

The Image

Human personhood as a physical and spiritual totality

PLACE OF PEOPLE

Enigma and paradox

‘ ... What are people that you are mindful of them,
and human beings that you care for them?
Yet you have made them little less than God,
and have crowned them with glory and honour’
(Ps. 8:4-5)

‘A person that is born of woman
is of few days, and full of trouble.
They come up like a flower, and wither,
they disappear like a shadow ...’
(Job 14:1-2)

“Who am I?” - what is my identity, and what is my role within the world?
“What am I?” – how am I structured, and what is my link with the world?

These are two of the of the most basic of life’s questions. They can be summed up in the single question, “What does it really mean to be a human being?”. It is such an obvious and easy question to ask, while, at the same time, it remains profoundly difficult to answer. Nevertheless, these are essential questions to answer. ¹

The simple and exciting fact about human personhood is that it is both an experienced reality for each one of us, while at the same time an enigma and a paradox. We sense mystery and ambiguity about ourselves; within ourselves, within the world and in terms of our relationship with God. Apart from divine revelation human beings hold extreme and opposing views about themselves:

- naive optimism : “Look what we have done ...”
- cynical pessimism : “What hope for the human race ...”

Poets and philosophers of all ages have offered quite different perceptions of personhood; according to them we are:-

- ‘The glory and the sum of the universe’ (Pascal)
- ‘The quintessence of dust’ (Shakespeare in ‘Hamlet’)
- ‘An economic being’ (Karl Marx)

¹ It is personally and practically vital so that we can understand ourselves, but also theologically essential if we are to understand the incarnation – Jesus being both fully human and yet fully divine both at the same time. We have already explored a biblical Christian understanding of revelation (‘The Light’) and also the tri-unity of God (‘The Godhead’); but before we can understand ‘The Incarnation’ we must have a biblical understanding of personhood.



The Bible stands in contrast to our own human ambivalent assessment of ourselves. It presents us as unique within the world, at one with the environment in which we move and yet at the same time with the call and destiny of God upon us.

We are unique within the world; the 'creature of God'. Within creation we alone are a mixture of heaven and earth; molded out of the dust, yet receiving life by the direct transfer of God's divine breath (Gen 2:7). Not only are human beings the final act of creation, God's noblest work, however it is in and through our existence and relationship with God that the rest of creation comes to fulfillment and meaning. The three major scriptures about human personhood are:

- Gen. 1:26 - 2:4a: "Let us make human kind in our image ..."
- Gen. 2:4b-9: "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground ..."
- Ps. 8:3-8: "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands ..."

Harmony and rule ²

The human person is wholly part of nature. The name *adam* emphasises the reddish dust from which the original person was formed (Gen 2:7; Job 10:8-9). We share biological and physical similarity with the animal creation with whom we also share the breath of life (Gen 7:22; Ecc 3:19-20). We move within the principles of the natural world and find ourselves overawed by its grandeur (Job 38-42). Like all created creatures we are wholly dependent upon the mercy of God (Ps 103:15; 104:27-30). Human beings have an empathy with nature (Gen 2:19); we must respect it (Dt 22:9-10), recognise our dependence upon it, and work gently within its environment to meet our needs (Gen 3:17; 9:1-7).

Nature is created and controlled by God. Our divinely chosen place is to be in unity and harmony within nature. God has placed humankind at the centre of creation and given us a mandate to exercise 'dominion' and 'rule' upon the earth. But this is to be done in 'meekness' ('strength under perfect control'), and in harmony with God's character (Gen 1:28; Ps 8:6-8). We are to live in companionship with nature, rather than mere stewards. Our role is to serve nature; to tend it and bring it to fruition (Gen 2:15). We are uniquely God's agents and rulers within the world, the representatives of God's kingdom upon the earth.

The nature of human dominion over the created order is profound (Gen 1:27; Ps 8:5-8). We are commissioned to take all the potential and possibilities of nature and develop, shepherd and build them to their highest level. This is only possible because of our unique covenant relationship with God. Our rule and position as human beings within nature depends entirely upon our obedience to God; fulfilling divine covenant requirements. We serve creation by serving God. We rule aright only as we ourselves come under the rule of God. Our interface with nature will only be harmonious and fruitful as we fulfill God's personal call upon us.

In rebellion towards God, people have the ability to exploit and destroy the world, reducing paradise to a dust bowl. Rabbi Roshi has said of the Hebrew expression, *ve-yirdu* ('have dominion'), that it may well imply the 'descending' as well as the 'ascending' of dominion.

² There is a close link and greater in-depth dealing with the material in this section in the session 'Ecology & Environment' on the 'Peace & Power' weekend



That is, if we are worthy we will live in harmony with all creatures, if we are not, we will sink lower than them and they will rule over us. True dominion sets creation free to find its full potential in God, perverted dominion drags nature down into a hell of destruction along with ourselves. The spectrum of possibility is as low as it is high.

So nature is not simply a 'neutral' framework in the background against which human beings move. God has placed deep and mysterious bonds between nature and ourselves. Nature suffers and groans under human sin (Gen 3:17-19; Rm 8:20,22). Nature rejoices at events that lead to our redemption (Ps 96:10-13; Isa 35:1-10; 55:12-13; Rm 8:19). Nature will share in God's redemption with us (Isa 11:6-9; 65:25; Rm 8:21).

Image and likeness

On one hand we, as human beings, are fully part of nature, yet at the same time we can find nothing within it that corresponds exactly to ourselves (Gen 2:20). In fact all true joy, harmony and completeness depend exclusively upon our relationship with God (Gen 3:8). It is the spiritual dimension of human beings, which determines their uniqueness. We have a partnership with God which no other creature shares. In Genesis 2:7 it is stressed that an individual's life is a divine gift, the result of the personal in-breathing of God. The words of Psalm 8:5 make the amazing statement that:

'... you have made them a little lower than *elohim* (God),
and have crowned them with glory and honour.'

Genesis 1:26 speaks of God making human beings, 'in our image and after our likeness'. This is a tantalising statement, and the words 'image' and 'likeness' have led to considerable debate among theologians over the centuries³.

The intriguing phrase 'image and likeness' needs to be understood within strictly Hebrew terms:

- **'Image' (Heb *tselem*):** this word is a very concrete term, it has the sense of representing something in the form of a 'statue', 'picture', 'drawing', 'a copy' of something
- **'Likeness' (Heb *demuth*):** this word is a much less distinct term, it has the sense of 'something resembling' - compare its use in the vision of Ezekiel (1:5,10,26 etc), it suggests 'similarity' yet the inability to be truly perceived by the senses, unreal and yet *more than real*

³ Among the different interpretations given, some have suggested they refer to, the dominion human beings may exercise over the earth, the rationality and powers of human reasoning, the immortality of the soul, the ultimate destiny into which individuals must grow, the idea there are certain physical characteristics akin to God. None are adequate in themselves, and some are quite misleading. As we shall see, the notion of an 'immortal soul' is not biblical. Also, while the Bible uses anthropomorphic language, it is clear that God is spirit; while he is able to assume a form if he desires no physical 'image' of 'likeness' of him is possible (cf Ex 20:4). However, the ease, naturalness and perfection of the incarnation is tantalising here. Others thinkers have drawn clear distinctions between the words 'image' and 'likeness'; '**image**' is said to refer to a unique gift from God, an original righteousness, perfect determination, all of which was lost at the fall, and '**likeness**' is said to refer to that which belongs to us by naturally; free will, rationality, dominion over nature, all of which we still retain after the Fall. The Fall leaves the 'image' wounded but the 'will' free. These are not satisfactory explanations, and some reflect Greek speculation rather than a biblical Hebrew mind.



The two phrases need to be held in poetic balance; 'likeness' softens and brings subtlety to the force of 'image'. The words must be understood spiritually, it is not about a sense of physical resemblance. To say that we are in the 'image and likeness' of God is stressing that a human being is a medium of spiritual and personal life; that we have been given a share in the 'personhood' of God. Here is a unique dimension of creation, quite unlike any other part of it. Even though we stand in awe of God we also have a spiritual nature, which gives us a kinship with God (Gen 3:19 we are called a 'thou'). This marks the honour and dignity God has conferred upon us. It marks our standing within God's purposes. The 'image of God' bestows upon us unique capacities for creativity, relationship, self-awareness, and self-determination. We alone, within creation, have moral freedom and a sense of responsibility.

It is only as individual people respond in relationship to God, with love, trust and obedience, that they can become what he truly is, and the 'image of God' be fully seen reflecting God's glory. Obedience to God is a fundamental human necessity, but it is also our privilege, the means by which we receive blessing (Ex 19:5). Human beings alone receive commands from God; eg:

- '... of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you may not eat' (Gen 2:16)
- 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might' (Dt 6:8)
- 'Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice' (Isa 1:16)

Fellowship with God is open to all people with a submissive spirit; those who have a heart that desires to obey his word.

It is important to see that 'the image of God' is primarily corporate, with the individual factors flowing from that. The image of God is only complete in the totality of male and female (Gen 1:27 'So God created human kind in his image ... male and female he created them'). The 'image of God' is only fully seen in the harmony of human relationships, one with another.

The 'image of God' is primarily a 'development' rather than an 'endowment'; we are to 'image God' in the way we walk with God, within the world and relationship with others.

The 'image of God' is part of the psycho-physical totality of human nature; while it can be damaged and distorted it can never be completely lost. It is in Jesus that we fully understand it. Jesus is the true 'image of God' (2Cor 4:4). Jesus is the 'true person' (Jn 19:5), the unique individual, the one bearing the very stamp of God's nature (Heb 1:3). The profound concept of a human person being in the 'image of God' is presented in Genesis 1:27, but it is nowhere further developed in the Hebrew scriptures. It is only 'in Christ' that the full potential of this fact begins to be realised (Rm 8:29; 2Cor 3:18; 1Cor 15:49). In Jesus and the incarnation we see 'the image and likeness' of God most fully revealed; the way that God can become an authentic human being without in any way being less God.



NATURE OF PERSONHOOD

The riddle

We reach the heart of the enigma of human personhood as we attempt to discuss and understand the structure of human 'being' and the function of our nature. The Bible does not present a formal doctrinal statement, nor a theoretical analysis, of human personhood. Such questions did not interest the biblical mind; however, they have been the obsession of the ancient Greek, the systematic theologian, and modern science.

Humanism stresses the 'physical' and 'animal' aspect of the human species. Any suggestion that we are more than the function of our bodily parts is dismissed as illogical; equivalent to arguing that a car engine works because there is 'a ghost in the machine'. Yet, while we encounter 'persons' as physical beings, our experience suggests that this is not the whole story, and that there are unplumbed spiritual depths laying beneath and beyond the skin and that these are clearly more than merely the electrical and chemical stimuli of brain function.

The Bible uses some 80 different words, linked to our physical body and its experience, to refer to a person's spiritual - psychological aspect. At first glance these words can appear to have little connection with each other. These words originate in the Hebrew scriptures; but while the New Testament gives them equivalent Greek names, they always retains their original Hebrew meaning and understanding. However, the New Testament does also make a small number of significant additions to expand this vocabulary:

Hebrew	Greek	English
<i>nephesh</i>	<i>psyche</i>	'soul'
<i>ruach</i>	<i>pneuma</i>	spirit
<i>leb</i>	<i>kardia</i>	heart *
<i>basar</i>	<i>sarx</i>	flesh
	<i>soma</i>	body + resurrection body

* Note that closely linked to the concept of the 'heart' are other concepts like: mind, conscience, kidneys, bowels, inwards, bones.

Note the remarkable omission of the 'brain' ('marrow of the head' – Syriac). For the Hebrew the centre of consciousness lay in the 'heart' not in the 'head'.

The error

Popular Christian doctrine has been very unhelpful in giving us a biblical understanding of personhood, it has usually presented one of two views as being the correct way of defining the components of human being. They have been as follows:

▪ Tripartite

This is the view that the human individual is composed of three components; 'the body', 'the soul' and 'the spirit'. This fails to take a whole biblical picture, and bases itself upon a misinterpretation of two verses:

'May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely;
and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless
at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ'
(1Th 5:23)



‘Indeed, the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit,
joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart’.
(Heb 4:12)

In context these statements are clearly the rhetorical words of a preacher, they are not foundational theological statements. They must be interpreted against the broad biblical background of statements about personhood; and not it against them.

▪ **Bipartite**

This is the view that the human individual is composed of two components; ‘the body’ and ‘the soul’, with the ‘spirit’ being the quintessence of the ‘soul’.

Neither of these two views are satisfactory, because:

- They create the impression that the human person is comprised of three (or two) quite distinct elements (like a Neapolitan ice cream!), rather than a totality
- They do not do justice to the range of biblical vocabulary with the variety of senses in which it is used
- They are influenced by Greek philosophy rather than by Jewish thought; the words of the New Testament have too frequently been filled with concepts from Greek speculation while the Hebrew ideas they are translating have been forgotten
- To imagine ‘body’, ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ as distinct entities is to fundamentally misunderstand the biblical concepts
- In 1Th 5:23 the verb and adjective are both singular; the implication is ‘keep the whole of you’, not ‘parts’ of you
- In Heb 4:12 the implication is to ‘permeate every dimension’ of a person, not separating ‘parts’
- Neither of the models give any direct mention to the ‘heart’ which is a key biblical concept

Bearing these facts in mind we must now attempt to resolve our thinking about the riddle of human nature by looking more closely at the way in which the biblical words are used.

The key

The solution to the riddle is to be found in a true understanding of biblical body language. The Bible leads us towards an understanding of our personhood in its totality by approaching it in terms of our physical body. To the Hebrew mind ‘personality’ resulted from an ‘animated body’, it was not, as the Greeks thought, an ‘incarnated soul’. The important biblical truth is that a person does not *have* a body they *are* a body. The Hebrews never thought about the body in isolation and for its own sake, they were only interested in the whole person and their relationship with God.

So the Bible sees the human body as the expression of the whole person; it sees the physical body as the medium of an individual’s personal life. Added to this, an organic and inseparable connection is seen between the physical and the spiritual dimensions of a person. As a result we see that various physical organs are spoken of as being connected with particular aspects of inner feelings and spiritual experience (eg breath, blood, heart,



liver, kidneys, bowels etc). In fact, at first sight, one could be forgiven for imagining that each individual person is composed of a number of unrelated and isolated centres of inner activity, seemingly independent of any unifying factor. However, nothing could in fact be further from the truth; and understanding this paradox is in fact the essential key to understanding biblical anthropology.

The key to the biblical doctrine of personhood is to understand that the Hebrew mind saw no contrast or distinction between the 'one' and the 'many', the 'whole' and the 'part'. This results in two fundamental conclusions upon which everything else is built:

- **The human person is a unity;** a physical and spiritual totality which is an indivisible whole;
- **The whole may be represented and seen in each particular part.** At any moment any part can stand for the whole person. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew scriptures mention some 80 parts of the human body, and yet, as we shall see, there is no single word for the 'whole'; at any time almost any part can be used to represent the whole.

So in studying biblical anthropology we are presented with personhood as a totality and a whole; an indivisible unity. What the nature and substance of that unity is, is illuminated by a wealth of pictures which have their root in physical organs and observable phenomena from which they provide a 'bridge' into the spiritual depths of human personality:

- Each picture gives a vivid description of some aspect of the inner spiritual processes of personhood
- Each picture serves as a window into the *whole* person
- Each picture represents the whole person from a particular point of view

Putting all the pictures together we have a series of windows each looking in on personhood as a whole, but highlighting different aspects of our unity from different perspectives.

The teaching of the Bible about personhood is profound. At first sight its approach may appear naive, but on examination we discover a treasury of pictures, which interlock with one another in the most complex manner. Their variety of emphasis and colour, their subtle nuances in sense and feeling, all express deep truths about a person as a spiritual being.

The New Testament naturally builds from its Hebrew foundations. While it makes no clearer dogmatic statements than the Hebrew Bible, it does provide a centre around which all the fluid Hebrew ideas can arrange themselves - this is the personality of Jesus. Paul's treatment of the nature of personhood is the most elaborate in the New Testament, due to his emphasis on 'personal experience'. While he enlarges the biblical vocabulary he uses the new words in the established biblical manner and framework. Also the New Testament emphasis on both the present and future experience of the Kingdom of God, and its promise of the 'resurrection of the body', bring a new force to the whole subject.



Room of Windows:

- an imaginative exercise

Imagine a free standing room around which you can walk. There is a large window in each of the four walls, there is also a window in the roof through which you can look down through the ceiling. As you look through each of the windows in turn you have a view of the whole room, but at the same time each window also gives you a unique and distinct perspective on the whole room. While you see the whole room from each window, in each case some things are given more focus while others are more peripheral. The same is true of each of the biblical words describing personhood. The each speak of the whole person, but each has a particular perspective and emphasis.

THE PICTURE - WINDOWS

***Nephesh* - Psyche - 'Soul'**

“God formed a human shape from the dust of the ground,
breathed into its nostrils the breath of life
and they became a living being.”

This important passage from Genesis 2:7 sets the scene for this 'window - word' into the nature of personhood. An individual becomes a *nephesh* from the infusion of divine breath into moulded dust. In physical terms *nephesh* means, 'neck', 'throat', 'gullet' and came to mean 'life', that 'vital motion' which distinguishes a living being from a corpse. Imagine you are standing in a room with two beds; in one someone is sleeping in the other the person is dead – the one sleeping is *nephesh*, the other is not.

The New Testament uses the Greek 'psyche' with the sense of the Hebrew *nephesh*. Paul's writings are significant for how rarely he uses it. The Synoptics are interesting in that one third of their usage refers to life beyond death (Mt 10:28,39; 16:25-26; Mk 8:35-37; Lk 9:24; 21:19), due to the overlap of present and future in the kingdom of God; revolutionary in terms of its Hebrew roots.

This *nephesh* is primarily the life of the whole person in terms of strongly instinctive (animal) activity. It reflects the glory and richness of God's gift of life to him though susceptible to death. It is *not* an independent substance, which, as many have argued, survives death. It is, as we shall see a highly complex image very easy to misinterpret.

Nephesh has such a variety of senses that we must make a careful definition in each particular case. Meanings overlap and are used side by side. It is easy to end up with contradictory statements about *nephesh*. The main characteristics of *nephesh* are:

- It is that vital life which is shared by both humans and animals (Gen 2:19)
- It is life that is bound up with the body, blood is the vehicle of *nephesh* (Dt 12:23), at death it dies (Nu 23:10) draining away with the blood, with resuscitation it 'returns'; not that it has gone anywhere



- It can denote 'the living individual themselves' (Gen 14:21), and can replace the personal pronoun to create special emphasis (Ps 42:6), God uses it of himself (Am 6:8)
- It is strongly instinctive (animal) activity; desire, vital urge, feeling, emotion, mood (Dt 14:26)
- It is feelings and emotions of a spiritual kind; grief, pain, joy, peace, love (Ezk 27:31); its highest expression is longing for God (Ps 25:1)

Ruach - Pneuma - Spirit

“The wind blows wherever it wills, you hear its sound,
but you know neither its source nor its goal;
so it is with everyone born of the Spirit”

This wonderful quote from John 3:8 shows the concept of *ruach* highlighting personhood in terms of our unique relationship with God. *Ruach* has its roots in the 'wind', which emphasises both its powerful and yet subtle nature. *Ruach* is used in a number of different contexts:

- For the wind in nature
- For the nature of God's being ('Spirit of God', 'Holy Spirit'); dynamic, overwhelming, at times completely dominating (Jg 6:34), the root of prophesying (1Sam 10:5-6) and abnormal strength (Jg 14:6)
- For demonic activity (1Sam 16:14)
- For the 'principle of life' (akin to *nephesh*) often used interchangeably; it is the life force present everywhere; independent, universal, it does not die; in contrast to *nephesh*
- For the vital energy dwelling within each individual, that force which affects temperament

Human *ruach* is more than just the natural breath we breathe (which is *nesama*). There is a vital energy within each person which is the result of the special 'in-breathing' of God; the centre of thoughts, decisions, moods, and is the dimension of personhood most directly open to the influence of God. The main characteristics of *ruach* are:

- The direction of the will, it is the energy behind willing and acting, that which urges good and evil (Isa 29:24; Ps 51:12)
- The deep emotions; passion (Jg 8:3), grief (Gen 26:35) zeal (Hag 1:14), often seen in the panting of excitement or distress which is different from normal breathing
- The seat of individual moral qualities and attitudes (Ecc 7:8; Isa 57:15; Num 14:24). Ezekiel sees the Messianic age as a period when individuals will be permeated by Yahweh's *ruach* which in turn will renew their own (11:19; 18:31; 36:26; 39:29). This is one of the most important words in Paul's vocabulary with his emphasis on regeneration, sanctification, fellowship with God (Gal. 5:22-23 etc)
- The experience of being in touch with God and under God's influence. The human *ruach* searches out God's ways (Ps 77:7; Isa 26:9), it can be stirred or hardened by God (Jer 51:11; Dt 2:30)

Ruach presents us with human nature in interplay with the nature of God. It is stressing the whole person open to and transmitting the life of God (Rm 8:16; 1Cor 2:10-11). It has



no physical 'animal' character, (never associated with blood), transcending mere desire or feeling.

Leb - Kardia - Heart

“The good person, out of the good treasure of their heart produces good
... it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks”

The ideas in these words from Luke 6:45 illustrate how *leb* is a 'window - word' that looks in at personhood in terms of deepest emotions and from the perspective of intellect and will.

It was early recognised that emotions and intense feelings produce physical effects in the heart (slow, quick, intermittent pulse rates, sometimes strong pain). So it has come to picture the epicentre of the human person as an emotional being. Other bodily organs have been drawn alongside to add other facets to this idea:-

- **Kidneys:** the unfathomable depths of an individual, centre of emotions that only God can search out and test (Jer 11:20; 12:2; Isa 29:13)
- **Bowels:** emotions that can be deeply agitated; seething fermenting, troubling (Job 30:27; Lam 1:20)
- **Inwards-Belly:** emphasising the unique character of human spiritual nature in contrast to the external world (Phil 3:19; Jn 7:38)
- **Bones:** the basic structural element in man; spiritually and emotionally as well as physically (Ps 35:10; Pr 3:8), they suffer seismic shock in emotional distress (Jer 23:9)

The main characteristics of *lev* are:

- It draws together every spiritual process
- It is 'conscious spiritual activity'
- It is personhood in terms of inner direction
- It is deliberate conscious activity of the will and the responsibility it brings
- What comes from a person's heart is 'the distinct property of the whole person' making them responsible for it; the 'responsible will' is central to the biblical concept of the 'heart'
- Making God's will our own requires a new heart (Ezk 36:26)
- Paul uses *kardia* with all the senses of the Hebrew *leb*, but enlarges it by the introduction of two other words that emphasis 'will' and 'responsibilities':
 - **Mind** (Gk: *nous*): human intellectual capacity (Phil 4:7), which may be good or bad. It may be immoral, vain, corrupt, defiled (Rm 1:28; Eph 4:17). It contains God's law (Rm 7:23) and in a Christian is renewed transforming life (Rm 12:2), imparting the mind of Christ (1Cor 2:16)
 - **Conscience** (Gk: *suneidessis*): human faculty for moral judgment. It can be defiled (1Cor 8:7) or pure [(1Tim 3:9). It is that consciousness of 'being right within one's heart' (Rm 2:15)

So *leb* is conscious spiritual activity, stressing the sense of responsibility.



Contrast : *Nephesh, Ruah, Leb*

It will be quite clear that *nephesh*, *ruach*, and *leb* overlap one another at significant points.

The distinctions between *nephesh* and *leb* at the higher level of understanding are very difficult. They are often used interchangeably (cf Ex 6:9 with Jg 16:16; Ecc 7:8 with Job 6:11), and yet they are not the same. The distinction is found back at their roots.

The overlap between all three is to be expected when we remember each is considering the whole person from a slightly different angle. Their contrasting stresses may be seen as:

- ***Nephesh***: instinctive 'animal' activity
- ***Leb***: conscious spiritual activity
- ***Ruach***: personhood open to the influence of the nature of God

Nephesh and *leb* stand in contrast with *ruach* between them. *Nephesh* and *ruah* stress the 'lower' and 'higher' levels of consciousness.

Basar - Sarx / Soma - Flesh / Body

“ ... by putting off the body of flesh ... you were buried with him in baptism ..”
(Col 2:11-12)

For, as it is written, "The two shall become one flesh" ...
Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you ...”
(1Cor 6:16,19)

Basar is the 'window-word' that looks at 'the whole life substance of personhood organised in visible form'. It is common to both humans and animals. As we have seen we do not have a body, we are a body. *Basar* is *nephesh* in its outward form, the same reality is involved, a person as a living being. It is the whole tangible form of a person controlled by the *nephesh*, (there are different Hebrew words for simply the muscular parts of the body and for a lifeless corpse). The Hebrew scriptures do not have a word for 'the body' in the way we would understand that term (the whole). *Basar* is 'flesh', though (as we shall see) the New Testament term 'body' is rooted back into it.

'Flesh' stresses the high value the Bible places on a person's physical aspect. It affirms our physical existence. It destroys the Greek idea, that has so often polluted Christian thinking, that 'the flesh' is a prison cell, the enemy of the spirit, which incarcerates the 'real self' in matter. However the Bible also affirms that the physical alone does not give complete meaning to personhood. 'Flesh' is simply the whole person from one particular perspective. 'Flesh' is the whole person in visible form and it is good. Dependent life, which requires a physical organism to sustain it. It stresses human impotence and the fact that ultimately we are wholly perishable. There is no promise of resurrection for the 'flesh'.

'Body' provides a unique 'picture - window' into the whole person. It is a word that takes on particular significance in the New Testament vocabulary of Paul. The word 'flesh' (Gk. *sarx*) properly translates the Hebrew *basar*. The word 'body' (Gk. *soma*) must find its origin in the same Hebrew root, but it develops quite differently. Paul speaks of 'the body of the flesh' (Col 2:11); this makes a complete identity between 'body' and 'flesh'. It is significant



that the Greeks stressed the contrast between 'body' and 'soul', while Paul draws the contrast between 'body' and 'flesh'. We can show the parallels and differences in emphasis in the following simplified way:

- **Sarx / Flesh**

- *External* - visible presence in contrast to internal and spiritual
- *Tangible* - often a personal pronoun; 'flesh longs for God'
- *Solidarity* - with the whole of creation, God-given sphere of life
- *Contrast to God* - mere mortals, weak, impotent, 'all flesh is grass'
- *Opposition to God* - exploited by the powers, appetites open to sin

- **Soma / Body**

- *External* - physical presence, making earthly life possible
- *Existential* - what personhood is, the very core of human being
- *Solidarity* - with the whole of humanity, binding us together, it is always social
- *Made for God* - emphasising the strength of human creativity
- *Opposition to God* - the power of sin, corruption and dishonour
- *Destined for God* - only the body carries an individual into the resurrection

- **Sarx / Flesh**

- It is personhood in external and visible in contrast to internal and spiritual (Gal 4:13-14; 2Cor 12:7)
- It is personhood in tangible form: often used as a personal pronoun (2Cor 5:5; Eph 5:28); notice how 'flesh', 'longs after God' (Ps 63:1), 'rejoices in God' (Ps 84:2)
- It is personhood in physical solidarity with earthly existence (Phil 1:24; Gal 2:20). It is God's chosen will for us to be part of this world, our God-given sphere of life. It is neutral. John stresses Jesus came 'in the flesh' (Jn 1:14; 1Jn 4:2)
- It is personhood in contrast to God: human as opposed to divine. It is 'mere mortals' in their weakness, their impotence, their mortality, temporary, perishable; in contrast to the power and eternal nature of God
- It is personhood in opposition to God; flesh has been exploited by the rebellious forces of 'this age' and has fallen under sin and death (Rm 8:12; Gal 5:13). It is a person living for this world. Their God-given place has taken over as the principle of his life and conduct (humanism), an individual in their self-sufficiency. For this reason flesh will neither 'glory before God' (1Cor 1:29), nor 'inherit the kingdom' (1Cor 15:50). In this sense 'being in the flesh' is incompatible with being a Christian (Rm 8:8), not because it is evil but because it distorts a person's relationship with God

- **Soma / Body**

- It is the external presence of the whole person. It is what an individual has that makes their earthly life possible (Gal 6:17; 2Cor 10:10). In as much as it is the sum of sensual functions and physical appetites, it will pass away. Only when the 'body' has emphasised everything in 'flesh' does it diverge from it
- It is existential personhood, what a person is. The whole person is an expression of the very core of their being. Hence fornication is a sin against the body (1Cor 6:18). It is the 'body' that is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19-20)
- It is personhood in solidarity. 'Body' stresses that which binds one individual to another. It contrasts the Greek idea, which saw the body as the boundary that separated one person from all others. The 'body' never stresses the individual; so singular or plural are



not significant, it must be understood as social. Body emphasises the solidarity of the human race (Heb 13:3). Biblically a person's individuality is found only in their relationship before God (Jer 31:29-30). It is in the vertical direction that biblical individualism is seen

- It is personhood made for God. It emphasised the strength of human creativity (1Cor 6:13-2). In contrast to 'flesh' it is not merely the external as opposed to the spiritual. It is not merely the human as opposed to the divine
- It is personhood in opposition to God. The 'body' is identified with 'flesh' in the power of sin and corruption (Rm 6:6) humiliation (Rm 7:24) dishonour (1Cor 15:43) and lust (Rm 6:12). It is because sin is not just 'fleshly' but a reality of the whole person that it is essential that redemption be accomplished as a bodily event;
- It is the whole person destined for God. 'Body' stresses an individual's 'goal', 'destination', and 'end' in God, rather than their origins; 'the body is for the Lord' (1Cor 6:13). Only the resurrection reveals a person's true destiny, and only the 'body' carries an individual into their resurrection, and that as part of the 'Body of Christ'. Before the body is raised it is essential that it dies first (Jn 12:24; 1Cor 15:36). The 'resurrection body' must replace 'Flesh'.

Resurrection body

"Christians do not believe in life after death:
but full embodied resurrection life after life after death!"

▪ Focus

Death brings visible physical destruction to the human body. If personhood is a 'whole' a 'unity', how can there be life beyond this point? This is the moment when for the Christian the distinction between 'flesh' and 'body' becomes critical. To focus on death, as the crisis-point for personhood is 'humanist', it distorts the biblical perspective. For the Christian the hope of resurrection of the body is rooted in the reality of being part of the eschatological community which is one with the resurrection Body of Christ. Nowhere is the 'resurrection of the body' to do with the moment of death. Neither is the modern obsession 'the survival of the individual' a biblical emphasis. Rather the Bible speaks in 'corporate' and 'social' terms which envelope the individual. Two key passages for our discussion are; 1Corinthians 15:35-58; and 2Corinthians 4:16-5:10. The focus points for Christian thinking on the resurrection body are 'baptism' and the *'parousia'*.

▪ Promise

The corner stone of the hope of the 'resurrection of the body' is the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 28:6). Upon this the promises are based:

- 'Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die' (Jn 11:25)
- 'The one who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies' (Rm 8:11)
- 'The one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also' (2Cor 4:14)
- 'God is our certainty, guaranteeing the promise by his Spirit' (2Cor 5:5)

▪ Baptism

This is the point at which we become part of the resurrection body of Christ; the corporate Christ who will one day be the only one. Our survival 'present' and 'future' does not depend simply upon our 'body' but on this unique relationship with God through the risen Christ.



From baptism onwards we begin to be inwardly renewed (2Cor 4:16) Christ being formed within us (Gal 4:19) transformed into his image (2Cor 3:18). Flesh is decaying but the individual as 'body' is being continually transformed (Rm 12:2). Resurrection begins at 'spiritual birth' (Jn 3:3,5); future life is a development of present spiritual life (Jn 6:40), a sequence in the life already possessed, a life, which passes through death untouched (Jn 11:25).

Being part of the Body of Christ releases within us 'the powers of the age to come' (2Cor 5:17). The present indwelling of the Spirit is the link with our resurrection bodies; full manifestation is yet to come (Col 3:4). The 'heavenly body' is the result of sowing in corruption, dishonour and weakness **now** (2Cor 5:17; 1Cor. 15:42-45).

There is a tension between present experience and future hope. The body of Christ is a 'suffering body' as well as a resurrection body (Phil 3:10-11); we groan in longing (2Cor 5:2). The 'resurrection body' cannot be complete until the 'Parousia' when Christ is 'all in all' (Eph 1:23).

▪ Parousia

The final change will take place 'in a moment' (1Cor 15:52) As the 'old' falls away it will be seen that in Christ all things are become new (2Cor 5:17). The 'Parousia' will not be an entirely 'magical moment' quite unrelated to the present. 1Corinthians 15 appears to be stressing 'resurrection' in 'individual' terms but the language must be understood corporately to get the full biblical force.

There are many perplexing questions about the nature of the resurrection body at the 'Parousia'. They remain unanswered. It is a mystery. What is raised? What is preserved and purified through resurrection? To what extent will the resurrection body be 'physical'? We cannot say (1Jn 3:2-3). Just as a 'plant' is different from its 'seed' and yet there is 'continuity' between the two, so it will be for us (1Cor 15:37-38). The body will fulfill its essence. However, it will only inherit if it is radically changed (1Cor 15:51). Sin is done away with (Rm 6:6). The body is redeemed and fashioned anew (Rm 8:23). The natural body is transformed into the 'spiritual' body (1Cor 15:44).

When Paul wrote 2Corinthians 4 and 5, and 1Corinthians 15 he clearly expected that he would be alive at the 'Parousia':

- **1Cor. 15:52** : 'The dead will be raised ... we shall be changed'
- **2Cor. 5:4** : 'Not that we would be unclothed, but ... further clothed'

This leads to the question, "What is the position of those who die before the 'Parousia'?"

▪ Interim

This is a very hard question to answer. In Hebrew thinking the 'dead' were not *nephesh* but *rephaim* ('shadows', 'the weak' Isa 14:10). They are 'insubstantial' but not 'immaterial', death being 'the weakest form of life' not extinction. Their habitation was *sheol*, a state of twilight existence (cf Job 3:17-19). There is this sense of suspended animation.

Jesus promised the dying thief that he would be with him in 'Paradise' (originally a Persian loan word meaning a 'nobleman's park or garden', a clear link with the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life). It is difficult to know what Jesus was implying as he was happy to use popular Rabbinic language which saw 'Paradise' (a place of blessing) contrasted with *Gehenna* (a place of judgment).



Paul is no clearer. He speaks of the dead being 'raised' and those alive being 'changed' (1Cor 15:52). We are not to grieve about those who die because 'God will bring them with (Jesus)', but a few sentences later he says 'the dead in Christ will rise first' those alive being 'caught up together with them' (1Th 4:3-4). Whether the words 'naked' and 'unclothed' (2Cor 5:3-4) refer to believers dying before the 'Parousia', or unbelievers at the 'Parousia' is uncertain. We have no advantages over those who die, implying that they have none over us (1Th 4:15). He says that 'whether we live or die we are the Lord's' (Rm 14:8). Though paradoxically 'to die is gain' and given the choice he would depart to be with Christ which is 'far better' (Phil 1:21-23).

Our resurrection hope is:

- Fundamentally social
- Inescapably historical
- 'Of the body' (not 'from the body')
- The 'old made new' (not a fresh start)
- Transformation of body of sin and death (1Cor 15:54)
- Part of the redemption of creation
- The church is a witness to the world's true nature, the 'firstfruit' of its destiny

Questions

1. What are the strengths of the biblical presentation of the nature of personhood in contrast to those of modern science (psychology, sociology)?
2. What questions or problems does the biblical picture of personhood present you with?
3. Are there any ways in which you believe a more complete understanding of the biblical anthropology will affect your understanding and attitudes?
4. How do you think ordinary people around you understand or imagine themselves in terms of being a 'person' or a 'human being'? What do you think about these ideas? How do you think they compare with the biblical Christian insight into personhood? What distinctive contribution could a Christian way of thinking on this subject make to popular views?

Reading and Resources

RS Anderson '*On Being Human*' Eerdmans 1982
GC Berkouwer '*Man : The Image of God*' Eerdmans 1962
G Carey '*I Believe in Man*' Hodder 1976
D Cairns '*The Image of God in Man*' Fontana 1973
TN Finger '*Christian Theology [Vol 2]*' Herald 1989
D Hall '*Imaging God*' Eerdmans 1986
P Hughes '*The True Image*' IVP 1989
WG Kummel '*Man in the New Testament*' Epworth 1963
H McDonald '*The Christian View of Man*' Crossway 1980
J Moltmann '*Man*' SPCK 1974
HW Robinson '*The Christian Doctrine of Man*' T&T Clark 1926
JAT Robinson '*The Body*' SCM 1952



M Rodgers & M Thomas [Ed] '**A Theology of the Human Person**' Collins 1992
C Schwobel & CE Gunton [Ed] '**Persons, Divine and Human**' T&T Clark 1991
C Sherlock '**The Doctrine of Humanity**' IVP 1996
A McFadyen '**The Call to Personhood**' Cambridge 1990
C Westermann '**Creation**' Fortress 1974

