

Conference Minister's Corner

"Everything is Connected": Confessions of a Recovering Gnostic

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Gnostic (pronounced NAW-stick): *a person who believes in the separation of the body and soul, usually privileging the soul.*

"Soul and body, body and soul—how mysterious they were!...Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychical impulse began? Was the soul a shadow seated in the house of sin? Or was the body really in the soul? The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery also." From *The Picture of Dorian Gray*¹.

Oscar Wilde's classic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* wrestles with the relationship between the body and soul. In the haunting tale written in 1890, Dorian's body stays perpetually handsome and youthful while his soul is displayed apart from him—in a painting. As Dorian becomes more and more corrupt, the painting starts sporting a sneer, then wrinkles, and finally has blood on its hands.

And (spoiler alert!—but I trust 131 years is enough time to read it) the story does offer an answer to the soul/body question. Dorian finally attempts to destroy the picture of his deeper self that has become like an unwanted conscience to him. He finds a knife that will "kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warning he would be at peace. He seized the thing, and stabbed the picture with it."

He is later found on the floor: "a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was."² It turns out that body and soul were inseparable all along—there is no destruction of one without the other following suit.

Gnosticism, the belief that the body and soul are separate entities, and that the soul matters more than the body, began within Christianity in the First Century. The Church throughout time has decided that it's not actually a Christian belief.

It wasn't until I interrogated my faith full-time for three years (yeah divinity school!) that I realized how much one of the oldest heresies had infected my way of thinking, and that the separation of body and soul is bad for both.

But what's really at stake? How might gnosticism affect us personally and collectively?

First, if our personal spirituality is disembodied, it is anemic. Faith is not about floating doctrines or ideas in space, unaffected by our actions. Bodily practices shape us. As Stanley Hauerwas says: "Christianity is to have one's body shaped, one's habits determined, in such a way that the worship of God is unavoidable."³

Spiritual disciplines have stood the test of time as tools that have the power to connect us to the divine—whether Sabbath or meditation or voluntary poverty or service or fasting—and they can only be accomplished in our own bodies. It is by submitting the body to fasting or walking on a pilgrimage that the mind and soul may follow.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: “There is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth—no real distinctions between secular and sacred, physical and spiritual, body and soul.”⁴ Therefore, our routines, our relationships, our day job matters greatly. Because, of course, we find in life that what we do, what we fill our minds and bodies with, eventually becomes who we are.

Furthermore, separating the body and soul can lead to hatred of one or both. In Dorian Gray’s story, he gave in to every bodily impulse and attempted to ignore his soul. But for many of us, the opposite is a struggle.

In a pandemic that forces our bodies to be separated from one another by Zoom and masks, we may find ourselves hating our own vulnerable bodies, wishing for invincibility. The same can be true when we’re faced with an unwelcome diagnosis or internalized racism in the BIPOC community or the daily frailties of the flesh (“If only I could function on less sleep!”). And in a culture that pushes unattainable standards for how our bodies should look, women in particular may find ourselves hating our physical appearance, rejecting our bodies while somehow thinking we’re not rejecting “who we are.” (The language we use doesn’t help. One part of female anatomy—the pudendum (a.k.a. the vulva)—is literally translated “the part to be ashamed of.” There is no male equivalent.)⁵

A subconscious or conscious downplaying of the body can also, tragically, be a justification for abuse. John Piper, a public theologian and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary, has said that women should endure a season of verbal abuse and occasionally “being smacked” by their husbands if it is “not requiring her to sin [spiritually] but simply hurting her [physically].”⁶ James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, has said that some wives seek abuse for the “moral advantage” that a black eye gives them as a “martyr”⁷—as if women are just itching to elevate their ethical standing by sacrificing their bodies to their husbands’ fists. The logic justifying intimate partner violence is oftentimes undergirded by Jesus’ own suffering—he submitted to bodily torment and therefore abuse victims should too, presumably for the development of their character and the salvation of their marriage.

How tragic! Our bodies are beautiful and imperfect and complicated and deserve to be honored by ourselves and others, especially those closest to us. Abuse damages our whole person, not just our bodies; therefore, the justification and celebration of abuse and violence have no place in Christian thought.

Gnostic thought is possibly even more destructive on a collective level. Gnosticism downplays or denies entirely the interconnectedness of all things. It starts with our individual bodies but then easily spreads this ideology to other bodies, like the body of the earth. This has real implications for our work of justice, especially creation care.

For much of my life, I believed that food/health/bodies were somehow in a separate realm from faith/the church/souls. Nurses and farmers worried about digestion and soil science and Brussels sprouts, while the church worried about right doctrine. It never occurred to me that the church potluck was a spiritual event—that who grew the food, the land and hands it came from, and our consuming it together were all things that mattered to our souls (clearly I hadn’t read enough Mennonite cookbooks!). It also never bothered me that the pastors I grew up listening to in the evangelical church didn’t preach against the fossil fuel industry’s destruction of people and the planet for the sake of profits.

But from the Eucharist to the feeding of the 5,000 to turning water into wine to the countless meals Jesus shared with friends and “sinners,” we find that land, soil, and food matter. And from the many interactions Jesus has getting up close and personal with bodies, whether his own body in the incarnation, death and resurrection, or others’ bodies through touching or healing, we find that bodies matter. The Word could have stayed Word but it didn’t—it became Flesh and hung out with us in all of our complicated, messy realities.

So what’s the antidote to gnosticism? Unsurprisingly, the remedy is interconnectedness. As Sam Wells puts it: “The Church has no deeper work than reconciliation: its work is to reconcile people to God, to creation, to one another and to themselves.”⁸ Or to put it another way: “Everything is connected” Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si*, “and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven

together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river, and mother earth.”⁹ An awareness of this interconnectedness is at the heart of deep spirituality, and is the means and end of our Christian lives.

Gnosticism is a pervasive and tenacious belief, and replacing one worldview with another takes time—I may very well be in recovery for the rest of my life. But hopefully my community can help me as we embrace that we are all in this together, that the physical and spiritual are inextricably linked, and that the body of the earth and our own needy and vulnerable bodies are always, always deserving of love.

1. Oscar Wilde, 1854-1900, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. (London; New York: Penguin, 2003), 62.
2. Ibid, pp. 228-229.
3. Stanley Hauerwas, “The Sanctified Body” in *Embodied Holiness*, ed. Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 22.
4. Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
5. Rachel E. Gross, “Taking the ‘Shame Part’ Out of Female Anatomy” *The New York Times*. September 21, 2021 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/science/pudendum-women-anatomy.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage§ion=Science>
6. Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism*. (New York: Oxford, 2015), 102.
7. Kathryn Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 84.
8. Samuel Wells, *A Future That’s Bigger Than the Past* (London: Canterbury Press, 2019), 27.
9. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Given in Rome at St Peter’s, 2015). Accessed September 24, 2021 at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html