

§ 10. Doctrine of Man

Lecture 6

The Nature of Man – Biblical Data

Today we want to turn to the nature of man. We want to begin by looking at the biblical data pertinent to man's nature.

Let's start with the Old Testament. The Old Testament includes a number of anthropological terms referring to man's nature. For example, the word *nephesh* is the word for "soul." The word *ruach* is the Hebrew word for "spirit." The word *besar* is the word for "flesh." Even though these are the primary meanings of these Hebrew words, nevertheless these anthropological terms in the Old Testament do not serve to draw hard and fast distinctions between different aspects of man. Indeed, sometimes the word *nephesh* or "soul" is actually used to refer to dead corpses. For example, look at Leviticus 21:11. It gives instructions for the priest and says, "He shall not go in to any dead body and defile himself." The word for "body" there is not *besar* (flesh) but *nephesh* or "soul." Similarly Numbers 6:6, "All the days that he separates himself to the Lord he shall not go near a dead body." The word again is *nephesh*. So *nephesh*, though the word for "soul," can actually be used to refer to the physical body. In English, this same usage has been adopted. For example, we've all heard the nursery rhyme "Old King Cole was a merry old soul." Nobody thought that Old King Cole was therefore a disembodied, unextended, immaterial entity. So when we say that Old King Cole was a merry old soul, we are not necessarily referring to that immaterial part of human being.

Turn now to the New Testament. In the New Testament we confront in Paul's letters a number of anthropological terms that are significant for the nature of man. First and foremost among these would be the word *soma* which is the word for "body" in contrast to the Greek word *psuche* which is the word for "soul."

Unfortunately, under the influence of modern materialism and existentialism mid-twentieth century theologians came to reject the distinction between the body and the soul. For example, for an anthropological materialist like Nancy Murphy of Fuller Theological Seminary, because she equates the self with the body, the self cannot survive death apart from the body. Therefore one is forced to deny the intermediate state of the soul after death between death and resurrection. For the Christian materialist like Murphy, when we die we are extinguished. We cease to exist. Then at the end of the world when God raises the dead he re-constitutes the physical body and so the self comes back into existence again. But this view implies that those who have so to speak fallen asleep in Christ have indeed perished as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. There is no intermediate state for the materialist.

By contrast, existentialist theologians like the German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann equated the soul or the self with the physical body. Bultmann held that the word *soma* doesn't really refer to the body in Paul's usage, but rather it refers to the whole person in abstraction from the body – the self or the “I” of the person. Under the influence of existentialist philosophy, Bultmann took the *soma* to mean simply the self – the person, the individual – but not his body. This is extremely important because if it's correct then Paul's affirmation of the resurrection of the body doesn't necessarily mean the resurrection of this physical substance, this organism. Rather it would simply mean that the self lives on, the resurrection of the “I” so to speak – me. To say “I will be raised bodily from the dead” would simply mean “I will continue to exist.” Thus a theologian like Bultmann can affirm paradoxically the bodily resurrection of Jesus while affirming that Jesus' tomb still contained the corpse of Jesus which in time rotted away. Moreover on Bultmann's view nobody else will ever be raised physically from the dead either. I think you can see how important it is that we understand what the proper referent of *soma* is. Is *soma* the body or is it simply the whole person in abstraction from the body?

Robert Gundry, who is a very fine New Testament scholar, has written a book entitled *Soma in Biblical Theology* in which he gives a withering critique of Bultmann's view. Gundry argues that *soma* is never used in the New Testament to denote the whole person in abstraction from the physical body. Rather, *soma* is used much more to denote the physical body itself or the person with special emphasis upon his physical body. Let's look more closely at how Paul uses the word *soma* in his various letters.

First, critics like Bultmann will often allege that because Paul uses the word *soma* and personal pronouns like “you,” “I,” and “we” interchangeably, that proves that *soma* actually refers to the person. If I were to say to you something like this, “You should present your body as a living sacrifice to God,” I could just as well have said, “You should present yourself as a living sacrifice to God.” This would allegedly show that the word “body” really just refers to you, the person, but not your physical body. Because the personal pronouns can be used interchangeably with the word *soma* then *soma* simply refers to the person. But Gundry points out that the presupposition of this argument is that the pronoun, when used instead of *soma*, expands the meaning of the word *soma* rather than that *soma* restricts the meaning of the pronoun. He says this is simply unjustified. The word *soma*, rather than being expanded in its meaning by the use of the pronoun, can actually serve to restrict the reference of the pronoun. Gundry gives the following example. Suppose you say, “She slapped his face.” You might also have said, “She slapped him.” Obviously, the fact that you can use the pronoun “him” instead of “his face” doesn't mean that a person's face is identical to the whole person in abstraction from the body. Rather, the expression “his face” limits the meaning of the pronoun to that part of him that she slapped. So “She slapped his face” restricts the meaning of the phrase

“She slapped him” so as to specify the physical face. When you look at all of the places that Paul uses *soma* interchangeably with personal pronouns you find that they are all exactly like this. In every case the emphasis is on the physical aspect of the human being. Let's look at some examples.

Romans 6:12-14,16a. Paul writes,

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.
Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield
yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your
members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion
over you, since you are not under law but under grace. . . . Do you not know that
if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one
whom you obey . . .

This is a passage where Paul uses the word *soma* interchangeably with second person personal pronouns “you.” But it's obvious from the context that the emphasis is on the physical body because Paul talks about your mortal bodies – using that adjective “mortal” – because he talks about obeying the passions that are in the body, and he also uses the word “members” to designate the members of the physical body (“Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness.”) So the emphasis in the passage is on bringing the physical body into submission to Christ. The passage in no way proves that *soma* can refer to a person in abstraction from his body. Rather, here the emphasis is physical and on bringing our bodies into submission to God.

Similarly, look at 2 Corinthians 4:10-12. Paul says,

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also
be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to
death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal
flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Again you see how the word “body” is used interchangeably with pronouns like “us” and “you.” But again the emphasis in the context is clearly on the physical body. Notice that in the context Paul is addressing the physical persecution that they have to endure. He goes on to talk about the difference between the outer man and the inner man. He talks about having this treasure in earthen vessels. Clearly the emphasis in the passage is on the physical body and not on the person in abstraction from his body.

Look at Ephesians 5:28-30. Paul says,

Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his
wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and
cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

Again, I think that the physical orientation of the passage is very evident from the use of the word “flesh” as a synonym for “body.” No man ever hates his own flesh, but rather he takes care of it. Again, the interchange of pronouns with *soma* by no means implies that *soma* refers to the person in abstraction from his body. Rather, in every case where these personal pronouns are used interchangeably with *soma* the emphasis is on the physical life and the body of the person involved.

I find Gundry’s critique compelling. It seems to me that when you read those passages in which you have pronouns and *soma* used interchangeably, the emphasis is clearly on the physical aspects of human being, even the sexual aspects of the human person, and therefore these passages do not in any way sustain Bultmann’s claim that the *soma* refers to the self or the “I”.

Secondly, Paul's uses of the word *soma* elsewhere are equally physical. Not only the passages where *soma* is used interchangeably with personal pronouns, but Paul's uses of the word *soma* elsewhere are equally physical. Let's look at some of these.

In 1 Corinthians 7:4, Paul writes,

For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does.

Clearly, the word “body” is being used here in reference to the physical body because the emphasis is on sexual relations between man and wife and how these are to be conducted in the marriage relationship.

Similarly, in Romans 1:24 we have a similar emphasis upon sexuality and hence physicality. Paul says,

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves . . .

Then he describes the aberrant sexual practices that these persons engaged in.

The same is true in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Paul says,

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything. “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two shall become one flesh.” But he who is united to the Lord becomes one

spirit with him. Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Here the emphasis upon sexual purity and the union of two persons in sexual intercourse into one body makes it quite clear that Paul is talking about the physical body when he uses the word *soma*.

Also in Romans 12:1-2, Paul says:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Here Paul envisions the presentation to God of our physical bodies as living sacrifices and then the transformation of our minds. So both the physical life and the mental life are to be consecrated to God. This is a passage that is dualistic in nature – mind and body wholly dedicated to God.

1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul says, “I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Here he's thinking of that physical aspect of his life and keeping that physical aspect in check and under discipline. The context, using athletic metaphors like boxing and running, I think serve to show that the physical part of human life is what Paul has in mind here.

1 Corinthians 13:3, Paul says, “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” Here he seems to contemplate martyrdom or giving his physical body up to be destroyed. Certainly the self or the “I” is not something that can be burned up. So Paul is here talking about his physical body once again.

Philippians 1:20, Paul says,

as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

Here again Paul seems to be contemplating martyrdom – whether he will live or die, whether the body will be physically killed or whether he will live on in the body. That seems to be the thing that Paul is concerned with. So Paul is talking about remaining in this physical life versus dying. So when he says in verse 1:24, “but to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account,” here he's using the word “flesh” in a morally neutral sense to indicate his physical presence via the body in this world.

Finally in Romans 8:11, Paul says,

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.

The use of the adjective “mortal” shows that he is here speaking of our physical bodies. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so God will give life to our mortal bodies when we are raised from the dead.

I think that it's very evident that when you look at how Paul uses the term *soma* he is talking about the physical body or about the person with an emphasis upon his physical life. Let me quote from Gundry's conclusion. Gundry says,

The *soma* denotes the physical body, roughly synonymous with ‘flesh’ in the neutral sense. It forms that part of man in and through which he lives and acts in the world. It becomes the base of operations for sin in the unbeliever, for the Holy Spirit in the believer. Barring prior occurrence of the Parousia [the second coming of Christ], the *soma* will die. That is the lingering effect of sin even in the believer. But it will also be resurrected. That is its ultimate end, a major proof of its worth and necessity to wholeness of human being, and the reason for its sanctification now.¹

I think that the importance of Gundry's conclusion cannot be overemphasized. For far too long twentieth century theology has been told that when Paul uses the word *soma* he is not referring to the body but is referring to the self, the ego, the “I” of a human person. But Gundry's study, like a dash of cold water, brings us back to the authentic consciousness of a first century Jewish person. The notion of the *soma* as the “I” or the self in abstraction from the body is a perversion of its biblical meaning into virtually the opposite, namely a symbol for the immaterial aspect of human being. Robert Jewett, who is another prominent New Testament scholar, has thus said, “Bultmann has turned *soma* into its virtual opposite: a symbol for that structure of individual existence which is essentially non-physical.”² Gundry thinks that existentialist treatments of *soma*, like Bultmann's, have actually been a positive impediment to a correct exegesis of Paul's thought, particularly 1 Corinthians 15 on the resurrection of the body. It has sacrificed New Testament theology for a philosophical fashion, namely existentialism, that is already passé.

START DISCUSSION

¹ Robert H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 50.

² Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms: A Study of Their Use in Conflict Settings* (AGAJY 10; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), p. 211.

Student: About Nancy Murphy . . . how do people like her explain verses where Paul says things like “absent from the body is to be present with the Lord?” It really sounds like when you’re dead that means you’re still conscious and in the intermediate state. How do they explain things like that?

Dr. Craig: I don’t know. I’ve never talked to her personally about these particular passages. But I think you’re quite right. 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul is talking about this intermediate state, and it seems to be a conscious blissful state of being with the Lord and being absent from the body. What these Christian materialists have to say is that there is no such state literally.

Student: The other thing that occurred to me is, what’s their view on the incarnation? They believe presumably Jesus was truly human, but they don’t believe humans have souls, so do they take an Apollonian type view where he’s a physical body with a divine soul?

Dr. Craig: You’re raising really good questions. If we do not have immaterial souls but we just are bodies, then wouldn’t that make the doctrine of the incarnation imply that somehow God turned himself into a human being? Because that’s all Jesus is – just the physical body. And of course I suppose they could still claim to the divine nature, but how it’s unified with that physical body is really difficult to see, I think. So these are pressing concerns for the Christian materialist. I agree.

Student: The last comment I think about that. I noticed that in van Inwagen’s interview, he kind of kept bringing up, how do you put it, the idea of a soul interacting with the physical body seems to violate the law of conservation of energy or something like that. And I’m thinking, but wouldn’t that seem to apply if he believes that there’s an immaterial aspect of Jesus? It would seem to imply to that.

Dr. Craig: That’s right, because there is a divine person there. The second person of the Trinity who is somehow united with this physical body. I have not seen materialistic accounts of the incarnation. I’m not sure how that would work.

Student: I may be taking you totally off track, but can we go back to 1 Corinthians 6:12-20? You talked about the two shall become one flesh, and how that is talking about sexual intercourse and that being physical. My question to you was: what does it mean then to become one flesh? I thought of that as a spiritual sort?

Dr. Craig: Well, in the context here, I think he’s talking about the man and the prostitute joined in coitus. They are one flesh because they’re united in sexual intercourse. Now, you will probably want to interpret Genesis theologically with a deeper understanding of what it truly means for the man and his wife to be one flesh, but at least here in 1 Corinthians 15 he’s talking about making your bodies members of a prostitute and

becoming one body with her which would be, I think, the idea of being joined in sexual intercourse with her.

Student: It's not the argument that when you have sexual intercourse you become one flesh like the Genesis account, and that's why we're not supposed to do it? Do you see what I'm saying?

Dr. Craig: I do. I do. And this is a good ethical question I once asked one of my New Testament professors. What she is saying is, if you join yourself to a prostitute so that you become one flesh with her, are you married to her? Does that mean that therefore you can never marry again even if you repent because you have already become one flesh with this person? Paul doesn't draw that inference explicitly. My professor that I asked the question of said he thought that that was the consequence and just underlined the seriousness of sexual sin. That's a very hard line to take, and I can't say anything more beyond that because I haven't reflected on it further. But at least for every person it ought to make us redouble our efforts to avoid these sorts of sexual sins because the consequences are serious and could be utterly disastrous. Good question.

Student: I'd like to ask the difference between *soma* and *sarx*, especially as used by Paul. For example, because he seems to be very specific in choosing one word over the other sometimes in the same passage. So for example in 1 Corinthians 15:44 he's talking about *it's sown a natural body; it's raised a spiritual body* but then a few verses later in verse 50 he says, *I tell you this brother's flesh [sarx] and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.* So they seem to be more than synonyms. What do you think about that?

Dr. Craig: OK, what you are drawing our attention to is the New Testament or Greek equivalent of the word "flesh" which is *sarx*. I haven't mentioned that, but we'll have to talk about that more. Is *sarx* (flesh) simply synonymous with *soma* (body)? Well, in some passages it does seem to be that way. In fact, the passages we read many times he would talk about your mortal bodies or your mortal flesh – flesh in the neutral sense, as Gundry calls it, is the body. But what that expression by Gundry conceals is that there is a non-neutral sense of the word "flesh" in Paul's letters. There is a sense of the word "flesh" which is a moral use, and in that case "flesh" designates this sinful quality, of sinful passions, that lodge in the body but are not simply equivalent to biological processes. For example, jealousy, envy, rage, and other sorts of sins will be manifestations of the flesh in this moral sense. So it's important to understand this distinction lest we think when Paul condemns these sins of the flesh that we think Christianity has a negative attitude toward the physical body, which it doesn't. It affirms the goodness of the physical body – the *soma* or flesh in this neutral sense – but there is this moral sense in which the same word "flesh" is used that is condemned and is antithetical to the spiritual. We'll talk more about

that later, but yes, you put your finger on an important issue in New Testament vocabulary for anthropology.

Student: As I'm listening to this, I was just wondering if this conversation could relate at all to the Greek *telos* – how that might possibly fit into this conversation? *Telos* – the idea of personhood being defined by our fulfillment of virtues.

Dr. Craig: OK. *Telos* means the end or the goal or the purpose of something. I'm not sure how you want to relate that idea of the goal or the end of something to this. What is the connection?

Student: I was just thinking about the physical – the purpose of a human being being defined by their sense of fulfillment in their purpose. When I was thinking about what you're mentioning about the physical body and how we act, how we purpose our physical actions for God or for God's will, it just made me think of that same sort of relationship between our physical body acting out virtues. I didn't know if they were related at all.

Dr. Craig: I think that you're raising a good point in that our ultimate *telos* is conformity to the image of Christ – sanctification. This includes the physical body. We shouldn't overreact to the materialists like Murphy by denying the importance of the physical body and its essentiality to full human being. It is an integral and essential part of what it means to be a human being. So whatever *telos* we have, it will include a physical component.³

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