An Argument for "Conditional Unity" of the Human Body and Soul and How a Christian Should Apply This Principle to Their Life

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Haylee Holeman

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I. Introduction

Humanity has never existed outside of the physical body. Every person on earth currently exists within the confines of a physical body, and every human in the future will exist within a physical body. The body is a critical component of the human life to the point that for Jesus Himself to be the sacrifice which reconciled humanity to God, He had to become incarnate and take on a human body.¹

If the physical body is critical to the human experience, it is logical to conclude that God calls people to care for their bodies. Some of the dualistic mindset argue that the body is not good and is inferior to the soul. Ancient philosophers such as Socrates and Plato fell into this mindset, claiming that the body is more like a prison for the soul and death sets the soul free.² Many modern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism follow this worldview as well. They go so far as to state that the physical body and all material realities are illusions, and the afterlife is an eternal bodiless existence.³

In the Christian worldview, this idea of the body and soul being separate is called "Dichotomism."⁴ Often, those of this perspective are more liberal in their theology, arguing that a person's personhood is defined by their soul and not their body, meaning the body is not an essential part of human nature.⁵ These theologians use verses which speak about a

¹Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers: Saint Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2021), 58.

² John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, Biblical Doctrine: *A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 416.

³ Ibid, 417.

⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 478.
⁵ Ibid, 479.

"troubled spirit" or "giving up the soul" to support their beliefs.⁶ The opposite end of the spectrum from Dichotomism is called Monalism. This viewpoint states that body and soul are inseparable because both make up the full human experience.⁷

However, the Bible clearly teaches against both the Dichotomistic and the Monalistic worldviews, though it still highlights the importance of the physical body. Erickson argues for a viewpoint called "Conditional Unity," which seeks to bring compromise between Dichotomism and Monalism.⁸ He defines conditional unity as "the normal state of a human is as an embodied, unitary being."⁹ Humans have a body on earth, but they abandon these bodies after death in order to live immaterially in heaven until the Second Coming of Christ. When Christ returns, humans will once again assume a physical body, but this body will be new and better than their old one.¹⁰ This viewpoint draws the two extremes together and balances them to show that while the soul is important, the human experience cannot be separated from its physical aspects.

Therefore, because the physical body is vital to the human experience, it is important for people to care for their bodies. The church spends copious amounts of time focusing on spiritual health and growth, and while this is important and cannot be neglected, the physical body must be attended to with the same importance.¹¹ Followers of Christ must take this

- ⁸ Ibid, 492.
- ⁹ Ibid, 491.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 493.

⁶ Example: Genesis 41:8 and Genesis 35:18

⁷ Erickson, 481.

charge seriously, and the objective of this paper is to provide Biblical reasoning and practical ways for Christians to care for their bodies in relation to food and drink, exercise, and rest.

II. Biblical Support for the Importance of the Body

The Bible is riddled with commands and insights concerning the human body. From Genesis to Revelation, the physical body plays a key role in the experience of humanity. God creates humanity to dwell in a physical body, saves people through Jesus' humbling himself into a physical body, declares the human body to be a temple of the Holy Spirit, and redeems people into a glorified body. This paper will briefly describe each of these four reasons for why the body is important because to fully understand why people should care for their physical bodies, they must recognize why their body is important in the first place.

God Creates Humanity to Dwell in a Physical Body

The book of Genesis describes the creation accounts of humans both in chapters 1 and 2. God created the entire universe, humanity included, with a purpose and plan in mind, and he made no mistakes in His creation. God's creation of man was the pinnacle of His work because He created them in His image and gave them responsibilities unlike the other beings which He created.¹² In His original Creation, God gave Adam and Eve physical bodies because that was His plan from the very beginning. Ryan Peterson argues that the Imago Dei includes not only their souls and minds but their physical bodies as well.¹³ When God created humanity, He created them with specific attributes which are necessary to reflect His image, and this includes His creation of them as physical beings.¹⁴

¹² John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), "Summary Overview of Genesis 1:1-2:3," Google Books.

¹³ Ryan S. Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 2, Google Books.

Thomas Aquinas dives deep into the theology of the Imago Dei in his Summa Theologica. He demonstrates that while man there exists imperfection in how humanity reflects God's image, the Imago Dei still resides within humanity. Christ, through His incarnation, perfectly reflected the Imago Dei because the rest of humanity could not.¹⁵ However, he contradicts Peterson's argument, writing that the Imago Dei does not include the physical body, but only the mind because even animals possess physical bodies but they do not possess rationality.¹⁶ This perspective is called the "structural image" of the Imago Dei, and proponents of this viewpoint focus on humanity's ability to reason, which is seemingly unique from other creatures.¹⁷

The physical body is an important part of humanity that cannot be dismissed as Aquinas and other proponents of the "structural image" viewpoint do. The physical side of things is inseparable from the human experience because since the creation of the first man and woman, God has intentionally created them to possess physical bodies. Genesis 1:26-28 does not make a distinction between the body and the mind, but rather states that the whole human, body and all, is created in the image of God.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid, 632.

¹⁸ Cortez, 21.

¹⁴ Ibid, 17.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, The *Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Burns and Oates & Washbourne, 1912), 626.

¹⁷ Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 18.

God Saves People by Humbling Himself into a Physical Body

Not only is the physical body important because God created them, but it is also important within the realm of soteriology. In the books of Hebrews, the author writes:

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is,

the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of

Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."¹⁹

Peterson uses these verses as well as arguments from St. Athanasius to highlight the importance of the incarnation in the salvation of humanity. He points out that Jesus took on a physical body because in order to be the sacrifice that humanity needed, Jesus had to become incarnate.²⁰ From His virgin birth to His death, Jesus experienced the fullness of humanity, including the physical side.²¹

Jesus could not redeem that which He did not become, and the author of Hebrews says this clearly when it states that Jesus had to make Himself like his brothers in every respect in order to be the propitiation needed for humanity's redemption. He could not have come in

¹⁹ Hebrews 2:14-18. ESV.

²⁰ Peterson, 157.

²¹ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010), 219, Google Books.

any other form, so any heresies such as Docetism, which states that because Jesus was fully divine He could not have also been fully human, are immediately discredited by the Bible.²²

Paul also writes about the necessity of Jesus' incarnation in Galatians chapter 4: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the

law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. " In these verses, Paul highlights not only Jesus' incarnation, but the fact that He had to be born under the Law as well. Jesus, living fully as a human, kept the Law perfectly, which no other person on earth has ever done. Because He was human and because He was perfect, Jesus was able to be the sacrifice that the rest of humanity needed to find reconciliation with God.²³ Because of Christ's incarnation, the work of redemption was accomplished and humanity can now become adopted as sons and daughters of God.²⁴

Because the incarnation was an essential part of the salvation of sinful humanity, one cannot assume that the physical body is unimportant to a person's life. If the only way for Christ to redeem people was to become like them, and that included taking on their physical form, the logical conclusion to for Believers is that their body is important and they must treat it as such. However, if this is not enough to prove the importance of the physical body, Paul gives the church another reason why the body is important in 1 Corinthians–the body is a temple of God Himself.

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²⁴ Ibid, 34.

²² ZA Blog, "What is Docetism?" Zondervan Academic, last modified November 1, 2018, https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/docetism

²³ Robert A. Person, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 33, Google Books.

God Declares the Human Body to belong to Him as a Temple of the Holy Spirit

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth to encourage unity and address certain issues, especially concerning sins of sexual immorality, within the church.²⁵ In chapter 6 specifically, Paul writes against the Corinthians' belief that "all things are lawful for [them]" and points out that actually, because they follow Christ they must restrain from desires of the flesh such as food and sex.²⁶

Paul does not simply give them commands, however. He explains why it is important for Christians to care about their bodies in chapter 6 verses 13 and 19-20. He writes, "The body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" and "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."²⁷ In these verses, Paul is specifically addressing sexual immorality within the church, but he points out some important concepts for the Christian to understand.

The first is that every person's body is not their own, but the Lord's. God created each person and their body, and because He is the Creator, every person belongs to Him. Therefore, what a person does with their body matters, and that includes how a person cares for their physical health. The human being is one unit, including the body, mind, and soul, and therefore a Christian must care for their bodies and live in their bodies as though they belong to an all-powerful and good God, because they do.²⁸

- ²⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:12, ESV.
- ²⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:13, 19-20. ESV.
- ²⁸ Preban Vang, 85.

²⁵ Preban Vang, *1 Corinthians*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 9.

Not only does a person's body belong to God as its Creator, but Paul tells us that the body is actually a temple for God Himself, the Holy Spirit. The body is not morally irrelevant, but in contrast it is the place where God dwells.²⁹ In the Old Testament, King Solomon built a magnificent temple for God, which was meant as a "house of prayer for all nations."³⁰ This temple was a place of worship which replaced the mobile tabernacle of the Exodus. It represented God's presence and was a place of worship for all people who desired to know God.³¹ In the book of 1 Corinthians, when Paul writes that the human body now serves as that temple, this was a radical idea because the temple was a sacred place of worship. Jesus came and flipped everything on its head. Rather than people having to travel to one location, one temple in Jerusalem to worship, the people of God could take His message to everyone because He dwells within them!³²

This is an amazing reality, and one that Christians today often take for granted. This truth has many implications for how Christians are to live their lives and treat their bodies. Because the Holy Spirit dwells within followers of Christ, their bodies are sacred and should be cared for with respect just as someone in the Old Testament would care for Solomon's temple. If a Christian is to be the temple of the Holy Spirit, it is important to care for that temple, not only in the aspect of sexual immorality as Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians, but also in the way in which one cares for their physical health. If the body is the Holy Spirit's temple, the church must care

³² Ibid.

²⁹ Preban Vang, 87.

³⁰ Isaiah 56:7, ESV.

³¹Joe Slunaker, "Yall are the Temple of God," The Bible Project, April 2020, https://bibleproject.com/blog/temple-of-god/

for that temple in all aspects of their lives, including in areas such as food, exercise, and rest. Each of these elements are important for life and maintaining a person's body, their temple.

God Redeems People into a Glorified Body

Not only does the Holy Spirit dwell within the bodies of Christians today, but God promises to redeem the bodies of His followers when Jesus comes again. Revelation 20:4 refers to the bodily resurrection of Followers of Christ. When they rise again, they will receive their reward from Christ.³³ Because there will be a bodily resurrection, the dichotomist worldview must be incorrect. Why would there need to be a bodily resurrection if the body is unimportant to the human experience?

Paul writes in Romans 8, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."³⁴ In Philippians 3, he also writes, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself."³⁵ In both of these passages, Paul is referencing a future, bodily resurrection which will occur for believers in Christ's second coming. He writes that God will revive the physical bodies of Believers, but that they will live in a more glorified state. Their bodies will be perfected and without flaw, so while they will have their physical bodies, they will be renewed and better.³⁶

³³ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John Volume 2*, The Daily Bible Study Series (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1978), 192.

³⁴ Romans 8:11, ESV.

³⁵ Philippians 3:20-21, ESV.

³⁶ Erickson, 1098.

This body will also maintain some resemblance to the original, pre-resurrection body, but it will be free of imperfection and flaws, having transformed into a new reality.³⁷

If there will one day be a bodily resurrection for believers, however, what does that mean for the Church? How should Christians respond to this truth? First, Christians must have hope that this world's imperfections, including bodily ailments and struggles, will come to an end one day.³⁸ Second, the Christian must realize that the body and soul go together to complete humanity. As stated previously in the "Conditional Unity" model, humanity needs both the soul and the body, meaning neither one can be neglected. Growth of the soul while neglecting the body brings about imbalance, and care for the body while neglecting the soul is damaging as well.

In the New Heaven and New Earth, Christ will redeem the human body. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul rebukes the church of Corinth for considering their lives on earth futile and their bodies insignificant. He combats the common Corinthian phrase, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die," calling them foolish.³⁹ He tells them of the resurrection and encourages them that their current bodies will go from "perishable" to "unperishable," and their "mortal [bodies] must put on immortality."⁴⁰ Therefore, to waste their lives by striving for physical pleasure and neglecting their health in order to "eat and drink and be merry" is to sin. God cares enough about the human body to resurrect them when He comes again, so Christians especially must care for their bodies as well.

- ³⁸ Ibid, 1104.
- ³⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:32, ESV.
- ⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:51-53.

³⁷ Ibid, 1100.

III. Practical Application

As has been demonstrated, the physical body is important in the life of the Christian. It cannot be neglected or seen as inferior because God Himself created the physical body to portray His image and will resurrect His Church physically with His Second coming. Not only that, but the body of a Christian is the dwelling place for the Holy Spirit, God Himself, and in order for Jesus to bring salvation to humanity, it was necessary for Him to put on a human body because He had to experience all facets of what it means to be human in order to redeem them.

And yet, this paper is meant to address the ethics of physical health in the life of the Christian. In order to present methods of maintaining physical health, however, it was necessary to explain the reason why caring for the body is so important for the Christian. If the body does not matter, then health does not matter. However, if the body is as important as this paper argues it is, then maintaining physical health is a matter of worship and good stewardship of God's creation.

With all of that in mind, this section will provide practical steps which Christians can use to maintain their physical health in the areas of food and drink, exercise, and rest. None of these areas should be neglected, though every individual should implement the elements in ways which fit into their lives.

Food and Drink

In the American culture, obesity has risen to new levels and plagues both those outside and within the church.⁴¹ The particular sin of gluttony is one which churches often avoid, and in the modern culture of celebrating all body images, the sin of gluttony is often glorified.

⁴¹ David Instone-Brewer, *Moral Questions of the Bible: Timeless Truth in a Changing World* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2019), 185.

However, in the New Testament, gluttony is listed alongside the sins of sexual immorality and idolatry because it is a type of greed.⁴² At its root, gluttony is overindulgence, consuming more than one needs and possibly leading one to sin in other ways as well.⁴³

A healthy relationship to food and drink is vital to the Christian witness in the world. As mentioned earlier in this paper, God created the human body and calls people to care for themselves as His creation. Food and drink are vital components to human survival, but one must not let themselves be controlled by them. In fact, God sometimes calls people to deprive themselves of these physical needs in order to grow closer to Him through fasting. When people fast, they deprive themselves of their physical needs in order to increase their dependence on God.⁴⁴ Fasting is one way to implement self-control regarding food and drink into the Christian life, but it is not necessarily to be a regular practice. However, the following tips are suggestions for maintaining a healthy relationship to food and drink from Rochelle Melander and Harold Eppley:⁴⁵

- 1. Maintain a regular food diary
- 2. Drink water regularly
- 3. Read the labels of the things of grocery store purchases
- 4. When possible, cook at home instead of eating out

⁴⁵ Rochelle Melander and Harold Eppley, *The Spiritual Leader's Guide to Self-Care* (Washington DC: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 117-118.

⁴² 1 Corinthians 5:10-11.

⁴³ Instone-Brewer, 188.

⁴⁴ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 192.

Though this list is not exhaustive, it gives the Christian a start to maintaining a healthy relationship with food and drink.

On the other hand, however, food and drink should not be something unenjoyable for the Christian. While consumption should not control Christians, God does tell us to enjoy His provisions. God wants people to enjoy His blessings, and that includes food and drink.⁴⁶ The Christian must not see food as a burden, but the Christian must also avoid gluttony and idolization of consumption. Food and drink are blessings from God, but they are not God Himself.

Exercise

Physical health does not simply consist of food and drink. Exercise is also something a Christian must do in order to care for themselves if they are able. For ministers in particular, finding time in their busy schedule to exercise can be particularly difficult. However, this does not negate its importance.

The Bible does not specifically mention physical exercise in the same way that it mentions food and rest. However, the Christian can understand through the many instances in which the Bible discusses caring for one's body as well as through modern science which teaches the benefits of exercise, that exercise will help keep the body healthy.⁴⁷ The extent to which a person can participate in exercise varies with each person because of physical impairments or other factors outside of personal control. However, if one is able, they should exercise as much as is physically possible for them. For some people, this could mean taking a

⁴⁶ Ecclesiastes 9:7-10. ESV.

⁴⁷ Roy M. Oswald, Clergy Self-Care: *Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry* (Washington DC: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995), 148.

walk around their neighborhood a few times per week, and for some it is running a 5k or marathon. No matter one's capabilities, incorporating some sort of exercise will benefit one's overall health including: minimizing diabetic risks, improving brain health, and managing weight gain.⁴⁸

Rest

Not only are consumption and exercise important for maintaining physical health, but it is also vital for people to take a break and rest. For the American workaholic society, rest is considered unproductive or a waste of time, but the Bible teaches that rest is actually necessary for human flourishing.

Rest does not equal laziness, and the Bible teaches of a rest which comes solely from God in Hebrews chapter 4. Rest is more than simply taking a break from work, but it is referring to a type of peace that only God can provide.⁴⁹ This rest comes when Christians cease to gain salvation and God's favor by their own efforts and rely solely on Christ.⁵⁰ The worry of being "good enough" lifts away, and the Christian understands that they can have peace with God.

Leaning into this spiritual rest benefits physical health because it relieves stress, which takes a toll on the body. Stress can cause weight gain, headaches, depression, and many other physical ailments.⁵¹ While it is impossible for someone to cease worrying completely, when the Christian strives to live in the rest of God, this helps the body as well.

⁴⁸ "Benefits of Physical Activity," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed April 5, 2021. https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/pa-health/index.htm

⁴⁹ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1976), 35.

⁵⁰ Bob Deffinbaugh, "Defining Rest (Hebrews 4:1-11)," Bible.org, September 8, 2008, https://bible.org/seriespage/9-defining-rest-hebrews-41-10

IV. Conclusion

If Christians neglect to care for their physical bodies, they misuse and God's creation. They ignore one of the most vital components of their humanity and disrespect the Imago Dei. They reject the importance of Christ's incarnation by not understanding how the physical body, specifically Christ's body, plays into their salvation. In addition, they directly destroy God's temple because the Holy Spirit dwells within each follower of Christ. And finally, when a Christian does not care for their physical body, they assume that their future bodily resurrection does not matter.

While these all appear to be extreme statements, the reality of them is stark. When a Christian mistreats their body, whether through gluttony, slothfulness, overwork, bad nutrition, or any other unhealthy habit, they are rejecting God's design and plan for the human body. God bestows a physical body to each person because a person's very being is tied to that body. Human beings are not merely souls trapped in a prison of a body, as dualists would argue. Rather, they live in a "conditional unity" between the soul and body, needing both to be fully human.

Prioritizing a healthy relationship with food and drink, incorporating movement and exercise into everyday life, and finding time to rest both physically and in the peace of God is a non-negotiable aspect of the Christian life. While this may look different for each individual depending on chronic illness or other factors out of a person's control, these healthy practices must still take priority in some way within each individual Christian's life. The church cannot tell the lost world how to care for their souls when the church does not care for its body.

⁵¹"The Effects of Stress on Your Body," Healthline, last reviewed June 5, 2017, https://www.healthline.com/health/stress/effects-on-body#Central-nervous-and-endocrine-systems

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