

A Christian response to fitness and the body

Throughout history there have been varied philosophies concerning the body. The *Gnostics*, who lived when Jesus was on earth, believed that all things material were evil. They believed that the body was evil and that only the spirit was good. A contrasting philosophy is *Narcissism*, the basis of today's most commonly held attitudes towards body image. This is a "look at me" philosophy, giving way to self-importance, egotism, vanity and conceit. It tells us that a beautiful body is paramount to our identity and we are expected to invest in plastic surgery, fad diets and all manner of fashion attire, not to mention maintaining a stream of pretense with online social networking. Where does a Christian theology of the body place itself on these matters?

Your body

Your body carries about your spirit. The Bible calls it your "temple" out of which you worship and serve God.

"Do you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Corinthians 6:19)

If your body is in optimal condition then the capacity for servicing God and others is heightened. So should you be aiming to keep your body in good shape? Think about how useful a fit and healthy person can be to God. When you are tired, sick, or a potential health disaster waiting to happen, you may be of less use to God. Although it is a ministry of the church to care and pray for the sick, the fewer sick people there are within the church, the more time Christians have to help those who do not know Jesus.

You must however be careful to check your motives for maintaining an optimal standard of fitness, health and beauty. Are you looking after your body out of obedience to God? Do you want to be fit to serve Him? Or is your motive to build a good physique to impress? Can an old and wrinkled lady be of use in God's kingdom? Of course! The person in your church most manifesting the spirit of Jesus might well be her! She certainly won't be lost to the temptations of vanity and pride in her striking looks and fashionable attire.

Our bodies are not ornaments, but instruments to bless the purposes and heart of God. If we neglect nutrition and fitness we may find that we have too little energy to serve well. As life progresses we may also find that we have to spend money and time on medicine and doctors trying to keep up life momentum as a consequence.

"My body is not my own, I was bought at a price" (1 Cor 6:20). This implies that every Christian is obligated to practice a wise stewardship of the body, which is a gift from God.

Your culture and its impact on your body

Do you then take part in *Christian* yoga exercise classes, or *Pole dancing for Christians* so you can please your spouse, wear tattoos or draw attention to yourself with radical body piercing? The church so often follows the fads of the culture and sanitizes them; does that make it legitimate practice?

A response to yoga for believers can be found in Paul Reid's fine book. The other questions can be answered when we draw close to God and listen to His voice on how we should dress and present ourselves. You might say, "I'm not hurting anyone," when you indulge in practices seen as being traditionally unorthodox for believers. This is the world's standard for legitimizing all manner of unwholesome behaviour. The Bible revelation is that your body exists as a temple of the Holy Spirit and also as an instrument for blessing, serving and edifying others. Your body has intrinsic value and dignity as it is a creation of God. In some countries, such as Iran and India, there is illicit and growing trade of selling organs such as kidneys. This is different to being an organ donor, because the people donating their kidneys are still living! This practice shows a mindset that the body is just a mechanism not much different to a machine, and vital organs are just items for sale.

Our bodies make visible the invisible, the spiritual and the divine. We are made in God's image, so in our bodies we see God made visible. "God is love", (*1 Jn 4:8*), and the three persons in the Trinity live in an eternal exchange of love. We are designed to share in that love. God created us male and female so that we could reflect His love by giving ourselves as a gift to each other. The resultant child of marital love completes the analogy of the Trinity reflecting our Creator. For those who remain celibate or childless, their role is to be equally as vital. They are to become spiritual mothers and fathers. This means the woman is nurturing the spiritual, moral, emotional, cultural and at times physical lives of others where she is given divine opportunity. The man responds too in a mentor and father-like way as did Paul of Tarsus. "I have no greater joy than this, to her of my children walking in the truth", (*3 Jn 1:4*). We humans discover ourselves not in satiation of physical urges and the ego drives, but in making ourselves a real gift to others as Jesus did. That's when fulfillment occurs. We are responding authentically as image bearers of God by making this counter-cultural lifestyle choice. The question of what we do with our bodies can be answered in the main when we ask, "Does this activity represent God's love or not?" Our challenge is not to hide in a monastery and become more "spiritual", but to use our bodies to glorify God.

The western world exalts a busy executive with a full diary working at a frenetic pace. The Bible presents the greatest executive ever, Jesus. When He lived on earth, Jesus was a person who was not afraid to admit being tired and who took a Sabbath rest. Your body was made to respond to rhythms of sleep, rest and recreation in order to function at its fullest. Proliferations of electronic communication media make the need to rest and restore even more imperative for people of God.

Body as a pleasure centre

What of the stoics who starved themselves, used whips, and even castration in an effort to master their bodies? They are not unlike some of the Hindu yogis who put their bodies through extreme pain to connect to their gods. Paul says physical training is of some value (*1 Cor 9:25*). People with the problem of anorexia or bulimia are striving to control their bodies. True freedom and holiness do not come from maiming and harming the body. Fulfillment and liberation come from a full and Christ-like use of the body.

Such unhelpful activities drain one's capacity to serve others and lead to pride and superiority. Our calling is to show how we use our body for neither hedonistic nor unwholesome and unnatural purposes. Christians are to model the extreme and unique freedom we enjoy, via self-mastery, not self-punishment. An example is purity in marriage relationships. You are of greater service to God when in relationship with others than when in solitude, for the self-giving love resident in the Trinity is being released when you minister to others.

Junk in junk out

What you put into your body, and what you refrain from putting into your body, affects your ability to glorify God. Toxic substances and junk food inhibit thinking and performance levels, as does lack of regular aerobic exercise. Inflicting extreme bodily deprivation, as undertaken by anorexics, or as promoted by some cults, depletes the ability of the body to serve and to think and perceive well. Paul writes to Timothy to warn him of those false teachers who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God required to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth, (*1 Tim 4:2-3*). These false teachers were the Gnostics: "men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth."

While the motto, "all things in moderation" is generally good advice, we should beware of applying it to things that are toxic. Smoking for example, is not good, even in moderation. When it comes to things that are toxic, abstinence is the better way to go. And the difficulty with eating junk food in moderation is that there is no measuring stick. How much is too much? Is it once a day or once a week? We can make our own standard to appease our conscience. 'Hardly ever' for some people might be once a week. For some it might be once a day. Rather than saying "all things in moderation", it is better to say, "some things in moderation and some things never."

What makes a body beautiful or attractive? It is worth reflecting on our source for a standard of what is considered to be a beautiful/attractive male and female body. Who sets the standard? These images are culturally laden and change across time periods. The media craft a particular image and advertisers promote wares and services to make us feel we can measure the standards. Since 1959 millions of young women have aspired to look like the anatomically unreal Barbie doll. If the doll was a life sized person such a woman would be anorexic and not be able to menstruate due to such low body

fat. TV evangelists and worship leaders have often been styled like Hollywood personalities and pop stars, causing one to wonder whether a prescribed body shape and age is requisite for platform and leadership roles in church. Our lack of congruence with body ideals of the current culture, and our physical flaws, and moral failings all can point people to Jesus. People crave what is real, and if you with your limitations are loved by God and actively serve Him, the unsaved will recognise this. They will realise that they can be loved and *are* loved, by God too. Salvation is not dependent on an ideal body or youthfulness.

Gender bender

The rise of the homosexual movement is causing a rethinking of the notion of gender. Rather than gender being something defined by anatomy, they would argue it is a social product and not a fixed thing. But gender is not a preference. Christians would say that the structure of a man and a woman's body speaks of connection. We are wired to want union, intimacy, love and sex, friends and children. This is part of our God-like image, which reflects the Triune nature of YHWH. God uses the analogy of marriage union as a teaching metaphor of the divine joining of ourselves, (the bride), with the husband, (Jesus).

“And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female.” (*Gen 1:27*)

An eye to the body beautiful

Sensual desire, which is meant to orient us toward intimacy with a person of the opposite sex, can actually keep us from loving that person. God intended sensual desire to orient us toward personal intimacy, and not just sexual union. Sensual desire serves as an ingredient of authentic love when it is integrated with the higher, nobler aspects of love—such as good will, friendship, virtue, or self-giving commitment. When sensuality *only* is stirred, we experience the body of the other person as a potential object of enjoyment. We reduce the person to their physical qualities—their good looks, their body. And we view the person primarily in terms of the pleasure we can experience from those qualities.

“Beloved, I urge you...to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul” (*1 Pet 2:11*).

Lust dehumanizes the target person. Beauty is experienced not through the stirring desire to exploit or through lustful fixation, but through unconditional love of the whole person. Lust fails to see the human body as a beautiful masterpiece of God's creation, for it reduces the body to being an object to be exploited, to satisfy one's own cravings in a consumer attitude. It is the mindset of a pornographer that reduces the human person solely to the sexual value of the body. Adam and Eve, prior to the fall, looked at each other in ways that did not objectify their partner. Jesus was able to faithfully and lovingly relate to all manner of women because He looked saw them as God's creation, not objects to exploit. The Holy Spirit, indwelling in our bodies, can progressively deliver

us back to this pre-Fall way through sanctification. He transforms the sensual yearning for a member of the other gender, augmenting it with other nobler elements of love: such as friendship, virtue, total commitment, fidelity and self-giving love.

God was incarnate in Jesus, and while in His human body remained connected to the Father within the Trinity. Salvation and the atonement are *body events*, and the general resurrection at the end of the earth's epoch sees the bodies of believers restored and enhanced for a life in heaven. Our bodies are not left as dishonoured waste-byproducts.

...”the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and **body** be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

(1 *Thessalonians* 5:23 KJV)

Further Reading

Every Body Matters: Strengthening Your Body to Strengthen Your Soul

By: Gary Thomas *Zondervan* / 2011 / *Paperback*

Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith

By: Matthew Lee Anderson *Bethany House* / 2011 / *Paperback*

Theology of the Body for Beginners

By: Christopher West *Ascension Press*/2004/*Paperback*

Activities

1. Explain “Gnosticism” and why the philosophy was opposed by orthodox Christians
2. Retell in several sentences the Greek myth of Narcissus.
3. “Yoga is just exercises. It is possible to do these with no reference to religion so this fitness practice is valid for Christians”. Present arguments against this statement. Switch “yoga” for “pole dancing” if you prefer.
4. “Young strong and physically striking people are naturally the best advocates for the Christian faith”. Discuss this comment.
5. “This is my body. As long as I don't hurt others I can put whatever I like into it and take what I want out of it, (e.g. a foetus), tattoo or pierce it, as there are no victims.” Respond to this comment.
6. There was once a Christian sect called “Flagellants”. They tried to mortify their bodies in order to promote holiness and work penance. Explain what they did and why such actions don't result in automatic deepening of spirituality and growth of sanctification.
7. Mother Teresa was a famous spiritual “mother” who never had biological children. The impact of her life was huge. Name some other spiritual mothers

and fathers who have served the Kingdom well, some may be local and known to you.

8. The body of Jesus has not suffered corruption and dissolution on planet earth. Find out which Old Testament people also had their body transferred directly to heaven.
9. If on earth you are short will you then occupy a comparatively short body in heaven? If you were no natural Romeo on earth, will you still struggle to impress females in heaven? If your singing voice is not melodious on earth, will you be making harmonious praise in heaven? If you die in your 90s will you have an old body in heaven or the body of yourself in your prime? Reflect on these questions and write a response, "How ill I appear in Heaven?"
10. Greek statues and idols aimed to present the ideal and perfect body. The Romans copied this style so it was prevalent in the time of the early Church. Examine some of the early Christian art and comment on the portrayal of Jesus, Mary and the disciples. Are they represented with perfect bodies? What reasons would you give for this?
11. There are naked representations of Adam and Eve in churches across Europe, and of Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus. Art depicting the resurrection show large numbers of nude people going towards hell or heaven too. Are they presenting the body in a sensuous way akin to soft pornography or do you see the art fulfilling a different function? Explain your answer.
12. What are the things that affirm young people who are losing weight and moving towards anorexic body types?
13. Draw a mind map with branches listing the key activities you need to pursue to maintain a body at optimal health for ministry. For the branch "nutrition" add on the key factors which make for a wholesome diet. There are ideas on the Beacon Media website – www.beaconmedia.com.au See Secondary Health.
14. Some Christians believe that cremation is wrong as it shows disrespect for the body that God gave to us. What are your thoughts on this?
15. Gluttony was a topic much preached about in the past, but since the end of World War Two it has not featured much as a sermon topic and has been a sin much excused. Why might this be so?