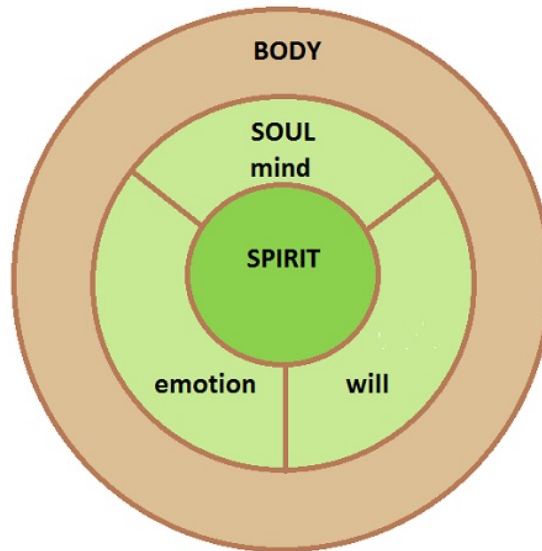


## Food For Thought Article: 'Body, Soul, Spirit.'



Now abide these three: Body, Soul, Spirit, but which do we consider to be the most important?

We spend an inordinate amount of time caring for our physical bodies and being aware of the changes they undergo as we go through the life cycle. The development of our bodies in the womb, the growth from 0-12 years, the hormonal changes of adolescence, for some the changes of pregnancy, and then, I'm afraid, the steady downhill march into middle age, the menopause, and the ever-increasing challenges of managing old bodies before finally dying!

By God's grace and wisdom, the Bible covers these events, all the way from the majestic development in the womb - 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... my frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place' (Ps. 139:14&15) - to old age - 'For there will come a time when your limbs will tremble with age, and your strong legs will become weak, and your teeth will be too few to do their work, and there will be blindness too' - and on to the inevitable end - 'as the dust returns to the earth as it was' (See Eccles. 12:1-8).

But anything we can do to delay, minimise the effects of, or even reverse this process, is welcome! So we will pay good money for preparations and lotions to keep our skin supple, fresh and wrinkle free; deodorants to keep our bodies smelling like a fragrant summer's evening; vitamin and other supplements to give us that extra power, edge, and ability to outperform and outlast others ~ like a Duracell battery that just keeps on going!

In Great Britain alone in 2020, we spent £8.7 billion on toiletries (29.5%), skin care (25.4%), fragrances (18.3%), hair care (14.3%), and colour cosmetics (12.0%).



Then of course there are all the medical services and supplies: appointments to be made and kept, investigations to be had, operations to be performed, follow-ups to check on progress. There are pills for every ailment under the sun, vaccinations, contraptions, replacements for myriad parts of our bodies, false this, that and the other, all fitted at our convenience! Lips filled, noses straightened, breasts enlarged, fat removed, teeth implanted!

Yet none of all this is able to stave off the inevitability of death - still a taboo subject in many western cultures - though in some countries 'green funerals' are becoming more popular and more talked about.



In this new environmentally friendly funeral process, known as 'human composting', or to give it its technical term, 'natural organic reduction', the body is laid in a special vessel surrounded by three cubic metres of wood chips, alfalfa and straw, in a warm, microbe and oxygen-rich environment. After 30 days in the vessel and between 2 and 6 weeks being cured and dried in a bin, you have been turned into a nutrient-rich soil, a kind of growbag I suppose, ready to enrich flower beds, trees, parkland etc. 'Earth to earth, soil to soil, in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life.'

It's a serious business. This process, apparently, saves about 1 metric ton of CO<sub>2</sub> per person, compared with cremation or conventional burial, and uses 87% less energy (See [www.recompose.life](http://www.recompose.life)).

But I digress.

Yes, we spend a lot of time and money, both in life and in death, focused on our bodily needs. Would that we gave as much attention to the other aspects of how God has created us, namely, our soul and our spirit. Alas, the temptation is to operate as if I was **only** a body and to ignore Paul's exhortation to: -

'Exercise daily in God – no spiritual flabbiness please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever' (1 Tim. 4:7b & 8 – The Message).



Moving on, Mary, the mother of Jesus, (she who was highly favoured among, not above, women), was able to differentiate between what was about to happen to her **body** involving the changes of pregnancy on the one hand, and her soul and spirit on the other. She knew she was tripartite. She said, 'My **soul** praises the Lord and my **spirit** rejoices in God my Saviour.' (Lk. 1:46&47).

In other words, sometimes we have to be able to separate out, in our experience, what is happening in our body, from what is happening in our soul, and from what is happening in our spirit.

For instance, even though we may be experiencing difficult things physically in our bodies, it can still be possible for our soul and spirit to be rejoicing in the Lord.

The apostle Paul draws attention to this when he writes, 'Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly i.e. physically, we are in the process of being disabled/wasting away, inwardly, i.e. spiritually, we are being renewed day by day' (2 Cor. 4:16). In our present bodies as we age, ongoing spiritual renewal often takes place in the context of ongoing physical deterioration.

I am not saying that our physical condition does not affect the other aspects of our being. For example, chronic pain and/or long-term illness is extremely hard to bear. I am saying though that we should not allow our physical condition to take over completely and suppress the reality and needs of our soul and spirit. We are not defined simply by our bodies but by the interconnectedness of body, soul and spirit.

Let me illustrate this with the phenomenon of hunger. Most of us know what it is to feel physical hunger and that this need and desire can only be met and satisfied with a good meal. Then, after a few hours, the physical appetite returns.



God intends our spiritual hunger to follow a similar pattern, and this need is met only through God's specific Word to us, followed by our obedience. It is God's intention that human beings 'do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.' (Deut. 8:3), and Jesus said the Blessed are those who keep on hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for they will be satisfied (Mt. 5:6).

In his Christmas address, Pope Francis said there was a 'famine of peace' across the world. There can also be 'a famine of hearing the words of the Lord' (Amos 8:11&12). The two are usually linked.

In the same way that it is possible, in terms of physical hunger, to suffer from malnutrition, so it is possible to suffer from spiritual malnutrition. This too causes people to faint, stagger and wander.

However, it is an amazing thing to discover how God feeds, satisfies and sustains us through, and by, his word. Physical food can then seem almost peripheral. Have you experienced this?

Jesus once said to his disciples, 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.' His disciples thought he was speaking about physical food but Jesus went on to tell them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work' (Jn. 4:32-34). So it is by hearing God's word, by engaging in God's work and doing God's will that we are energised and sustained in our lives and our ministry.

### **The Body (Soma).**

None of what I have written thus far should indicate a low view of the body, quite the reverse! We have been given a wonderful machine which needs to be carefully looked after. Indeed, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and members of Christ himself, bought by his blood (1 Cor. 6:19&20).

It is the atonement that gives meaning to the incarnation of Christ, the body which God prepared for him sacrificed on the Cross so that 'we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus once for all' (Heb. 10:10). What a truth that is!

And of course the physical body of Christ was unique, 'For in Christ all the fulness of the Godhead/Deity lives in bodily form' (Col. 2:9). The perfect God-Man.

I heard Cliff Richard sing a song recently where one of the lines was, 'Mary, when you kissed the face of your baby boy, did you realise you were kissing the face of God?'

The apostle Paul is also quite happy to describe the Church as the body of Christ with Christ as the Head (Eph. 4:15&16).

However, there is, as I have already indicated, a downside to **our** present bodies. It is often through them – our eyes, minds, words, desires, actions – that we experience moral and spiritual battles, weaknesses and failures.

Indeed, Paul differentiates (and he is often misunderstood here) between the negative use of the word 'sarx'/'flesh' when he is referring to our unredeemed, fallen, lower nature, as opposed to when he speaks positively of our 'flesh'/'sarx' being energised by the spirit and living according to the spirit i.e. 'we walk not according to the flesh ('kata sarka') but according to the Spirit ('kata pneuma') (Rms. 8:4).

Is your relationship with God sometimes a struggle? At times, mine can be, but I am reminded of Jacob who resisted and wrestled all night in the darkness with a man (a theophany?) before the man 'touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched' (Gen. 32:22-32). If you have had hip problems and/or a hip replacement maybe you can identify with Jacob.

But as the sun rose, Jacob was blessed, named the place Peniel which means 'face of God', and limped off to meet his brother Esau. Physical struggle and spiritual blessing can often go together.

Another downside to our present bodies is that they have a 'best before' date!

Paul describes them as perishable, weak and dishonourable; they are 'dust of the earth' bodies. As such, they are incapable of inheriting the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50). For this to happen they must be changed from being perishable to being imperishable. Because our present bodies are perishable, they die, but they will be raised imperishable; mortality gives way to immortality.

And for those who are alive on earth when Christ returns, their bodies will be 'changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye' (See 1 Cor. 15:42-58).

### **The Soul (O.T. 'nephesh'; N.T. 'psuche').**

Gen 2:7 is an important verse in understanding the Soul. 'And the Lord God formed man (his body) from the dust of the ground and breathed ('neshamah') into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul' ('nephesh').

So, Body + Breath = Living Soul

Someone once asked the question, 'Where is the soul in the body?' And the answer came, 'It's where the music is in a pipe organ!'

Elihu, one of Job's comforters, understood this well when he said, 'the breath of the Almighty gives me life', and 'if God withdrew his breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust.'

So when atheists say, 'I don't believe in God', they wouldn't be able to say that unless God was keeping them alive! All of us, whether we recognise it or not, are on God's life support system!

I also believe that the 'soul' encompasses the mind, the will and the emotions (the essential psychology of a person perhaps) and that God wants each of these three areas of functioning to come under his Lordship.

So Paul writes that he wants us to be being transformed by the renewing of our **mind** ('noos'). This will impact on our ability to test and approve what is God's good, pleasing and perfect **will** ('thelema') for us (Rms. 12:2).

The heart ('kardia') is often regarded as the **emotional** centre of our being representing the true character and experience of a person e.g. 'So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts ('kardia') will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (Jn. 16:22).

'[Let your adorning] be the hidden person of the heart ('kardias') with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious' (1 Peter 3:4).

**The Spirit (O.T. 'neshamah', 'ruach'; N.T. 'pneuma').**

These words are also translated 'wind', 'breath', so there is obviously some overlap with 'soul'. Perhaps we could say we *have* a spirit, but we *are* a soul?

Certainly, Jesus had both. As he faced the awful prospect of the Cross he said, 'Now is my soul ('psuche') troubled' (Jn. 12:27), and as he died on the Cross, he prayed, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' ('pneuma') (Lk. 23:46).

I don't know whether you have ever been with a person when they took their last breath and died; they deflate - a bit like a tyre with a puncture - as their wind, their breath, their spirit, leaves them. I will always be grateful that my mother held me when I took my first breath and I held her when she took her last. Meanwhile, outside the room in the hospital where she died, the wind was howling, a storm was blowing! I'm sure God was in the whole process.

*There is a strong relationship in the Bible between wind and breath and the Holy Spirit. This occurs: -*

1. In creation, '...and the Spirit/wind/breath ('ruach') of God moved over the waters' (Gen. 1:2).
2. In providing the power and motivation for individuals doing God's work in the O.T. e.g. Judges 11:29; 13:25
3. In bringing about the restoration to the land, and the renewal of, 'the whole house of Israel' (Ezek. 37:1-14).
4. When Jesus breathed ('emphusao') on his disciples and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (Jn. 20:22).
5. In providing the power and motivation for individuals doing God's work in the N.T., especially as it relates to mission (e.g. Acts 1:8; 2:2,4,17,18).

*We also see there is a close connection between Gods Holy Spirit and our human spirit.*

Unless we are born of [God's] Spirit ('pneumatosis'), we cannot enter the Kingdom of God (Jn. 3:5). We cannot understand the things of God unless [God's] Spirit reveals them to us. All of us have a [human] spirit, but unless we are taught by [God's] Spirit we are in the dark (1 Cor. 1:10-14).

In Rms. 8:10, Paul says that our [human] spirits ('pneuma') are alive because of [Christ's] righteousness and in verse 16 Paul says that it is the [Holy] Spirit ('pneuma') who witnesses with our spirit ('pneumati') that we are children of God.

We can see then that God wants His Spirit and ours to be intertwined. Only through Christ and by the Holy Spirit does our human spirit come alive. Our spirit is that aspect of our humanity which gives us the ability to have an intimate relationship with God.



This is vital for our worship. True worship is not about where we worship or what form our worship takes or what our personal preferences in worship are. Jesus said it is about worshipping the Father in spirit and truth ('en pneumati kai aletheia') - Jn. 4:23&24. He repeats the phrase twice so it must be important! So we see again that the Holy Spirit and our spirit combine to effect true worship.

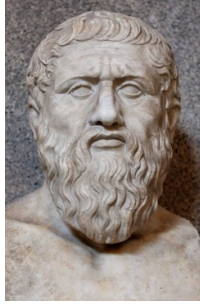
The Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of truth so it's no wonder that Jesus links spirit and truth. Truth must never be sacrificed on the altar of worship, so we may need to check out the theology of our worship songs. For example, we often sing, 'It's all about you Jesus', but most worship in the New Testament is directed to the Father, rather than the Son.

Of course, more generally, there is a lot of false worship around today. Dr Rowan Williams has an interesting piece in the bumper double Christmas edition of the Radio Times (24 Dec. 2022 – 6 Jan. 2023) in which he says, 'Be careful what you worship.' He goes on, 'If we surrender and submerge who we are in blind loyalty and adoring devotion to *human* power, glamour, wish-fulfilment promises, we end up less human, less real.'

### **Keeping Body, Soul and Spirit together.**

Christian theology in the West, unfortunately, has been tainted by Greek rather than Hebrew thinking about Body, Soul and Spirit.





Plato

Plato, Philo (even though he was Jewish), and most of the early church fathers, including Augustine, thought the soul was more important than the body. In fact they viewed the body as the source of calamity for the soul, describing it as a corpse, a tomb, a prison. The sooner a person died so that their soul could be set free from their body, the better! So it was that they regarded the body (material) as inferior to, and entirely separate from, the soul (immaterial).

However, Hebrew/Biblical thinking never allows us to do this. It keeps body, soul and spirit together and doesn't allow us to separate the physical from the spiritual and always presents us with a high view of the body including sexual relationships.

Paul, steeped in Hebrew thinking, but aware of the influence of Greek philosophy, always had a high view of the 'body' whilst recognising it had a 'best before' date. Not only did Paul, as we have seen, have a high view of these present bodies, but he was looking forward to our future material, spiritual, eternal, resurrected bodies.

But this caused him difficulty when he spoke to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens. 'What is this babbling trying to say?' they asked. Most sneered, but a few men and some women did believe (Acts 17:16-34).

And Paul urges us in Romans 12:1 to offer our **bodies** as living sacrifices which is our **spiritual** worship. The Bible never allows us, in these bodies on this earth, to separate the physical/material from the spiritual.

The only place in the New Testament where spirits and souls *are* separated from bodies (temporarily) is in heaven, after our present bodies have died on this earth. And so the writer to the Hebrews says we have come (prospectively) 'to the heavenly Jerusalem..... to the **spirits** ('pneumasi') of righteous men made perfect' (Heb. 12:22&23). And John, who received the revelation of Jesus and had a conducted tour around heaven, writes, 'I saw under the altar the **souls**

(‘psuchas’) of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained’ (Rev. 6:9) and, ‘I saw the **souls** of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God’ (Rev. 20:4).

So heaven is a place for spirits/souls; earth, including both this present one and the new one which will be our eternal dwelling place, is for bodies/spirits/souls.

We could say therefore, that we go through three stages: here, on this present earth, we are embodied souls/spirits; when we die, we shall be disembodied souls/spirits in heaven with Jesus (he being the only one at this present time who has his new resurrection body); and our final destiny and existence will be as re-embodied bodies/ souls/ spirits on the new earth.

There is a beautiful symmetry in the Bible in this regard. In Genesis 2, God first makes Adam’s physical body and then animates it with his [God’s] breath. God starts with the physical body so, in the order of things, priority is given to Adam being an animated body rather than an incarnated soul. God doesn’t start with the soul; he starts with the body. For you and me, after death, it is the other way round; our souls will wait to be incarnated/ re-embodied.

Exciting times ahead!

And so we pray:

‘May you enjoy good health and may all go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well’ (3 Jn. 2).

‘May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it’ (1 Thess. 5:23&24).

‘For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart’ (Heb. 4:12).

George Irving – Jan. 2023

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**Note:** If you wish to delve deeper into this topic, I would recommend this book:

Gooder Paula, ‘Body – biblical spirituality for the whole person’, SPCK, 2016.