

Embodiment

We're having a national election in a couple of days, and almost everyone in the Church in America seems to be terribly concerned about its outcome. Indeed, most political commentators say this election may be the most portentous one in a century. But God is totally in control of this election. He's not asleep nor is He indifferent. He has a timetable and an agenda for this world, and He's fulfilling His will in His way. So, whatever is the election's outcome, it shouldn't matter to believers. We should be concerned about more lofty matters, things that are eternal in importance. Let's discuss why.

We live in a world of time and space, in a magnificent world of nature, and in a great society of people saturated with their culture, beliefs and ideas. It's how God created us – to live in His natural world and in society. But this isn't the world nor the kind of society that God desires. That's because of the Fall of man into sin, God's resulting curse on the physical world, and the usurpation of the control of societies by Satan and his minions. Thus, we read, "love not the world, neither the things that are in the world..." (1 John 2:15). We're necessarily in the world, but we're not to be *of* it. As we've discussed many times in Sunday School, in the future God will restore the physical world to how He intends it to be, and the Son will rule over a world-wide society that honors and serves God. But we don't have that now. Instead, we have the Word of God and the gift of the Spirit to instruct and guide us in how to live in this present alien, God-cursed, demon-dominated world while honoring and serving God. We're not – we can't be! – oblivious to the world because, for example, it can hurt us and it necessarily feeds us. But we set priorities, and our priority is God's will for us.

In the same way that we necessarily live in a physical world of time and space, a world of culture and ideas, we live in a body. At creation, God brought physical matter into existence. And out of the elements He'd made, such as carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen, phosphorous, sulfur, etc, He created life. He constructed bodies that autonomously function, that have the necessary biochemical processes that make life as we know it possible in this physical or natural world that God made. And we read in Genesis 2:7, "And the LORD God . . . breathed [into the man's body that was formed from physical matter, from atoms and molecules] the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Our ultimate origin is God. As He's a spiritual Being, so are we. We're a spirit, having come from God, living within a body of physical matter. Our material body plus our non-material spirit makes us human beings. [The term "soul" is probably synonymous with spirit, although some theologians and Christian psychologists try to invent another entity from the term. We needn't discuss that issue here.] As God is eternal, our spirit is eternal too. We are embodied spiritual beings. Our physical body is the home God gave us for this present, brief, temporary life on earth. But God has greater plans for us in a future that extends for eternity. Another kind of existence awaits us.

The pinnacle of creation was the making of human creatures. And God said of His total creation, it was "very good." Non-material existence is not in some way *better* than our physical existence. Our bodies aren't intrinsically evil. Our bodies can be defiled by sexual immorality, for example, or by other immoral things we do with it. We're to be holy *in the body* we live in (see 2 Corinth 7:1, a very important statement). To Paul, body and spirit together make up a unity, a whole person. In another place, Paul says we're to use our body to serve God, "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer..." and he goes on to say our spirit is involved in the same act, "...without anger or disputing" (1 Tim 2:8). Although distinct (in 1 Corinth 14:14, "spirit" is distinguished from the material "mind," and in Rom 8:16, it's to our "spirit" that the Holy Spirit bears witness), we are material and non-material entities harmoniously forming a whole person. And it's the whole person who, in this life, relates to God. Nevertheless, at death the spirit departs from the body and continues its existence, while the body, subject to God's physical laws that necessarily work in the natural world, disintegrates. This world we live in and this body we inhabit are not what God has in store for us as His ultimate creation blessing. The best is yet to come.

We're going to have a new body in a resurrection. It'll be one like Jesus' resurrection body, based on 1 John 3:2, 1 Cor 15:49, and especially Phil 3:21. Embodiment is eternal. It's not just our spirit that's eternal, our *person* is. "I" survive death, not just my spirit. God intends us to have a new, replacement body for our spirit to indwell. Just as there's to be a new, replacement physical world in which His transformed people will dwell.

By the way, the immaterial aspect of humanity gives the lie to Darwinian evolution. We all have free will, and consciousness, and we have a conscience, ie, an awareness of what's right and wrong, what's good and what's evil. These are non-material facets of humanity, and they absolutely cannot be accounted for by naturalistic evolutionary processes. They can only be explained by a transcendent, super-intelligent Being having made humans with these non-material features.

A few words of caution are needed here. Many Christians today err in believing the spirit is more important than the body and, the intellect being considered a bodily function, they take an anti-intellectual stance to the Christian life. This is phony piety. There's nothing unspiritual about diligent study of the Scriptures or the study of theology. We're to love the Lord "with all our mind" (Mark 12:30). Similarly, although emotional responses may in part be a bodily function, that doesn't mean it's unspiritual to express emotion. Is God never angry?

We also need to avoid asceticism. Ascetics repudiate the pleasures and comforts of our material world because they think they are either evil or lowly, vulgar. Some Christians likewise suppose that to be spiritual, we must be contemptuous of and/or renounce enjoying the good things with which God has filled His creation. Wrong! Scripture says that we are free to enjoy life. (See 1 Timothy 6:17c.) Everything God created (in the context of 1 Timothy 4:1-5, sexuality and eating) is to be received with thanksgiving. We will abuse and misuse what God has provided, our sin nature makes that certain. But the material world God created is "very good," and the life He gave us is to be enjoyed to the glory of God. But we must set priorities! Paul also wrote, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Col 3:1-4). Is Paul confused? Conflicted? No. The life we experience now is only temporary. Our great hope and desire is for what God has in store for us in the future.

The body we dwell in is not the ideal one we might wish we had. Severe limitations have been imposed on it. We continuously have to breathe air, for example. We must eat and drink water to stay alive, and the body produces smelly wastes that have to be disposed of. The body has various kinds of messy discharges. It ages, and it's vulnerable to all kinds of infirmities. And it's mortal; it ceases to live and it then decomposes. Some people have a beautiful body, but others have one not as beautiful. Some have bodies that are frail, others have bodies with astonishing strength. Some bodies have great intellect (due to complex neural pathways), others, well, not so much. The body that some people have continues functioning for many decades, 90 or 100 years perhaps. Others have a body that doesn't last very long. God, a *good* God, has given us the body to live in that He thinks we should have. In this present life, we're to glorify God with whatever He's given us, and in whatever circumstances He's put us in.

There's another aspect to human embodiment. We need to think clearly about it. Scripture often refers to the "flesh" as either the whole material aspect of man, or to our disposition as embodied creatures to sin and to rebel against God. "In my flesh [embodied sin nature] dwelleth no good thing" (Romans 7:18), for example. And there's a reference in 2 Peter 2:10 to those "who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority." But in Galatians, Paul says that the sins of "the flesh" are uniquely those that we do in our bodies: "Live by the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh" (Gal 5:16-19), eg, sexual immorality. This is the point of Romans 1:24. That's because the physical body has sinful passions and desires (v. 24). John too says that the body has its particular lusts (1 John 2:16). Because we're fallen embodied creatures, we're susceptible to the ungodly lusts and cravings generated by the physical body in which we dwell. Just as we're susceptible to the ungodly influences and beliefs of the world in which we dwell.

For the believer, being embodied creatures with a sin nature entails the near certainty of failure. Yet we need to overcome the lusts of the flesh. We can't be indifferent. Awareness of fleshly lusts and the self-discipline to avoid them (1 Cor 9:27) are key requirements to living the victorious life. Paul also tells us to reckon our mortal bodies to have died with Christ, so that sin no longer has to dominate us. And that we need to yield to the Spirit for the empowerment He offers. John refers to "the man who does the will of God..." meaning we need to be obedient to the Word. God has not abandoned us to uncontrollable forces. He wants us to be overcomers (1 Corinth 6:20b, "glorify God with your body").

Unless the Rapture is soon [and it may be], the day is coming for all of us when our spirit will leave the body. Death is separation, a separation from the people we love and a separation of our spirit from the body (implicit in James 2:26). But death is not something to fear or loathe. For Paul, it was what he desired most: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain...I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Phil 1:21-23), and in another place he says that he'd "rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8). Stephen anticipated being with Christ thru death ("Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," Acts 7:59). The greatest moment of our life is when our spirit leaves the confines of this mortal body and is transported to be with God into what is the most blessed existence there is, something wonderful beyond anything we can imagine. John in Revelation 4 helps us to know what it may be like. If you haven't read that chapter lately, it's worth reading and thinking about it, not only now but again and again. We need continually to have a fresh awareness of God's deep love for us. And live in a way that's appropriate to our glorious destiny.

That is why it doesn't matter how the November 3 election turns out.