

A BIBLICAL RATIONALE FOR EMBODIED SPIRITUAL PRACTICES⁹¹

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Why should biblical counselors—as followers of Christ and as helpers—be concerned with the body?

We should be concerned with the body because the way God designed our normal human existence is that our spiritual lives are not a disembodied affair. Body and soul are intertwined as we relate to God. Growing in Christ is a whole-person experience.

How self-conscious are we about the way we use our bodies? I would guess we are much more aware of the times when we use our bodies in clearly sinful ways: slamming a door in anger, raising our voice in conflict, looking at pornography, using an illicit substance, overeating, etc. But the fact is that *all* of life is done in a “bodily” way, for good or for ill.

To be “spiritual” is not some otherworldly, disembodied experience of God, but a real flesh-and-blood existence lived in concrete ways of obedience before him. We see this throughout Scripture. In this article, I will show the biblical basis for such attentiveness to our bodies as we live as image-bearing worshippers of God. I will explore the central role that bodily existence and bodily practices have from creation to consummation. Then, more briefly, I will consider some implications for our lives as both followers of Christ and as counselors.

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Created Bodies

Our bodies are part of God's good creation, but at times, the church has downplayed the importance of the body compared to the soul. Yet diminishing the role of the body is not biblical. Reformed theologian John Murray reminds us, "Man is bodily, and therefore, the scriptural way of expressing this truth is not that man has a body but that man *is* body."⁹³ Consider that. You don't just *have* a body; you *are* a body. Your body is not an appendage. It is part of the essential you.⁹⁴

Job 10:11 says, "You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews." Perhaps even more familiar is David's acclamation in Psalm 139:13–14: "for you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

We are flesh-and-blood beings, bodies personally knit together by our sovereign and loving God. This is our starting point for understanding the biblical view of the body. Christians may not think along these lines. Too often, we view our bodies only through a post-fall lens (the suffering and sinful acts experienced in a bodily context) and fail to remember their original created goodness. "No dishonor belongs to man because of the material aspect of his person," concludes Murray.⁹⁵

Humans, created in the image of God, are material beings. Physicality is good. To be human is to partake of *both* the physical and the spiritual. And that's the plan for eternity. Of course, we are not only bodies. Such a view skews our anthropology in a different but equally damaging way that an overemphasis on the soul does.

⁹³ John Murray, "The Nature of Man," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 14.

⁹⁴ This article's focus on the body is not meant to displace the primacy of the heart in relation to God. The ultimate (resurrection) hope for a decaying body is a heart renewed in Jesus Christ. The heart (spirit) is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23). Without Christ our hearts are desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:23). Through the Holy Spirit our hearts are made new (Ezekiel 36:26–27; Titus 3:4–7), we turn to Christ in repentance and faith, our sins are forgiven, and we are freed to serve Christ. But life in Christ transpires in a bodily context (Galatians 2:20); it is that context that occupies our focus for this article.

⁹⁵ Murray, "The Nature of Man," 14.

What we see at creation is body and soul united in worship of the Creator, carrying out his kingdom-building purposes. Our bodies are a part of God's pronouncement at creation: "This is very good!" Human beings are indeed finite, dependent, limited, and differing in bodily capacities. We are not God. But finitude and limitations are not sinful; they're built into the goodness of creation and particularly into the good-ness of our bodies.⁹⁶

But it doesn't take long before this all goes terribly wrong.

Broken and Fallen Bodies

Though the body was created "good," the impacts of the fall are holistic in scope and consequences (Genesis 3). John Murray notes that the body "becomes depraved."⁹⁷ This does not mean that our physical selves are a source of sin or are sinful in and of themselves. Rather the ravages of the fall extend to every aspect of our being, including our bodies.

We see these effects of the fall in two main ways—bodily suffering and bodily sin. Illness, disease, injury, and ultimately death are impacts of the fall. It's not just that our hearts are rebellious because of sin; our bodies are decaying and wasting away. From the nuisance of the common cold to the terror of cancer run amok, every human experiences bodily suffering.

Every human also experiences bodily sin. Our bodies are experienced as a liability as they become willing participants that direct our hearts away from God. Murray says something striking here:

We are too ready to underestimate the gravity of the sensuous manifestations of sin. This tendency is frequently bound up with the notion that the body does not belong to the integrity of personality, and is something alien to it, and incompatible with the highest attainments of spirituality. Thus sensuous lust is shrugged off as something that belongs to what is not intrinsic to our true nature. Since man is body, he is, as respects responsibility and guilt, as

⁹⁶ See Kelly M. Kapic, *You're Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God's Design and Why That's Good News* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

⁹⁷ Murray, "The Nature of Man," 15.

closely identified with the depravity of the body as he is with that of his spirit.⁹⁸

Again, we are not used to speaking of the body in this way. This is not meant to be a depreciation of the body but a recognition that our human constitution, body and soul, is directed against God apart from the grace of Christ.

Even redeemed sinners are called to steward their bodies unto God. Consider a few directives in the New Testament:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. (Romans 6:12–13).

This passage, along with verse 19, highlights that we can use our “members” (that is, our bodies) as instruments of righteousness or unrighteousness, for good or for evil.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul tells the Corinthians that sexual sin is a sin against one’s own body. He writes, “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” (v.19–20). Those who have been redeemed through Jesus Christ honor him by stewarding their bodies in holiness.

Finally, in Matthew 5:29–30 we read,

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

While Jesus is speaking hyperbolically (i.e., he is not advocating self-maiming in the wake of bodily sin), we don’t want to miss how serious he is about the holy use of our bodies.

⁹⁸ Murray, 15–16.

While Scripture clearly teaches the critical role of our bodies in obeying God, Jesus also says that both words and actions ultimately flow from the heart (Matthew 15:18). What is in the heart comes out in bodily practices. If I honk my car horn repeatedly in frustration amid slow-moving traffic, that bodily action is an overflow of my angry, impatient heart. However, we might also say that there is a bidirectional relationship between our hearts and bodies. Certainly, our loves, desires, and wants influence what we do with our bodies. But the reverse is also true. Our repeated practices of righteousness or unrighteousness—concrete acts of love or hate—shape the dispositions of our hearts.⁹⁹

Clearly, many struggles in life—suffering or sin—bring our bodily constitution to the forefront. The body now becomes a focal point, the tip of the spear, where we experience the brokenness of the fall. This happens throughout our lives but comes to its climax at our death.

But is the gradual breakdown of our bodies leading to death the end of the story (2 Corinthians 4:16)? Where does our hope lie? How do God’s good purposes for our bodies—now and in the future—connect with the whole-person redemption that Jesus Christ brings?

Redeemed Bodies

The Christian hope is not to escape the body but to use our bodies as vessels of worship and service, both in this life and in the life to come. This is seen clearly in Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Paul exhorts us to use our bodies for the goal, the endpoint, of worshipping God.

In his plan of redemption, God doesn’t jettison the body as though the purest worship is only “soulish.” God’s people have always been invited to

⁹⁹ For more on how regular practices shape the dispositions of our hearts, see Michael R. Emlet, “Practice Makes Perfect? Exploring the Relationship between Knowledge, Desire, and Habit,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27:1 (2013): 26–48; James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Brazos Press, 2016); Dru Johnson, *Human Rites: The Power of Rituals, Habits, and Sacraments* (Eerdmans, 2019); and also Dru Johnson *Knowledge by Ritual* (Eisenbrauns, 2016).

bring their entire selves into his presence. It's striking to consider in Scripture just how much of what God prescribed for his people in their worship involved bodily practices. In fact, what we see throughout Scripture is a pattern of what I'll call "multi-sensory discipleship." These embodied practices are embedded in the covenant God makes with us and help us to taste and see that he is good (Psalm 34:8). Our relationship with God is earthy and fleshy in the best sense of these words! Let's look more closely at the embodied practices that God prescribes both in the Old Testament and New Testament that are formative in knowing him.

Old Testament Practices

There are at least seven practices in the Old Testament that underscore the importance of the body in relation to God.

1. *Circumcision.*

In his covenant with Abraham, God prescribed circumcision as the en-fleshed sign of the covenant (Genesis 17:9–14). This distinguished Jews from non-Jews. If you were a man, you wore on your body the unalterable reality that you belonged to the God of the universe.

2. *Passover.*

This practice marked God's "passing over" the people of Israel when he judged the Egyptians.¹⁰⁰ Every year when the Jews prepared and ate the Passover, it was a tangible reminder of God's rescue from slavery in Egypt and claiming them as his own people (Exodus 12:14–20; Leviticus 23:4–8). It's a meal that marks identity—and continues to be central in the practice of Judaism. It's significant that the Israelites failed to carry out this practice consistently. Consider 2 Kings 23, which describes King Josiah's restoration of the Passover:

And the king commanded all the people, "Keep the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant." for no such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges

¹⁰⁰ The original Passover involved the sacrifice of a lamb without blemish whose blood was placed on the doorposts and lintel of the Israelite's house. The blood served as a sign that averted God's wrath as he judged the Egyptians.

who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel or of the kings of Judah. But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah this Passover was kept to the Lord in Jerusalem. (v.21–23)

This is astounding! Apparently, Passover was not kept even during the reign of King David. Further, the loss of this embodied practice of worship was associated with a loss of purity in God's people over time.

3. Memorials.

In Joshua 3, for example, we read of the Israelites crossing the Jordan on dry land, as God cut off the waters from flowing downstream. This was purposely reminiscent of the miracle God performed to allow the first generation of Israelites to cross the Red Sea. To memorialize this event, the Lord commanded that twelve men, one from each tribe of Israel, gather twelve stones from the dry riverbed, and place them on the far side of the river where the people lodged that night (Joshua 4:1–7). This very visible pile of stones was to be a “memorial forever.”

4. Sacrificial system.

Confessing sin and experiencing the blessing of forgiveness was a lengthy and multi-sensory process. Consider Leviticus 4:27–31:

“If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally . . . he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed. And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering. And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.”

Worshippers experienced forgiveness viscerally through their senses. Sight, hearing, touch, and smell were all engaged as a person participated in the

bloody sacrifice of their sin substitute—as they grasped the hairy head of the animal, felt its warmth, heard its fearful bleating, wielded the knife, and saw and smelled the blood.¹⁰¹

5. Festivals and feasts.

I have already described the Passover, which was also known as the first day of the feast of Unleavened Bread. God also instituted several other major feasts including the feast of Weeks (Leviticus 23:15–22) and the feast of Booths (Sukkoth) (Leviticus 23:33–43). Each festival was an embodied celebration of God’s mercy, generosity, and redemption. In the feast of Booths, the Jews lived outdoors for seven days in booths as a tangible reminder of how their ancestors lived when God brought them out of Egypt. Could God have told them simply to pass down that story from generation to generation? Yes, but the embodied practices drove home the reality more pointedly.

6. Music.

God used many genres in his self-revelation to his people. One of these is poetry, specifically the poetry of the Psalms, Israel’s prayer book set to music. While we no longer have the original tunes to the Psalms, we should not forget that they were meant to be sung, not simply read. By definition, our bodies are more involved when singing.¹⁰²

7. Tabernacle and temple.

The latter chapters of Exodus are devoted to the pattern and construction of the tabernacle. Chapters 25–30 contain the particular commands of God for construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings, as well as instructions for the priestly garments and ordination ceremony. Chapters 36–40 describe the actual construction of the tabernacle and culminate with God’s glory filling the structure. This physical space was to be the very dwelling place of God,

¹⁰¹ For an excellent resource, see L. Michael Morales’s book *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 37 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

¹⁰² Interestingly, MIT researchers have recently discovered a population of neurons in the auditory portion of our brains that are activated with singing but not with speech or other types of music. See Sam V. Norman-Haignere, et al., “A Neural Population Selective for Song in Human Auditory Cortex,” *Current Biology* 32, no. 7 (April 2022):1470–84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2022.01.069>.

and his presence was visible to all, twenty-four hours a day (Exodus 40:38).¹⁰³

The tabernacle (and subsequently the temple) was the place where heaven and earth met. Every detail communicated something important about the Lord, the king of his people. Senses were engaged: the smoke of incense was always rising, the lamps were always burning, and a continual parade of animals was being slaughtered. Many Old Testament scholars view the tabernacle as a new Eden.¹⁰⁴ The apostle John picks up the imagery of God dwelling with us when he speaks of Jesus dwelling, or tabernacling, among us (John 1:14).

What we should see by all of this is that worship of the living God was not an armchair, passive experience. Circumcising newborns, eating a symbolic meal, stacking up stones, smelling the burning fat of a sacrifice, living outdoors for a week, singing, and worshipping at a structure designed by God but built by people—it all involved the body. It was an active posture of body and soul.

New Testament Practices

Does this change when we get to the New Testament? Definitely not. While the ceremonial law (and in particular, the sacrificial system) was no longer necessary to make worshippers right with God because of Jesus's final sacrifice on the cross, we see that New Testament worship practices involving the body continue. We will focus on the importance of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, although I will also mention briefly the practice of fasting, which we see in both the Old and New Testaments.

1. *Sacraments.*

Our risen Savior has given us his Spirit to indwell us. He can't be any closer to us than he already is. But he also instituted two practices we call sacraments, as part of our worship in the here and now: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

¹⁰³ It's remarkable to consider that sandwiched between the instructions for building the tabernacle and its actual construction is the account of Israel's sin with the golden calf (Exodus 32). We see here, in the narrative flow of Scripture, that an embodied practice of disobedience (the creation and worship of the golden calf) was followed by an embodied practice of redemption (the building of the tabernacle).

¹⁰⁴ For example, the east-facing entrance, the presence of cherubim, and the lampstand symbolizing the Tree of Life.

They are means of grace—tangible, concrete practices where we commune with Jesus Christ.

What is a sacrament? The Westminster Confession of Faith 27.1 says, “sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him.” Church historian Chad Van Dixhoorn observes,

In biblical usage a sign is a distinguishing mark that points to something [else] and a seal confirms or authenticates the genuineness of something. Sacraments signify or point to our relationship with Jesus. And they seal or confirm that we belong to him by God’s great grace.¹⁰⁵

Sacraments employ ordinary physical elements for extraordinary spiritual purposes.

First, we have *baptism*. In the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 28.1 we read,

Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.

Baptism marks you as part of the new covenant people of God. It succeeds the Old Testament practice of circumcision. In the New Testament, a person’s inclusion in the people of God is marked by baptism in the name of the father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Consider this passage that describes the significance of baptism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3–4)

¹⁰⁵ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 358–59.

The water used in baptism—whether it's sprinkled, poured, or used for immersion—points to the gift of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; John 1:33) and the once-for-all cleansing of the Spirit (Titus 3:5). Van Dixhoorn describes it this way: “Baptism’s washing with water symbolizes the removal of our sin by Christ, who was completely covered by our sin and then cleansed in his resurrection: he was buried and raised again to new life.”¹⁰⁶

While baptism is a means of grace for the one being baptized, all Christians have the opportunity to grow as they witness the baptisms of others. This is part of what the Westminster divines called “improving our baptism.”¹⁰⁷ Johannes Vos notes,

The more fully we appreciate the real meaning of our baptism, the farther will spiritual complacency be from our hearts. As baptism stands for salvation from sin, improving our baptism involves taking salvation from sin seriously, in actual living experience.¹⁰⁸

Second, we have the sacrament of the *Lord’s Supper*. Both the old and new covenants are centered on a meal—Passover and the Lord’s Supper, respectively. The two most significant moments in redemptive history (the exodus and the crucifixion) are preceded by a family meal instituted by God himself. Both meals point to and are intimately connected with God’s mighty act of redemption. And both of these meals point toward a final feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb which God’s people will enjoy in his presence.

Jesus is the true Passover Lamb whose blood shed on the cross is a new covenant that brings once-for-all cleansing, forgiveness, and protection from the wrath of God. In him, the Passover feast and the sacrificial system are brought to complete fulfillment.

This meal involves remembrance (looking back), participation (in the present moment), and anticipation (looking forward). Past, present, and

¹⁰⁶ Van Dixhoorn, 367.

¹⁰⁷ Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 167. See also Matt Ryman, “Observing Baptism as a Means of Grace,” Ligonier (blog), January 25, 2017, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/observing-baptism-means-grace>.

¹⁰⁸ Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 481.

future unite as we come to the Lord’s Supper. It causes us to remember Jesus’s sacrifice on our behalf. It whets our appetite for our certain and glorious future. And as we partake of the bread and wine, the benefits of Christ’s redemption are sealed to our hearts and we commune with him afresh.

In the Lord’s Supper, we are taking Jesus at his word when he says in Revelation 3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” Jesus invites us to this meal, and the main course is himself! Does that sound too strong? It’s certainly no stronger than what Jesus himself said in John 6:56: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”

But why a tangible meal, why food and drink? Jesus didn’t just say, “remember what I did for you when you gather together.” He instituted a meal. As with baptism, God links his grace to the believer in tangible ways. Sinclair Ferguson puts it this way:

We do not get a different or better Christ in the sacraments than we do in the Word. But we may get the same Christ better, with a firmer grasp of his grace through seeing, touching, feeling, and tasting as well as hearing.¹⁰⁹

Tim Chester says something similar: “All our senses are thus engaged so that our frail faith might be matured.”¹¹⁰ How kind of God, in keeping with our materiality, to engage our senses as part of our worship.¹¹¹

Sometimes we overvalue the cognitive aspects of our faith. The sacraments level the playing field. Amos Yong tells the story of a young woman with Down

¹⁰⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 233.

¹¹⁰ Tim Chester, *Truth We Can Touch: How Baptism and Communion Shape Our Lives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 35.

¹¹¹ Ligon Duncan notes that Jesus’s words at the Last Supper—“take and eat”—contrast with what happens in Genesis 3 when Eve “took and ate.” The meal stolen by our first parents brought condemnation and death; the meal instituted and gifted by the second Adam signifies forgiveness and life. “Take and Eat”—Ligon Duncan (T4G18), YouTube(video), 1:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJgLSIcFbL0>.

syndrome who approached communion with such anticipation and joy:

“I can’t wait until I can eat Jesus bread and drink Jesus juice. People who love Jesus are the ones who eat Jesus bread . . . and I want to eat it and drink with all the other Christians at church ’cause I love him so.”¹¹²

There’s a whole lot of theology and a whole lot of experience packed into that dear woman’s testimony.

2. Fasting.

Though not a sacrament, the practice of fasting appears throughout Scripture.¹¹³ God instituted fasting from food and drink as a spiritual practice long before anyone was talking about the health benefits of it! It was a regular part of individual and communal life for God’s people in the Old Testament, often associated with prayer or mourning over sin. For example, consider that, in 2 Samuel 12, David fasted for his son’s life; in 2 Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout Judah when faced with a great enemy army; and in Joel 2:12 the Lord called Judah to “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”

The New Testament assumes the regular practice of fasting, and Jesus gives the only instructions related to it:

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your father who is in secret. And your father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:16–18)

We see examples of the early church fasting before important decisions, such as the appointing of Paul and Barnabas for missionary work (Acts 13:2–3) or the appointing of elders in the new churches (Acts 14:23). Why is the

¹¹² Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Re-imagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 193.

¹¹³ It’s important to note that both eating and refraining from eating throughout Scripture are to be done with God in mind (1 Corinthians 10:31).

physical practice of fasting helpful spiritually? There are several reasons. first, the time you would have spent preparing and consuming food is spent in prayer or reading of Scripture.

Second, physical hunger serves as a reminder of our spiritual hunger (or lack thereof). Do we have the attitude of David in Psalm 63:1: “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water”? Too often, when I fast, I am reminded that I *don’t* hunger and thirst after righteousness. An empty stomach reminds me of what I try to fill my life with apart from God. My physical experience makes me more attuned to my spiritual state.

Third, experiencing the absence of food points toward the generous provision of our heavenly father. Much of the time in the affluent West, fasting is a chosen discipline, and not one forced upon us by food insecurity. Our temporary, freely chosen abstention especially prompts thankfulness for God’s care and bountiful provision and reminds us to pray for others who lack basic food and nutrition.

Fourth, put another way, fasting reminds us of our creatureliness. Psalm 104 is a song to God the Creator and Sustainer of life. Addressing God, the psalmist says in verses 27–28, “These [that is, all your creatures] look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.”

Fifth, practicing this form of physical self-denial and restraint helps set a pattern wherein bodily appetites (for food, entertainment, sex, etc.) are submitted to God.

These somatic aspects of life in Christ are important to recognize because they have been neglected at times. But nothing I have written here bypasses the soul, as if our bodies allow unmediated access to our father in heaven or bodily practices automatically result in sanctification. New life in Christ comes through the renewal and cleansing of our hearts by the blood of Jesus Christ. We are new creatures because we have new hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit. We live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). And

yet, engaging the bodily context in which we live is critical for our spiritual formation even as we trust that God the Holy Spirit is working in us “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

What should we conclude from this biblical survey of embodied practices associated with worship? Both the Old and New Testaments provide biblical warrant and directives for the use of our bodies in relationship with God in everyday discipleship. Discipleship is sensual, linking the mind with eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and hands. Regular bodily practices tutor the hearts of God’s people toward him and his kingdom. Through our bodies, we literally “taste and see” that he is good.

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:14 says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This is the foundation for everything I’ve said so far. Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, is himself an embodied soul. He is fully human. And he is fully God. He is God incarnate. “The incarnation means that the life of the world began all over again in Jesus, and no part of our existence is left out of his redemption.”¹¹⁴ Jesus Christ is the second Adam (Romans 5:12–21). The second person of the Trinity becomes like us—he assumes a human nature—that we might become like him. Through union with the one who died and rose again, we “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Jesus ascended into heaven in bodily form and will return in bodily form.¹¹⁵ The God of the universe is not embarrassed by our materiality. In his loving rescue plan, he partakes of it. The Apostles’ Creed rehearses our core beliefs about the reality of Jesus’s embodiment. I have italicized the verbs for emphasis.

[He was] *born* of the Virgin Mary, [he] *suffered* under Pontius Pilate, was *crucified*, *died* and was *buried*...On the third day he *rose* again. He *ascended* into heaven and is *seated* at the right hand of the father.

The Apostles’ Creed emphasizes that Jesus was truly “the Word made flesh.”

¹¹⁴ Sarah Clarkson, *This Beautiful Truth: How God’s Goodness Breaks into Our Darkness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 122.

¹¹⁵ Jesus ascended in bodily form: Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:6–11. Jesus will return in bodily form: Acts 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18.

He has fully experienced embodied human life (Hebrews 2:14–15).

The embodied practices of the Old Testament—Passover, sacrifices, tabernacle and temple worship, and festivals—prepared God’s people for the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, these old covenant institutions find their fullest expression and fulfillment, even as he initiates a new covenant with new practices (the Lord’s Supper and baptism) for the church.

This is the strongest apologetic for highlighting the continuing importance of the body—Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had a body and has one still. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brings renewal to our spirits even as we face our inevitable death and await the resurrection of our bodies. We have been gifted with the Spirit—a promissory note of future perfection (Ephesians 1:14). But meanwhile, we groan, longing for the mortal to be swallowed up by the immortal (2 Corinthians 5:4).

Glorified Bodies

We are destined to die, and our bodies will return to the dust. But for believers in Christ, this is not our final condition. Jesus’s resurrection was a first fruit of our own resurrection to come. Our ultimate hope is resurrection, not a disembodied state.¹¹⁶ This also proves the created goodness of bodies. We get to keep them, but as they were meant to be in all their splendor!

Paul speaks of the wonder of this in 1 Corinthians 15:50–55:

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

¹¹⁶ Scripture does support the existence of an intermediate state between death and resurrection where human beings exist temporarily as souls without bodies (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Luke 16:19–31; 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23). But this is not our final state nor is it our ultimate hope. See *Westminster Confession of Faith* 32 for more details.

immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* 32.2 notes,

At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and, all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies, and none other, although with different qualities, which shall be united again to their souls forever.

There is mystery here, no doubt. What will it actually look like to dwell with God as perfectly restored embodied souls in the new creation? Louis Berkhof suggests, “We should not think of the joys of heaven . . . as exclusively spiritual. There will be something corresponding to the body. There will be recognition and social intercourse on an elevated plane.”¹¹⁷ Putting it differently, life in the new creation will be an earthy, sensual experience. We will get our hands dirty in the garden, but there will be no weeds. We will be as we were meant to be—embodied souls living in perfect communion with our God and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We eagerly await this time when the suffering and sin associated with our bodies is no more. How wonderful it will be when disease, disability, and dysfunctions in our bodies will cease to exist. Further, this eschatological mindset motivates us to steward our bodies in the present. If our “self-same” body created by God will experience resurrection, we want to treat our bodies with care and dignity now, knowing of their participation in the glory to come. We want to use our bodies now in ways that reflect a love for Jesus that will one day be perfected.

Implications for Daily Discipleship

While the thrust of this article has been to develop a biblical rationale for

¹¹⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology, Expanded Edition* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2021), 773.

the intentional use of our bodies, both individually and corporately, I want to suggest a few practical steps to consider. Although I won't discuss the need to steward our bodies in obedience to God in those areas where bodily sin is evident (e.g., pornography, overeating, substance abuse), this fight against sin is a critical place of growth in Christ (1 Corinthians 9:24–27). Instead, I will focus the rest of the article on proactive practices for using the body in God-honoring ways that are in line with the multi-sensory discipleship I outlined earlier. In other words, I'm not focusing so much on the problems with our bodies in relation to God, but on our opportunities.

Individual practices that self-consciously involve the body.

First, I want to give a short preface here regarding regular, personal times of prayer and Bible reading or study. There's no place in Scripture that explicitly commands a daily devotional time. However, the psalmists speak about praying at regular points during a given day (Psalm 55:17; 119:164) and it was Daniel's practice to pray three times a day (Daniel 6:10). The apostle Paul says that we should "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). And Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).¹¹⁸ Scripture, whether encountered in private or in corporate settings, is meant to be as nourishing and as necessary to us as daily food. Of course, our season of life and circumstances play into the timing and frequency of personal devotions (parenting young children, illness, care giving responsibilities, etc.).

Having said that, here are a few things to keep in mind related to sleep, timing, and space. Adequate physical rest is an important precursor for a focused time before the Lord. I find it hard to concentrate if I haven't been a good steward of my sleep, at least as far as it depends on me. I also think it's helpful to try to have a discernible pattern to your day—awakening at the same time each morning and doing devotions at the same time each day. In addition, having a defined space or place where you generally meet with God is conducive to concentration. It could be a particular armchair (not too cozy!) or at a desk or the kitchen table. It might be a space that you use exclusively for your time with the Lord. Consider your physical environment—is it calming or is it unsettling? This is part of acknowledging that we are physical creatures.

¹¹⁸ Matthew 4:4 quotes Deuteronomy 8:3.

The physical aspects of your devotional practices are up to you, but consider including the following:

- Change your posture for prayer (standing, walking, kneeling, raising hands, etc.)
- Light candles
- Sing or listen to music
- Write down portions of Scripture or journal a prayerful response to what you have read (this is further bodily engagement than simply reading)
- Mark or highlight your Bible
- Use a devotional that pairs Bible reading and prayer with poetry or artwork¹¹⁹
- Take a prayer walk outdoors
- Spend a day fasting and pay particular attention to the way your bodily response (stomach growling, hunger, etc.) points to your spiritual need as well

These are just a few of the many potential ways to use your body as you meet with God.¹²⁰

Corporate practices that self-consciously involve the body.

Having been discipled in a parachurch collegiate ministry that emphasized personal devotional times, for many years I had a low view of the role of corporate worship in promoting spiritual growth. Of course, I believed it

¹¹⁹ Some examples are (1) the Daily Prayer Project’s “Living Prayer Periodicals” which are published for each season of the church year as a ministry of Grace Mosaic church (PCA) in Washington, DC, <https://www.dailyprayerproject.com/>; (2) Biola University’s Center for Christianity, Culture, and the Arts has free Advent and Lenten devotionals that are sent out each year. Previous years’ devotionals are available at <https://ccca.biola.edu/resources/collection/Devotions/>; (3) I also use Malcolm Guite’s collection of sonnets for the church year, especially during Advent and Lent, titled *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (Canterbury Press, 2012).

¹²⁰ Some brothers and sisters have bodily limitations and disabilities by birth, disease, injury, or aging. They may experience the body more often as an impediment than as an opportunity. At the same time, a broken body is not a barrier to the Spirit’s inward renewal (2 Corinthians 4:16).

was right to gather weekly, but apart from what I learned from the sermon, didn't the real engine of spiritual transformation hum during my individual devotional times during the week? That was my Western individualism speaking!

I want to examine how the embodied practices of worship shape us, and how worship stokes the imagination through its earthy, bodily practices. We've already looked at the sacraments in depth, which are means of grace God has instituted in the context of the corporate gathering of God's people, so here I'll focus on some other aspects.

For many of us, the pandemic revealed the stark contrast between on-site and online church. Normally, when we gather for worship, there is a sanctuary filled with living, breathing people who create various opportunities for engagement. In contrast, the online experience allows disciples to be passive, distracted, and disconnected. You're a spectator rather than a participant. It was too easy to be finishing breakfast in the kitchen in your pajamas while the call to worship was happening on the family room's large TV. Worship in the Bible is an in-person, face-to-face, embodied experience.

The order of worship itself tutors our hearts and bodies, forming us as disciples.¹²¹ Consider the following five major movements of the worship service followed by a local Philadelphia church, with additional comments from me.¹²²

Movement 1: “God **summons** us as his people—*calling*.” Here we find the call to worship, praise in song, a responsive reading of a psalm, and the prayer of adoration. Already we’re engaged bodily: standing (for those who are able) for the initial elements of worship, using our voices to read responsively or sing, and bowing our heads for prayer.

¹²¹ See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), especially pages 155–214; also Emlet, “Practice Makes Perfect?”

¹²² Resurrection Philadelphia, “Guide to Our Worship,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57d994956a4963d203edd4ac/t/583d78866b8f5b152d4af7a6/1480423579451/City+Church+Worship+Guide.pdf>. (Note: City Church Philadelphia and Liberti Church: Center City merged to form Resurrection Philadelphia.)

Movement 2: “God **sanctifies** us to himself—*cleansing*.” Here we find confession of sin and an assurance of pardon, followed by a congregational response in songs of thanksgiving and praise and then the passing of the peace as we greet one another in the Lord as forgiven, cleansed people in union with Jesus and with one another. Again, notice the embodied actions included in this portion of the worship service: heads bowed or kneeling for confession of sin; standing and using our voices for singing; handshakes, hugs, or waves during the passing of the peace.

Movement 3: “God **speaks** to us in his Word—*counseling*.” In this portion of the service, we hear Scripture being read and the Word preached. In my current church, we stand for the reading of Scripture. Often I will take notes during the sermon to keep me focused and engaged. We respond to God’s Word through the offering. We also respond by standing and reciting together the Apostles’ (or Nicene) Creed. This is followed by the prayers of the people, led by one of the pastors or officers of the church. After each petition the one praying says, “for this O Lord we pray,” and the congregation responds, “Hear our prayer.”

Movement 4: “God **strengthens** us at his table—*communing*.” This refers to the Lord’s Supper. I’ve already spoken about the importance of the tangible elements that comprise the sacraments and what they signify. But even the way the Supper is administered can involve our physical selves to a greater or lesser degree. Prior to the pandemic, many congregations served the Lord’s Supper from the front of the church and people came forward to receive it. In others, the people remained seated and the elements were passed down the pews. I prefer the former as I think it best captures coming to Jesus, together with his people, to receive the spiritual nourishment he provides in his Supper. In the post-COVID era, many churches use individually packaged wafers and juice that parishioners pick up on the way into the sanctuary. No doubt it is more hygienic to do it this way, but there is loss in the overall participatory experience.

Movement 5: “God **sends** us into the world—*commissioning*.” This involves the pastoral benediction and dismissal. The benediction is literally the “good word” that is pronounced by the minister over God’s people. The last word you hear is a word of grace and mercy to you in Jesus Christ. Over the

past few years, I have started raising my hands during the benediction as a tangible, physical act of receiving the father's word of blessing to me. The pastor closes with the words, "Let us go forth as those who love the Lord," and the congregation responds, "Thanks be to God." And then the congregation departs. Notice the entire service involves a physical gathering and then a physical dispersal into the world. We are not simply moving out into our world in our minds but with all we are, body and soul.

Some churches have special services that emphasize our creaturely status even more. During an Ash Wednesday service, for example, congregants are marked using ashes with the sign of the cross on their foreheads while the pastor speaks these words: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." This is a sobering reminder of our mortality and frailty that prompts us to lean dependently upon Jesus for life itself and all that we need for a given day. A Tenebrae ("shadows") service on Good Friday pairs the reading of the passion narratives from Scripture with the gradual extinguishing of candles. As the sanctuary descends into darkness and silence, we literally experience the Light of the World moving inexorably to death.

The next time you gather for worship, pay particular attention to how you use your body and consider how different that is from being a passive observer or spectator, and embrace it. Bodily engagement is for all God's people to experience and enjoy.

Let's now turn our focus more specifically toward how to keep the embodied nature of our counselees in mind as we minister to them.

Implications for Counseling

While our focus as biblical counselors is to bring the truth and perspective of God's Word to bear on the particulars of our counselees' lives, we must remember they are embodied people! When you encourage your counselee in practices that engage the body, you help them become more fully human; it reminds them that they are indeed bodily creatures. You are helping them "taste and see" that the Lord is good. Not just telling them true things that you want them to think harder about but helping them engage their five senses as they relate to God.

So how do we remain attentive to the body even as we bring timely words from Scripture to them? Here are several suggestions.

1. Notice how they use their bodies during a counseling session. The term body language is apropos. Physicality “speaks” a message in addition to the particular words a counselee might use. Are we attentive to those messages?
2. Pay particular attention to your own body as you counsel. What is your posture? Too casual? forward leaning? How is your eye contact? The expression on your face? I had one counselee who became upset with me because she thought I was irritated with her. I was completely at a loss to know what she meant—until she pointed to my furrowed brow. To her it communicated displeasure; for me it was simply a mark of thoughtful, serious engagement with her weighty words. I was more aware of my facial expression after that!
3. Ask about sleep, schedule, diet, and exercise. I find there is a correlation between lack of consistency in physical disciplines and lack of consistency in spiritual ones. In 1 Timothy 4:8, Paul does say that physical training is of some value!
4. Ask about their experience of corporate worship. Are they going to church regularly? What portion of the worship service is most person-ally engaging? Where do they struggle? Do they feel like active participants or passive spectators?
5. Discuss their personal devotional times. Do they have a rhythm or a plan? Do they engage their bodies in self-conscious ways?
6. Consider giving homework that encourages counselees to get outside and use the beauty of creation as a springboard for praise and prayer. Calvin considered the natural world a “theater of God’s glory.” Belden Lane notes something similar about Jonathan Edwards.

[He] perceived the physical world, when appreciated with the new spiritual sense that regeneration brings, as offering direct

training in the multidimensional way of knowing that is necessary for meeting God. This is a knowing that involves tasting and delighting—not just an apprehension of the mind, but an intimate engagement of all the senses as well.¹²³

Once again we hear the value of using our bodily senses to deepen our relationship with God.

7. Ask about bodily symptoms that can be associated with anxiety, depression, or trauma such as distractibility, fidgeting, crying, dissociation, etc. Consider concrete ways to respond to these physical manifestations of distress. What bodily practices can you use to orient them toward God while you are with them and when they leave your office? I'll mention two that may calm anxious hearts and bodies: deep breathing and grounding.

Slow, deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which slows a racing heartbeat and rapid breathing. So, when we use our bodies in this way, we are aligned with how God created us. We don't do slow, deep breathing as an activity unto itself. We are seeking to remember that it is *in God* we live and move and have our being. Our very breath is given by him. As we breathe, we remember that we are in God's presence and under his watchful, caring eyes. Todd Stryd wrote an in-depth article on how this might look.¹²⁴

Grounding helps a person who is experiencing anxiety or other bodily symptoms, such as dissociation, to focus on the here and now. How do you harness the body for good in that moment? Typical approaches have a person notice things around them that they can see, touch, hear, or smell. Sometimes it's as simple as having someone concentrate on the wood or fabric of the chair they are sitting on, or the feel of their feet on the floor. Grounding can help bring a person who's panicked or distracted into the present moment. We are grateful for this. But as Christians, we want to do even more in the moment. We want to assist in slowing down the person's runaway body and orient them to the Lord's presence.

¹²³ Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 179.

¹²⁴ Todd Stryd, "'Take a Deep Breath'—How Counseling Ministry Addresses the Body," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:3 (2018): 62–74.

We want what is seen, touched, heard, smelled, or tasted to draw the person into God's care, not simply to come to the conclusion (as helpful as it is) that "I'm safe in my body as I'm sitting in my counselor's office." While it is important to feel safe, what we are hoping for is that the present moment becomes a moment of engagement with Jesus. We want to help the person experience what Psalm 16:8 describes: "I know the Lord is always with me. I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me." for example, you could say, "Look around the room for a concrete reminder of God's power and love." Let's say they pick a stone or pebble from the windowsill. (I have a collection of stones and rocks gathered over the years from the coast of Maine.) You might then invite the person to touch and hold the rock, leading to a conversation about how God is like that rock, which is exactly what David calls God in Psalm 18:2. He's strong and immovable. I can hide behind him for protection. He will not break. And so on.

In doing this, we're highlighting that *God* is alive, present, and powerful in this moment. God is the one keeping your counselee, right here, right now. We want to help them fight fire with fire, to tame an unruly body by reorienting their bodily senses toward the Lord.

Using Our Bodies to Draw Near to God

I will end where I began, with John Murray's reminder. You don't simply *have* a body; you *are* a body. In light of that reality, are you marshaling your materiality as you seek to grow in Christ? Are you inviting your counselees to do the same? We must avoid treating fellow image bearers as souls without bodies (or bodies without souls for that matter)! If we are only souls, Christ died and rose in vain because the incarnation is a mirage. If we are only bodies, Christ died and rose in vain because the idea of resurrection is insanity in a universe that is purely material. Our salvation only makes sense in a world where embodied humans populate God's creation and where Jesus of Nazareth did the same. Through union with our embodied Savior, Jesus Christ, the God-man, we will one day image him gloriously as body-soul worshippers. Let's practice for that reality today by using our bodies to draw near to him.