—the present, earthly troubles are relatively light and of brief duration. Indeed, a right estimation of the true worth of what is to come, and a resolute focus on that unseen reality, will help Christians to persevere in the midst of suffering. Though the eternal treasure that is in heaven is now hidden, though the expected glorious existence is now invisible,

that does not make the future reality any less real. Christians who suffer are to wait patiently for the great hope that one day will be revealed.

Such an attitude of hope stands in stark contrast to society's selfish insistence on happiness and a pain-free existence. Certainly, some Christians may be blessed with little affliction and pain, but their attitude should be one of thanksgiving, not of entitlement. Indeed, they should hold such blessings loosely in their hands, acknowledging them as privileges that they can live without, if God so wills (Phil 4:11-13; 1 Tim 6:6-8). To hold on to them tight-fistedly, demanding them as rights, may result in such blessings becoming spiritual curses. Tragically, Christians can too easily become lukewarm, compromising their faith and settling for something less than wholehearted service for Christ and his cause. The pursuit of happiness and ease, as the world defines such things, may cloud the vision and muffle the call of God to suffer for Christ's sake (Phil 1:29).

Relief from suffering, including physical affliction, is also possible, if the Lord so wills. In his instructions to the church, James offers, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (Jas 5:13-15).¹⁵ Sick members of the church are to turn to God for endurance and help during suffering, and God has given the responsibility to pray for them to the elders. They anoint the sick person with oil, consecrating him to the Lord and marking him out for God's particular attention and blessing.¹⁶ While anointing the sick person, the elders pray over him (quite commonly, they lay their hands on the sick person),¹⁷ believing that the Lord can heal him and beseeching the Lord that he will grant such healing.¹⁸

Several misconceptions concerning this practice need to be addressed: First, the promise of healing is not absolute; if it were, no one for whom

the elders pray would ever die. At the same time, the elders and the sick person should expect healing to take place. Their prayer and anointing "in the name of the Lord" should reflect that confidence. Second, failure to obtain healing cannot simply be attributed to a lack of faith. Certainly, the elders are to pray for the sick person with the expectation of God's intervention to heal; they pray believing that the Lord can heal and pleading that the Lord will indeed heal the sick person. Such prayer, however, is always cognizant of divine sovereignty. Earlier, James addresses this matter in his discussion of human planning, when he urges Christians not to purpose arrogantly as if their intention alone decides what will take place. Rather, they are to acknowledge, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that" (Jas 4:13-16). This same attitude must characterize praying for the sick: "If the Lord wills" this person will be healed, and it is for healing that the elders pray. But such healing may not be the Lord's will; in that case, the prayer for healing reflects the proper desire—both that of God and the church—for life rather than death, but ultimately yields to God's sovereign good purpose. Third, not all sickness is caused by personal sin, but a particular case of sickness may be the result of such sin.¹⁹ In conversation with the sick person before the time of anointing and prayer, the elders should ascertain if sin has been involved and could therefore be responsible for this illness. If it is the case, they should encourage the person to confess that sin or those sins; after the confession, the elders should assure the person that he is forgiven. At this point (as well as if the sickness is not attached to personal sin) the elders should proceed with the anointing and prayer. In this way, relief from suffering may be obtained through praying for the healing of the sick.

DEATH OF THE BODY

Eventually, of course, even this biblical prescription for the healing of physical suffering is unfruitful. Indeed, though the focus of a theology of human embodiment has thus far been on life in

the body, one of the great inevitabilities of life is death. Ecclesiastes describes the inescapable finality of death (Eccl 9:2-3), speaking of it in terms of an appointment that all people have (Eccl 3:1-2). Specifically, “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb 9:27). This destiny is sealed for all people because of the solidarity of the human race with Adam and his sin (1 Cor 15:21-122; Rom 5:12). As a divine judgment upon sin, death affects not only the head of humanity but all those represented by him as well. Thus, death inevitably comes to all human beings.²⁰

While Scripture addresses several kinds of death—physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death—for the purpose of our discussion I will limit comments to the first of these. Scripture presents physical death as the cessation of the functioning of the material aspect of human nature. The body ceases its physiological activity, and the life principle that energized the body is withdrawn from it. Thus Solomon, picking up on the narrative of Gen 2:7, comments on the death of a living being: “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Eccl 12:7; cf. Gen 3:19).²¹ Similarly, James comments that the body without this spirit, or life principle, is dead (Jas 2:26). Another important component of death has to do with the relationship between this material aspect, the body, and immaterial aspect of human nature, the soul (or the spirit). Jesus warns, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28). He implies that the immaterial aspect survives the death of the body. Thus, at physical death, a temporary separation of the body and the soul occurs. The body is sloughed off, returning to dust from which it was derived, while the soul continues in a conscious state of existence (2 Cor 5:1-9). Death, therefore, is not the end of all existence, but the end of existence in this earthly state.²²

In the medieval church, people were fascinated with *ars moriendi*, or the art of dying. Constructing

a biblical art of dying, we affirm: (1) Death is the gateway between the current earthly existence and eternal existence of either blessedness in the presence of the Lord or of misery and torment away from that blessed presence (Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:5-12). (2) This gateway of death is unnatural, the result of sin and not part of the created human order. There is no hint in Scripture that God created Adam and Eve with the eventuality of death as the natural result of the aging process of their bodies. Rather, death was introduced into the human realm as a punishment for sin (Gen 3:19; Rom 5:12). The experience of death, therefore, is unnatural, even if it is universal. (3) Christians should view their own death as a homecoming, leaving their earthly body and going home to be with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). Death, then, as the passage into their future life, is “gain” and means departing this life as so to “be with Christ,” which is “far better” (Phil 1:21, 23). Christians do not need to fear death, because the evil one who holds everyone in fear of death has been defeated by Christ’s death and resurrection (Heb 2:14-18). (4) While grieving deeply over the death of other believers (e.g., Acts 8:2; 20:37-38; Phil 2:27), Christians should also rejoice with hope (1 Thess 4:13), knowing that these Christ-followers are now in the presence of Christ experiencing his blessings, comfort, and rest (Rev 14:13). (5) Such anticipation is not the case with the death of those who did not embrace Jesus Christ. Though Christians may eulogize them at their funeral, giving thanks for their good character and deeds, and though Christians may hope that they repented of their sins and trusted Christ on their deathbed, the sorrow that is experienced “is not mingled with the joy of assurance that they have gone to be with the Lord forever.”²³ (6) A steadfast hope is nurtured for the complete defeat and disappearance of death, a future reality that will one day be realized through Jesus Christ. Then the church redeemed by its Lord will be able to cry (1 Cor 15:54-55):

Death is swallowed up in victory.
O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?

THE FUTURE OF THE BODY

This cry of exultation will accompany the return of Jesus Christ, which will result in major changes for those who have already died and for those who are alive at his second coming. Paul describes this event and its mysterious corollaries:

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality (1 Cor 15:50-53).

For those who have died as Christ-followers, who exist as disembodied beings in heaven with the Lord (2 Cor 5:1-9), the return of Christ will result in the resurrection of their bodies. They will be re-embodied with glorious, new bodies. For those who are still alive at the second advent, who are embodied Christ-followers on earth at that time, the return of Christ will result in their bodies being instantaneously changed into glorified bodies. In both cases, these resurrected and glorified bodies will be imperishable, glorious, powerful, and dominated by the Spirit (1 Cor 15:42-44; Phil 3:20-21; Rom 8:11). It is important to recognize that for the dead in Christ, his return is the point at which their future embodiment commences (and continues for all eternity).²⁴

Depending on one's eschatology (Rev 20:1-6), the return of Christ and the resurrection of Christians will be followed (1) by the immediate renewal of the entire creation, issuing in the new heavens and new earth (the amillennial and post-millennial positions), or (2) by a thousand year

earthly reign of Christ in the millennial kingdom that, at its conclusion, will give way to the renewal of the entire creation, issuing in the new heavens and new earth (the historic premillennial and dispensational premillennial positions). In either case, embodiment is the future hope and blessing for human beings.

Thus, as fallen and sinful, human beings are called to salvation through Christ, and they are not just "souls to be saved;" the human body is included in this divine work. Indeed, "the Lord is for the body" (1 Cor 6:13) in that his completed work of salvation will include bodily resurrection. Indeed, against the prevailing view held by many Christians, death resulting in disembodied existence in the presence of the Lord is not their ultimate hope. Rather, the resurrection and glorification of the body at his second advent, leading to embodied existence in (the millennial kingdom and) the new heavens and the new earth, is their ultimate hope (Rom 8:18-25; 2 Pet 3:8-13; Rev 21-22).

CONCLUSION: HUMAN EMBODIMENT

As divine image bearers created for embodied existence both now and in eternity, we do well to live our human embodiment cognizant of the rich instruction given in Scripture and here developed in a brief article. Whether we are confronting questions from people experiencing physical problems, addressing the uniqueness of human genderedness and sexuality, struggling personally with gluttony or sloth, selecting clothes to wear, expressing our worship through physical acts, praying for the sick, or pondering the mystery of the life to come, Scripture provides abundant teaching that corrects wrongful attitudes toward the body and underscores the wonderful reality of human embodiment.

ENDNOTE

¹Regrettably, the church has developed its neglect or rejection of this embodied reality because of being negatively influenced by Platonic philosophy. Plato

maintained that the human soul or spirit, being of divine origin, is inherently good, while the human body, being of earthly origin, is inherently bad. Salvation, therefore, consisted of the spirit's escape from the body, facilitated by focusing on spiritual rather than bodily matters. This philosophy infiltrated the church and resulted in some Christians considering the body and its physical appetites to be a hindrance to spiritual maturity and even the root of human sinfulness. As a result, monastic movements arose that denied legitimate, physically pleasing activities such as eating and drinking certain things, sleeping and resting comfortably, and engaging in sexual intercourse. At the same time, the church insisted on the goodness of the human body, appealing to God's creation of the physical world, the incarnation of Jesus Christ (which included the Son of God taking on a human body), and the future resurrection of the body. This article is a counter attack against the prevailing Platonic philosophy and its denigration of human embodiment.

² Much of the following is an expansion of a forthcoming article of mine: Gregg R. Allison, "The Human Body," *The Dictionary of Everyday Theology* (ed. Bruce Demarest; Colorado Springs: NavPress, forthcoming, 2010). For further reading, see: Mary Timothy Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (Braintree, MA: The Pope John Center, 1985); John Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (2d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); John A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM, 1952); Robert H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms: A Study in Their Use in Conflict Settings* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971); James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

³ Though Christian interpreters of Scripture have traditionally understood "the breath of life" to refer to the spirit (Hebrew *ruach*) or immaterial aspect of

human beings (with others understanding the last phrase "and the man became a living soul" [Hebrew *nephesh*] to refer to the soul, another element of the immaterial aspect), this is not my position. First, "the breath of life" is a property that is shared by all living creatures (Gen 1:30), and it is this energizing principle that is given at conception and withdrawn at death (Gen 7:22; Eccl 12:7). Second, the last phrase of Gen 2:7 explains "the man became a living being" and does not indicate that to his immaterial spirit was added an immaterial soul. Rather, the material entity formed by God, the lifeless "lump of clay" (Luther), was enlivened by the vitalizing principle, and it thus became a living person. If a complaint is registered that this interpretation demeans man's existence by relegating him to the same level as all other living creatures, it should be noted that the text specifies that God himself breathed this breath of life into the man's nostrils, something that is not said of any of the other creatures. This personal impartation of the energizing principle to the man distinguishes him from, and elevates him above, all other creatures.

⁴ According to Clines, "The body cannot be left out of the meaning of the image; man is a totality, and his 'solid flesh' is as much the image of God as his spiritual capacity, creativeness, or personality, since none of these 'higher' aspects of the human being can exist in isolation from the body. The body is not a mere dwelling-place for the soul, nor is it the prison-house of the soul. In so far as man is a body and a bodiless man is not man, the body is the image of God; for the man in the image of God. Man is the flesh-and-blood image of the invisible God. D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 86.

⁵ Frederica Matthews-Green, "The Subject Was Noses: What happens when academics discover that we have bodies," *Books and Culture* (January/February 1997): 14-16.

⁶ Divine creation of the body has important implications in the ethical realm. Both abortion at the beginning of human existence, and euthanasia/physician-assisted suicide at the end, are ruled out. God and God alone is the Creator of human life, and he and he alone decides when that life is over. His

human creatures do not possess this divine prerogative and may not take human existence into their own hands. Additionally, embryonic stem cell research certainly resulting in the destruction of fertilized eggs, and experimentation to develop human cloning that similarly results in the destruction of human life, are wrong. Also, genetic engineering that feeds human pride and greed for the creation of perfect children, and transhumanist experimentation that fuels human autonomy in the development of super-human beings or cyborgs (man-machine complexes), are evil.

⁷This imperative is especially directed at the church, which Paul portrays metaphorically as a family: “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim 5:1-2). Such family relationships assume men and women in the church know and love one another deeply. An intriguing question that is raised is how close should be the relationships between men and women who are not married to each other. Immediate attention is drawn to the many pitfalls such cross-gender relationships present: (1) Occasions for sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:12-20) that, when actualized, perpetuate the terrible reputation (rightly) earned by churches because of sexual scandals. (2) The weakening and/or destruction of the existing marriage(s), including (a) non-sexual jealousy (the friends’ spouses are jealous of the relationship), (b) non-sexual rivalry (e.g., the male friend’s wife is worried that her husband finds the other woman easier to talk to or her personality more captivating), and (c) exacerbation of already existing problems in an already weak marriage. (3) Opportunities for lust, fantasies, inappropriate closeness, etc. (4) The appearance of evil. At the same time, benefits accrue and opportunities are created from such cross-gender relationships: (1) Opportunities to obey the commands to love one another (John 13:34; 1 John 3:11) and to treat one another as brothers and sisters with all purity (1 Tim 5:1-2). (2) Occasions to gain the other gender’s perspective on life, issues, ministry, and the like, with the benefit of identifying over-

sights and correcting potential missteps before they are taken. (3) Opportunities to be built up and grow through enriching experiences of others’ gifts, character, faith, love, and the like. As Gilbert Meilander noted, “friendship between the sexes may take us not out of ourselves but beyond ourselves and may make us more whole, balanced and sane than we could otherwise be.” (4) Pastors are responsible to teach, disciple, and equip the women members, and even if they delegate most or all of those responsibilities to women leaders, they as pastors are still ultimately responsible for instructing and building up those key women. Painfully aware, then, of the potential pitfalls, but encouraged also by the opportunities, men and women should take precautions in cross-gender relationships to help prevent a fall into sin. These precautions include: (1) Commitment to be faithful to one’s spouse. (2) Accountability to others (to expose one’s self-deception, fiction-making, dangerous desires, etc.) (3) Bringing one’s spouse into the relationship (at the minimum, the spouse should know about meetings and conversations with the friend). (4) Being concerned for the other’s spouse’s perspective, feelings, etc. and for the health of the friend’s marriage. (5) Being careful of physical expressions (e.g., don’t go beyond those gestures appropriate to express toward one’s sibling, or beyond those to which the spouses would object if they knew of such expressions). (6) Pray for continued purity. (7) Focus on friendship and not romance, on relationship and not intimacy. Important to recall in this discussion is that such relationships are part of life, as a section of a Madeleine L’Engle poem expresses:

We may not love in emptiness;
We married in a peopled place;
The vows we made enrich and bless
The smile on every stranger’s face.

The above ideas are expressed in or generated by an important article: Caroline J. Simon, “Can Men and Women Be Friends?” *The Christian Century*, 19 Feb 1997, 188-94. The Meilander citation is on p. 188.

⁸A second aspect of this mandate—“subdue it [the

earth] and have dominion”—is vocation. All men and women, therefore, are to contribute to what could be called “civilization building.” Genesis 4 narrates some specific examples of this aspect of the cultural mandate being fulfilled, as Enoch built a city (v. 17), some dwelt in tents and had livestock (v. 20), artists played the lyre and pipe (v. 21), and Tubal-cain was “the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron” (v. 22).

⁹Marital rape, for example, is precluded.

¹⁰Jeff Olson, *Once a Deadly Sin: A Contemporary Assessment of the Sin of Gluttony* (unpublished Th.M. thesis, Western Seminary, 2000), 22.

¹¹Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 193.

¹²In a 2007 study of Americans’ views on sin, only thirty-five percent of Americans consider “not taking proper care of your body” to be a sin. Ellison Research, cited in *The Rainer Research Report* (March, 2008). This tragic attitude must be overcome if sanctification is to be pursued as it is holistically intended to be followed.

¹³In Temple’s words, “Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose.” William Temple, *Readings in St John’s Gospel* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Barlow Co., 1985 reprint of 1939 edition), 67.

¹⁴Another important discussion on this topic is how the physical environment in which worship takes place either enhances or detracts from that worship. I will treat this idea in a forthcoming book on the doctrine of the church.

¹⁵Excellent commentaries on this passage include: Douglas J. Moo, *James* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New Interna-*

tional Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1995).

¹⁶I understand the anointing with oil to be symbolic, not medicinal or sacramental. The medicinal interpretation takes the oil to be a balm that brings about the healing. Certainly, some types of olive oil contain medicinal qualities. For example, oleocanthal, a compound found in some brands of olive oil, acts as an anti-inflammatory agent, much like ibuprofen. However, the prescription to anoint all sick people with oil would seem to imply that the oil is capable of healing all kinds of sickness; the medical facts, however, betray this notion. Moreover, the emphasis of James’s imperative is on the prayer of faith, which would seem to be superfluous if the oil were the curative power at work. Furthermore, why would a medicinal cure need to be administered by the elders of the church? The sacramental interpretation is best seen in the Roman Catholic “sacrament of the anointing of the sick” (also called “last rites” and “extreme unction”). At the heart of this practice is the grace of God that is conveyed by the administration of the sacrament, grace that may restore the sick person to health or that may prepare the person for death. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, part 2, article 5, sections 1499-1532. A discussion of the Roman Catholic theology of the sacraments is beyond the scope of this article (though I intend to address it in a forthcoming book: *Intrigue and Critique: An Evangelical Assessment of Roman Catholic Theology and Practice* [Wheaton: Crossway, forthcoming]). Suffice it to say that this passage in James does not support a sacramental interpretation. The symbolic interpretation, which I favor, finds support in the practice of anointing people with oil as a sign of dedication to God for a specific purpose or task. As for the type of oil to be used, James does not specify; given the (agri)cultural context of the letter, olive oil was most likely used. When I have been involved in this elder responsibility, one of our men took a small amount of olive oil from a small bottle used exclusively for this ministry and marked

the sign of a cross on the sick person's forehead.

¹⁷The practice of praying for and/or consecrating people with the laying on of hands finds biblical support: Mark 10:16; Acts 8:18; 9:17; 1 Tim 5:22; 2 Tim 1:16; Heb 6:2.

¹⁸According to James, all prayer is to be offered in faith (Jas 1:5-8). But his instructions both in 1:5-8 and 5:15 underscore the possibility of falling short in this matter. So the elders must engage in their responsibility believing God for healing. It has been my practice to ask elders who do not or cannot believe that God may heal through our prayer for the sick to dismiss themselves from the time of prayer and simply observe what takes place. For some, it is a stretch to pray in faith for healing, so to be in obedience to James's instructions, I ask them to remove themselves from the activity of praying. I also assure them that their self-dismissal is of no embarrassment to them; rather, it gives them an opportunity to observe the practice in which, on another occasion when they can pray in faith, they may participate.

¹⁹The expression "if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (v. 15) is a third class conditional; there is uncertainty with respect to the commission of sin. One should not assume, therefore, that the person is sick because of personal sin.

²⁰Interestingly, Scripture encourages people to face death as a key to life: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.... The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth" (Eccl 7:2, 4). This call to contemplate death is not an injunction to engage in morbid introspection for long periods of time. But it does encourage personal examination. A measured reflection on the inevitability of death, avoiding undue preoccupation with and morbid attachment to it, should change the way people live.

²¹See the earlier discussion of Gen 2:7.

²²To this biblical discussion of death could be added an explanation of death from a physiological point of view, a discussion that involves several definitions of death, including whole brain death and higher brain

death (or neocortical death). Such discussion will have to be postponed for another time. See: President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, *Defining Death: A Report on the Medical, Legal and Ethical Issues in the Determination of Death* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981); Robert M. Veatch, *Death, Dying, and the Biological Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University, 1976); B. Holly Vautier, "Definition of Death," in *Dignity and Dying: A Christian Appraisal* (ed. John F. Kilner, Arlene B. Miller, and Edmund D. Pellegrino; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 96-104; Thomas A. Shannon, *An Introduction to Bioethics* (3d ed., rev. and updated; New York: Paulist, 1997), 77-78; Sherman B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

²³Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 815.

²⁴The same experience of a future resurrection is coming for non-believers, though when their resurrection will take place is a matter of debate depending on one's eschatological perspective.