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## The Body-Soul Question: Can We Be Both Confessional and Reformational?

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by John W. Cooper

**T**he Reformed confessions emphasize both the unity of human life before God and the separation of body and soul at death. However, some Reformed or "reformational" Christians believe that there is a tension here and would resolve it by denying the dichotomy of body and soul. They offer two major reasons. First, the body-soul distinction of traditional orthodoxy is Greek rather than biblical in nature. Second, the body-soul distinction has fostered other unbiblical dualisms, such as the nature-grace and sacred-secular dichotomies.

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The purpose of this paper is to understand and evaluate these criticisms of the traditional Christian body-soul distinction. In response to the first objection, the paper surveys biblical anthropology in connection with life and death, concluding the general validity of the anthropology and eschatology of traditional orthodoxy while admitting the presence of some unbiblical Greek formulations. The paper then examines the second allegation: that the body-soul distinction is culpably implicated in various other unbiblical dichotomies. It turns out that there is no necessary connection between them either theoretically or practically, although they have sometimes been linked historically. The paper concludes that Scripture teaches both the wholeness of life before the face of God and temporary existence apart from bodily life between death and resurrection. Thus we should retain the body-soul distinction while pursuing God's Kingdom in all of life. In other words, we should be both confessional and reformational.

### **Body and Soul, Unity and Separation, in the Reformed Confessions**

We all confess with joy that "I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ" (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer One). This is more than a simple affirmation of our salvation. It also emphasizes that everything we are—the whole scope and duration of our existence—belongs to Jesus Christ. Not just our souls, but also our bodies; not just when we die, but all during our lives we are his. He not only "assures me of eternal life" for the future, but he "makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

In other words, the first answer of the Catechism implicitly contains what I will call “the reformational maxim” that all of life is religious and must be lived in obedience to God. Thus it grounds the vision of God’s Kingdom as articulated in the Calvinist, especially the Kuypertian tradition—a vision which exhorts Christians to live for the Lord in the spheres of society and culture as well as in personal piety and individual morality. Answer One’s use of the terms “body” and “soul” is intended to emphasize the wholeness and spiritual unity of life in Christ, not to divide it up.

The issue begins to emerge, however, when Answer Fifty-Seven expresses the division of body and soul. In explaining how the promise of bodily resurrection comforts us, the Catechism states that “my soul will be taken immediately after this life to Christ” and that “my very flesh, raised by the power of Christ, will be reunited with my soul.” The Catechism clearly teaches the doctrine of the intermediate state, which unavoidably implies that there is body-soul separation from the time of death until the final resurrection. Apparently the Catechism recognizes no tension between its stress on the unity of life in Answer One and the separation of body and soul in Answer Fifty-seven.

The doctrine of the intermediate state and final resurrection is standard fare in Calvinist theology. It is also found, for example, in the Westminster Confession, Chapter XXXII. “The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them.” Thereafter, the Confession also affirms the general resurrection. It is more explicit than the Heidelberg Catechism in affirming the soul’s immortality and in denying both its extinction and unconsciousness.

So the Reformed tradition has emphasized both positions: the unity of body and soul in this life and the post-resurrection life to come, and the separation of body and soul between death and resurrection. It has been confident that both are taught in Scripture and that there is no tension or contradiction between them.

### *The Reformational Challenge to the Separation of Body and Soul*

In more recent times the belief that the soul survives apart from the body at death has come under attack from several directions. Philosophers since

Hobbes and Spinoza in the seventeenth century have grown increasingly skeptical of the arguments of Plato and Descartes, who claimed to demonstrate that the soul is a metaphysical substance separable from the body. Developments in science also undermined this view. Neurophysiology and experimental psychology discovered how dependent mental and personal capacities are on the functions and chemistry of the brain. The soul or mind no longer appeared to be a distinct entity. In addition, the general theory of evolution implied that human consciousness has emerged as a function of the organism, not that consciousness is evidence of an immaterial soul.

Criticism of the traditional view of the soul arose also among mainstream theologians and biblical scholars. They argued that traditional exegetes had misinterpreted the body-soul distinction in Scripture. Proper understanding of what the ancient Hebrews meant by “body,” “soul,” and “spirit” leads to the exact opposite of the traditional view, they explained. The Bible does not speak of body and soul as separate substances. Rather, it emphasizes their unity. These scholars concluded that in the Bible body and soul are just two aspects of human beings, who are actually indissoluble wholes. Hebrew anthropology is holistic or monistic. Body-soul separation thus came to be considered as a Greek idea which is foreign to the Bible. According to historians of doctrine, it was introduced into Christian theology by church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Origen, and Augustine, all of whom were partial to Plato’s philosophy. Thus it became part of traditional exegesis and doctrinal orthodoxy, according to this account. But it is not really at home in the biblical worldview.

Criticism of traditional anthropology is not limited to mainstream philosophy, theology, and science, however. Some biblical Christians, including evangelical and Reformed believers, have also turned against it. Opposition to traditional anthropology’s body-soul distinction is even found within our own circles. In what follows I will refer to this opposition as “the reformational critique.”<sup>1</sup>

The motivation of these reformational brothers and sisters, of course, is not to be in style with modern intellectual trends, but to be faithfully obedient to Scripture. That is the heart of what they mean by “reformational.” If it is true that traditional body-soul doctrine has been influenced more

by Greek than by biblical ideas or if it distorts the Gospel, then we must reform our doctrine according to the Word of God. Scripture, not tradition or human confessions, is the final authority. Whatever its view of the body-soul distinction, this reformational attitude toward the Bible is wholly appropriate and should be embraced by all.

*The Substance  
of the Reformational Challenge*

As far as I can tell, there are two major ways in which the reformational critique finds the body-soul distinction of classical orthodoxy to be out of tune with Scripture.<sup>2</sup> First, it alleges that the traditional doctrine simply misconstrues biblical anthropology itself. On this point modern scholars are thought to be largely correct. Careful study of the relevant Hebrew and Greek texts of Scripture does not yield the body-soul dualism of tradition. The Bible presents a more integrated, holistic view of human nature than is found in Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and scholastic theology. Further, it is not difficult to locate the source of traditional anthropology. There are explicit appeals to Greek philosophy in the writings of the great doctors of the church. Even Calvin praises Plato and calls the body the prison of the soul (*Institutes* I,xv,2, and 6). The influence of Greek philosophy on Christian anthropology is undeniable. According to the reformational position, faithfulness to Scripture requires that it be purged away.

The second reformational objection to any body-soul dichotomy is that it is inextricably entangled with other dualisms which are unbiblical and undercut the claims of the Gospel over all of life.<sup>3</sup> Body-soul dichotomy is said to be implicated in the spiritual-material, nature-grace, sacred-secular, and orthodoxy-orthopraxis dichotomies, all of which divide up life and severely restrict the transforming power of the Gospel. Being reformational—fully reformed according to the Word of God—means eliminating all of these false dualisms, including the body-soul dichotomy.

Consider first the spiritual-material dichotomy. The body-soul distinction is not neutral. It came wrapped in a larger package—a dualism of metaphysical substances. The Greeks saw the soul as part of the spiritual realm of complete rational and ideal perfection. The body is part of the material realm which is inherently imperfect and irrational.

But this substance dualism implies that body and soul are each entities or beings in their own right with their own proper capacities and functions. They are externally related when joined in human life. But they are not really integrated into a genuine unity. Each continues to function with relative autonomy. This conclusion is very clear in the anthropology of Descartes, who follows Plato. This functional dichotomy is not merely a philosophical problem but has influenced our whole culture. Descartes' mind-body dualism has been the paradigm for modern psychology, biology, and medicine. It has also had enormous popular influence. As a result, body, mind, emotions, and spirit have been cut off from

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each other both in ordinary life and in our attempts to treat the problems of ordinary life. People compartmentalize their minds from their emotions and their emotions from physical and spiritual expression. This dualism is a factor even in the ecological crisis, for we have treated the earth as mere inert matter. This mind-matter dualism must be eradicated. We must return to a more holistic, integrated way of understanding ourselves.

Even worse, the dualistic Greek worldview actually posits a metaphysical tension within human existence itself, a tension between the rational soul and the material body. They repel each other like opposing force fields. This implication does more than posit tension in existence. It contradicts the biblical view that God created us good and that our sinful rebellion is the origin of all the tension and evil in human existence. Further, Greek dualism makes the body inherently inferior and the soul inherently superior. In the religious context, therefore, the soul and spirit are the objects of salvation and sanctification while the body and the material realm must be escaped. After all, isn't this how the tradition has understood Paul's teaching that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (I Cor.15:50)? Thus the body-soul distinction leads to the spiritualization of the Gospel and flight from the world. The detrimental effects of this view of Christianity are well-known.

The Greek dualism of body and soul leads us in the second place to the pernicious nature-grace distinction. Reformed antidualists regularly link this with the body-soul distinction roughly as follows. If the soul and its realm are the true home of spirituality, whereas the body and its worldly realm are not, then saving grace properly applies to the soul but not directly to nature, the realm of the body. Grace may complete or fulfill nature but does not internally reorder it. Thus the realm of nature is shared on equal terms by all humans in common, irrespective of their religious condition. Nature may be adequately understood by the rational principles which are common to all. But this implies that much of human life is not transformed by the Gospel. Biblical principles do not make a difference in significant parts of life and society. In the realm of nature people are pretty much the same. Certainly the pursuit of knowledge and of life in civil society can be undertaken according to the same rational principles by Christians and non-Christians alike, according to this dualistic vision of life and religion.

Passing through the Renaissance and setting up the Enlightenment, the medieval nature-grace distinction, tied up with the body-soul distinction, has become the sacred-secular, private-public distinction in modern society. Our public life is considered secular or religiously neutral, grounded in commonly accepted rational-moral-practical principles. Our private lives are where we find the sacred realm of religion and spirituality—protected from public interference but in turn prevented from influencing public life. The harmful consequences of this dualism are too many and too well-known to list here.

In summary, then, some reformational Christians reject traditional body-soul doctrine as unbiblical for two main reasons: it is inconsistent with biblical anthropology; and the dichotomies associated with it are incompatible with the cosmic scope of Christ's redemption and God's Kingdom.

Thus these brothers and sisters are not persuaded that the confessions are correct: affirming both body-soul unity in life and body-soul separation in death is not a coherent biblical position. It is not possible to be both confessional and reformational in anthropology.

Are these brothers and sisters correct? Should we take their advice and revise our doctrine of humanity?

The major problem with this position is obvious upon a moment's reflection. The Confessions do not simply posit a body-soul dichotomy. They express it in affirming the doctrine of the afterlife which they find in Scripture. If we deny that the soul/spirit/ego can survive separation from the body at death, then we—our souls—cannot be with Christ between death and the resurrection. Denial that human existence can be dichotomized logically entails elimination of the intermediate state. That connection is inescapable. So if we revise our anthropology, we must revise our personal eschatology as well. Can that be squared with Scripture?

Reformational scholars have not adequately dealt with this consequence of their position and they have not offered the church a more biblical, conceptually coherent alternative. They leave one of two impressions. Either they deny an intermediate state of fellowship with Christ (most do not). Or else they are self-contradictory, first denying the possibility of dichotomy and then affirming that it occurs at death.

To evaluate the reformational critique of traditional anthropology, we must now turn to biblical anthropology and its connection with death and the life to come.<sup>4</sup>

### Anthropology and Personal Eschatology in Scripture

#### *The Old Testament*

It is true that Christian theologians have read Platonic ideas into some Old Testament anthropological terms. Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, for example, all treat "soul" in Genesis 2:7 and "spirit" in Ecclesiastes 12:7 as though the terms refer to an immortal substance.

It is likewise true that the idea of an immortal substance is foreign to the Old Testament. *Nephesh*, traditionally translated as "soul," actually has a variety of meanings: "neck," "stomach," "living creature," or simply "the whole person." "My nephesh" can be translated adequately as "I" or "myself." In fact it has been argued that the entire Old Testament can be translated without using the word "soul." There is little here which parallels Plato's view of the soul as an immaterial substance.

The same is true of *ruach*, often translated as "spirit." It can mean "wind," "breath," and "power of life." It too can be translated as "I" and is the seat of the life, thoughts, words, and deeds

of the whole person. However, there is no clear evidence that when it returns to God it remains in existence as an immortal personal substance, as Plato thought.

*Nepesh* and *ruach* often parallel organic terms such as "heart" and "kidneys" in representing the deep center of human existence. The overall picture of Hebrew anthropology, therefore, is that human beings are holistically constituted as integrated psychophysical unities. There is little room in the Old Testament for construing soul and body in the Platonic metaphysical categories of spiritual and material substance.

It is a mistake to conclude from this, however, that the Hebrews denied the afterlife or that it was impossible for them to conceive of a dichotomy of human existence at death. The Old Testament is clear about the reality of Sheol as the realm of the dead—deep in the dark, damp, cold earth. Although the inhabitants of Sheol are typically termed *rephaim* and not "souls," there are exceptions (e.g. Ps. 16:10; 49:15). Scripture does occasionally speak of *nepesh* in Sheol. The *rephaim* are ghosts or shades, lacking flesh and bones although retaining their bodily form. Samuel at Endor is our clearest example of this.

Although existence in Sheol is bleak—cut off even from the knowledge and praise of the Lord—it is not the end. In the Psalms there are expressions of hope in the Lord beyond Sheol. And at least two texts unambiguously prophesy individual resurrection—Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2. Isaiah 26:19 is most interesting because it specifically identifies the *rephaim*, the inhabitants of Sheol, as those whose bodies will be raised from the dust.

In summary we may say that although the Old Testament presents an integrated, holistic view of life, it also contains a view of the afterlife in which existence is dichotomized. Personal existence is separated from flesh and bones. In fact, Isaiah actually adumbrates the intermediate state-resurrection view. Existence in Sheol is merely a temporary condition until the resurrection, when the Lord will reestablish his Kingdom in Jerusalem. Apparently the Hebrews had it both ways: the unity of existence in life and the division of existence in death.

#### *Between the Testaments*

Much of what the New Testament says about anthropology and eschatology draws on the Judaism

of its background. Thus it is necessary briefly to survey this material.

Jewish beliefs about the afterlife developed in different directions after Old Testament times. Some writers were influenced by Greek ideas and affirmed the immortality of the soul without bodily resurrection. Others, like the Sadducees, asserted the dark finality of Sheol and likewise denied the resurrection. But mainstream Judaism, such as we find in the Pharisees and Rabbis during the life of Jesus and Paul, seems to have taught a conscious intermediate state in which the blessed and damned are already separated and awaiting judgment. Resurrection, at least for the elect, would occur when the Messiah came.

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### *The Greek dualism of body and soul leads to the pernicious nature-grace distinction.*

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Several developments are worth noting. First, Judaistic texts written both in Hebrew and in Greek use "soul" and "spirit" to refer to the dead during the intermediate state. This is beyond dispute. Further, it is not clear that such usage indicates Greek influence. And even if it does, this might merely be a terminological development within the Old Testament view, which already speaks of *nepesh* in Sheol. The Septuagint refers to *psyche* in Hades.

Startling developments take place in Jewish understandings of the realm of the dead. Sheol or Hades is not always underground and ceases to have specific cosmic location. It is divided into parts, some for the blessed and some for the damned. These places are described in more particularity. The place of the blessed is sometimes called "Paradise," a Persian word meaning "garden." The place of punishment is sometimes called "Gehenna," after the desecrated valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem. In some writings Paradise and Gehenna are located in the third heaven. Other texts do not indicate their place. Important to notice is the fact that Hades and Gehenna are not necessarily the same. Translating both as "hell" has caused untold confusion.

There are variation and plurality of doctrine in intertestamental anthropology and eschatology. Familiarity with them sheds considerable light on the New Testament. In particular, these develop-

ments clearly locate the body-soul distinction and the intermediate state in the immediate vicinity of the New Testament.

### *The New Testament*

Scholarly studies have confirmed that New Testament anthropological terminology continues the integrated, holistic usage of the Old Testament in speaking of human life. Greek terms for "soul," "spirit," "mind," "body," "flesh," and "heart" are employed to stress the unity and wholeness of existence before God. This Hebraic emphasis is not lost.

But it is also true that dichotomistic intertestamental usages are taken up in the New Testament without any apparent sense of contradiction. This is substantiated by much current scholarship. References to "soul" or "spirit" in distinction from "body" or "flesh" occur regularly in connection with death. Matthew 10:28 implies that the soul can survive bodily death. Revelation 6:9-11 depicts the souls of the martyrs during the intermediate state. Hebrews 12:23 mentions the spirits of righteous men made perfect in the heavenly Jerusalem, presumably between death and future resurrection. Our Lord himself distinguishes between "spirit" and "flesh and bones" in Luke 24:39 while assuring his disciples that he is not a ghost. All these passages imply the separation of body and soul or flesh and spirit. These terms are often used as synonyms and not to make technical distinctions.

In some of these texts the New Testament also incorporates Jewish ideas about the realm of death: Gehenna and Heaven. In addition, Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, although it is a parable intended to challenge the love of money, is a clear picture of how Jewish believers imagined the intermediate state. Within the realm of the dead there are two main places. Lazarus is in the bosom of Abraham (in Paradise) and the rich man suffers in Hades. Elsewhere Jesus promises the thief on the cross personal fellowship in Paradise the very day of their death (Lk. 23:43). This is neither a parable nor a mere report of Jesus' words. It is intended by Luke to be taken as Jesus' general teaching: all who die in Christ have immediate access to Paradise.

Paul also appropriates Jewish doctrine. In Acts 23:6-8 before the Sanhedrin he identifies with the Pharisees' position on personal eschatology. Luke explains that this includes affirmation of the future

resurrection as well as belief in the existence of spirits. Extra-biblical sources confirm that the Pharisees taught an intermediate state. Elsewhere, in II Corinthians 12:2-4, Paul locates Paradise in the third heaven and wonders whether his visit there was with or without his body. All of this parallels Jewish writings.

Paul's teaching on the last things displays the same consistent pattern. In I Thessalonians 4:13-18 he is clear that the resurrection is future and implies that those who have died are with the Lord, since they will return with him. And although I Corinthians 15 is silent on the intermediate state, it explicitly locates the resurrection in the future, "at the last trumpet" (v. 52). The resurrection is general and will occur at a future time, the return of Christ. This appears to rule out the idea of immediate individual resurrection, which some contemporary theologians would substitute for the traditional view and its body-soul dichotomy.

Other theologians would replace the intermediate state with actual nonexistence between death and future resurrection. On this view resurrection really amounts to a recreation of the whole person as a body-soul unity. But this theory is ruled out by two familiar Pauline texts. II Corinthians 5:1-10 and Philippians 1:20-24 both identify two possibilities: living, i.e. remaining in the body away from Christ; and dying, which involves being away from the body and at home with Christ. There is no room for a third option, the possibility of nonexistence between death and resurrection. Paul clearly teaches fellowship with Christ immediately upon death. Death itself cannot separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:38). The extinction-recreation theory also contradicts Jesus' promise to the thief. It even rules out what happened to Jesus himself, who was not nonexistent between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

### *Conclusion*

Traditional as well as substantial contemporary scholarship yields the conclusion that Scripture not only emphasizes the unity of human life; it also teaches fellowship with Christ between death and resurrection; and in so doing it sometimes speaks of the separation of body and soul.<sup>5</sup> Thus the body-soul distinction and more generally the belief that human existence is somehow temporarily dichotomized at death are not necessarily unbiblical

Greek ideas read into Scripture by the church fathers. The Reformed confessions are on firm biblical ground.

This conclusion is directly at odds with reformational opponents of the body-soul distinction. In fact it may be that they have been too uncritical of the assumptions of some modern biblical theologians. One such assumption is a preference for monistic anthropology, which has sometimes shaped modern biblical exegesis. Others are the systematic opposition of the Greek and Hebrew minds, which stems from a Hegelian scheme of history, and the consequent dismissal of everything Greek, which follows Harnack. Classical theologians may not be the only ones who have unwittingly adopted questionable presuppositions from their intellectual environment.

Reformational scholars are correct, however, in stressing Scripture's emphasis on the wholeness and unity of life. They are likewise justified in claiming that sometimes traditional theology has been influenced by Greek ideas in construing the nature of body and soul. Augustine and Calvin self-consciously employed Plato, and Thomas combined Plato with Aristotle in defining body and soul and in interpreting the anthropological texts of Scripture. These categories may not always clarify biblical teaching, but may sometimes distort it.

In summary, reformational critics are mistaken in charging that the body-soul distinction as such is unbiblical. But they are correct in claiming that Greek philosophy has had some influence on classical theology's understanding of body and soul. The next question is whether that influence has undermined obedience to the Gospel.

### **The Body-Soul Distinction and Unbiblical Dualisms**

As we have seen, reformational scholars go beyond charging that traditional orthodoxy's anthropology fails to comport with biblical anthropology. They also claim that the body-soul distinction has led historical Christianity down several other unbiblical paths. It has led to the division of life into the material and spiritual realms, thereby compartmentalizing life as well as limiting transforming grace and the Christian walk to the spiritual realm. This in turn has meant abandoning vast and important areas of life in the world to the unbiblical spirits of secularism, modernity, and non-Christian worldviews. In other words, the body-soul

distinction is pernicious because it is implicated in the spiritual-material, nature-grace, and sacred-secular dichotomies. It must be abandoned if Christianity is going to be reformed and these dualisms eliminated.

### *The Limited Validity of the Critique*

It is foolish to deny that historically important theologians have postulated false and unbiblical dichotomies in terms of skewed notions of body and soul. Consider, for example, the belief that the soul is superior and the body inferior, if not the source of sin itself. Justin Martyr, Origen, and Augustine

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### *Scripture sometimes speaks of the separation of body and soul.*

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all reflected their Platonic background in esteeming the life of the soul and mind more highly than the life of the body. In time this attitude was institutionalized in the religious orders and the monastic movement, which expressed the widely-held notion that the purest and highest Christian vocation called one away from worldly involvement to a life of spiritual contemplation. A great deal of popular piety in many Christian traditions has been spiritualistic in this narrow, world-transcending sense of the term. Mission strategies, methods of evangelism, understandings of the kingdom of God, and whole approaches to Christian life in the world have suffered from this misunderstanding of spirituality. How many Reformed people have the idea that being a minister or missionary is a loftier, more spiritual calling than being a mother or a farmer or a businessperson?

Another form of this overemphasis on the soul is evident in Reformed circles. Western theology has emphasized rationality as the essence of the soul—the very image of the divine mind itself. Under this influence, we have prized the intellectual dimension of faith. We are prone to place more importance on correct doctrinal formulation than on spiritual maturity, evangelism, social justice, or reforming the culture in which we live. A Greek idea of the soul has influenced our tradition as well. Reformational criticism of these dynamics is certainly justified.



The flip side of spiritualizing and elevating the soul in Christian tradition is denigrating the body. The body is not only inferior to the soul; it is the source of evil desires. The life of the Christian therefore requires struggle against these desires. For many in Christian tradition this understanding of sin and sanctification has led in the direction of asceticism. Bodily life was not viewed as a good gift to be restored to its creational place, but as inherently unholy. This attitude characterizes less healthy forms of Puritanism, much of the Victorian outlook, and the feelings that millions of Christians still have about their sexuality. Here too reformational criticism that these attitudes are more Greek than biblical is valid.

Finally, there can be no denying the detrimental effects of the nature-grace and sacred-secular distinctions in the history of Christian thought. Both Aquinas and Calvin in different ways accepted the distinction between natural and supernatural knowledge. Natural knowledge is possessed by Christians and non-Christians alike, whereas supernatural knowledge is possessed only by Christians because it comes through special revelation. While this conclusion is understandable in an age before the importance of presuppositions in all human thought was recognized, it also implicitly truncated the scope of the Gospel. This natural-supernatural distinction eventually led some to the conclusion that nontheological topics may be approached wholly on the basis of theoretical and practical reason, which are held in common by everyone irrespective of their religious beliefs. In this way both the academic and public political-economic realms were prepared for the Enlightenment banishment of religion to private life. The public square was clothed in secular dress. The Gospel had nothing intrinsically reforming to say in the academic or social arenas. Most Christians have not resisted this development. In fact they have regarded it both as inherently correct and as an important safeguard of religious liberty. The destructive consequences of this situation have been recounted in many current books on religion, culture, and society.

The reformational movement has offered important criticisms of the spirit-matter, nature-grace, and sacred-secular dichotomies and has suggested more biblically obedient alternatives to personal, academic, and cultural life. We ought to heed what they have been saying.

### *The Basic Mistakeness of the Critique*

While some of these unbiblical dichotomies have been formulated in terms of faulty notions of body and soul, and although all of them have been held by Christians who believe in the intermediate state, it is not true that the body-soul distinction itself automatically divides up human life or supports these dichotomies. The problem does not lie with the body-soul distinction *per se* but with unbiblical forms of it. This can be shown both in theory and in the history of Christianity. In fact, some who have rejected unbiblical spiritual-material and sacred-secular dichotomies have affirmed the intermediate state and the body-soul distinction. And some who deny the separation of body and soul are guilty of these unbiblical dichotomies. The reformational charge that the body-soul distinction unavoidably divides up human life and thus is the source of other unbiblical dualisms is, in the final analysis, false. So then is its prescription that the body-soul distinction as such be eliminated.

### *The Body-Soul Distinction and Spiritual-Material Dualism*

As we have seen, one implication of the Platonic-Gnostic body-soul distinction is that the material body with its functions and actions is less worthy than the spiritual soul. Perhaps it is even inherently imperfect and irredeemable. So ultimate salvation and the present Christian life transcend the body and material world and fight against them. We noted above how this attitude has survived in Christianity to the present day.

But it is hard to blame this attitude on the body-soul distinction as such. There is nothing in the mere assertion that body and soul separate at death which makes the soul intrinsically more spiritual or worthy than the body. That might be implied by the definition of body and soul in terms of Greek spirit-matter dualism. But then the problem would be with the Greek definitions of body and soul, not with the body-soul distinction itself.

Further, although the church fathers undeniably employed Greek philosophy, it is not true that they did so quite as naively or uncritically as is sometimes suggested. Most of them explicitly rejected the Greek idea that matter and the body are inherently evil or inferior. They did so because of the doctrine of an originally good creation. Further,

they did not follow Plato in considering the body to be the source of sin and temptation. They recognized that sin arose in the human soul and that the tempting quality of bodily desires resulted from the disorder of the sinful soul itself. Finally, the church fathers did not consider the body irredeemable. They all confessed the resurrection of the body. Most of them believed in some sort of transformation of the body in glorification. But none affirmed the immortality of the soul without the body as Plato had done. And none affirmed immortality as an indefeasible property of the soul. All recognized immortality as a created gift of God. Thus the church fathers did attempt to cleanse their understanding of body and soul of its objectionable Greek trappings in the light of biblical teaching. Perhaps they were not wholly successful.

There is an undeniable tendency toward asceticism among some of the fathers as well as a tendency to rank spiritual activity higher than physical activity. While this may bear traces of Platonism, it might also express an ethic of kingdom-seeking. In other words, it may not represent metaphysical dualism at all, but a certain way of implementing Paul's teaching that all things are lawful but may not be expedient for serving God. Paul himself did not consider spiritual and bodily exercise to have equal value.

Even if traces of Greek spiritualism are evident in Christian tradition, this does not invalidate the body-soul distinction as such. It only warns us against uncritically adopting Greek versions of the body-soul distinction. Instead we should work with the biblical view which emphasizes the created goodness, final redemption, and importance in present Christian living of the body as much as of the soul. There is nothing inherent in the affirmation that human beings are the union of body and soul which leads to an unbiblical spirit-matter dualism or the evaluation of soul as better than body. That occurs only when body and soul are understood in terms of a non-biblical worldview. The solution, then, is to change the worldview, not to abandon the body-soul distinction.

The same sort of response is appropriate for two other mistaken views of the soul and body. One is the traditional belief that the soul is primarily rational. This too is of Greek origin. It has contributed to the devaluation of less rational and less well-educated people. It has led to suppression of the

emotional side of life. It has been at the heart of a doctrinalistic understanding of the Christian faith. Once again, however, the problem here is not the body-soul distinction itself; it is a rationalistic definition of the soul. The solution to this problem, therefore, is not to reject the soul as such, but to return to a more biblical, less rationalistic view of it.

A second mistake compartmentalizes body and soul into wholly different, separately functioning entities. Descartes' anthropology was mentioned above as an example of this view. The correct response to this problem is to follow Scripture and insist on a more integrated, functionally holistic understanding of the body-soul relation. It is not to

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*Bodily life was not viewed  
as a good gift to be restored  
to its creational place, but  
as inherently unholy.*

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eliminate the body-soul distinction altogether or to deny the possibility of their separation at death. We should not throw out the baby with the bath.

*The Body-Soul Distinction and  
the Nature-Grace, Sacred-Secular Dualisms*

Our response to allegations about the complicity of the body-soul distinction in the illegitimate nature-grace and sacred-secular dichotomies is much the same. These dichotomies are not inherent in traditional anthropology itself, but only accompany certain versions of it. And even where the dichotomies are put forward, there is little significant connection with the ideas of body and soul.

Thomas Aquinas is the most instructive example. He is frequently blamed for the nature-grace distinction and by implication for the modern sacred-secular dichotomy. In many Protestant commentators these distinctions are treated as essentially connected with his body-soul anthropology—as though the one automatically leads to the other.<sup>6</sup>

But this connection is a misrepresentation of Thomas. It is clear in the *Summa Theologica* (Ia, 76) that he uses Aristotle's categories of form and matter to emphasize the unity of human nature. Humans are not two things—body and soul—but one thing with two metaphysical ingredients. The body-soul unit as a whole is the subject of all human actions and functions, whether digesting food or

meditating on God. This body-soul unity was created with an inherent natural end—life in this world oriented toward God. However, it has pleased God through the salvation of Jesus Christ to grant us—as body-soul unities—a supernatural end as well, something beyond the capacity of our present human nature. In the afterlife as body-soul unities we will be able to contemplate God himself—the beatific vision. Thus our created natures as body-soul unities will be supernaturally augmented by the grace of salvation. This augmentation of our created nature is the gift of supernatural grace, the so-called *donum superadditum*. It gives us a supernatural as well as a natural goal for life (ST 1a, 12).

The point is this. Thomas in no way connects body with nature and soul with grace. Rather, the body-soul unity as a whole has a natural end and that unity is then given a supernatural end. We can criticize Thomas' view of salvation and grace from Scripture. We can reject the Roman Catholic nature-grace distinction. And we can admit that some Thomists (e.g. Suarez and Cajetan) in later centuries have linked the body-soul and nature-grace dualities more directly. But we also see that there is no necessary conceptual connection between them. There is not even an historically unavoidable slippery slope from one to the other. Some Thomists have never accepted the rigid nature-grace dichotomy of mainline Catholicism.

The negative historical outcome of the rigid nature-grace distinction was the supposition that the realms of nature, history, and civil society can be understood and engaged in adequately without the benefit of God's special revelation. The Bible is for theology, personal piety, and spiritual discipline. But the worlds of education, business, economics, politics, art, and public morality operate according to principles available to intelligent and conscientious human beings apart from particular religious beliefs. Nature-grace has become the modern sacred-secular disjunction.

But notice that the issue here has nothing to do with the body-soul distinction. It has to do with the relations between religious commitment and the rest of life, between creation and redemption, between general and special revelation, between common grace and saving grace, and between faith and reason. But it has nothing to do with whether body and soul can separate at death. One could deny the body-soul distinction and still hold the sacred-

secular dichotomy. Think of certain parts of the Anabaptist tradition in this connection. Conversely, one could affirm that the soul can exist temporarily without the body and steadfastly deny this sort of nature-grace, sacred-secular dualism. Abraham Kuyper is my favorite example here. The path to reformation, then, is not to abandon the body-soul distinction, but to promote a proper understanding of how biblical faith should shape the rest of life.

In spite of the fact that unbiblical spirit-matter, nature-grace, and sacred-secular dichotomies have been associated historically with the body-soul distinction, the distinction as such is not to blame. Instead, the spirit-matter dichotomy is rooted in the dualistic Greek worldview. The Christian body-soul distinction ought not to be understood in terms of the Greek worldview, but should be rooted in the biblical worldview. It would then avoid all the problems of spiritual-material dualism. Furthermore, if the body-soul distinction were understood biblically, it could not be used to promote the nature-grace and sacred-secular dichotomies. As a matter of fact, these turn out not really to be grounded in the body-soul distinction in the first place, but in mistaken views about the relations between creation and redemption, common and special grace, and faith and reason.

The reformational charge that these unbiblical dualisms are deeply rooted in the body-soul distinction as such is mistaken. Consequently, its claim that a fully reformational world-and-life view must eliminate the body-soul distinction is also mistaken.

### **Conclusion: We Can Be Both Confessional and Reformational**

We began this paper by noting that the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of body and soul in two ways. In Lord's Day One it emphasizes the religious unity of all of life: "we belong body and soul to Jesus Christ." In Answer Fifty-seven, however, it speaks of the separation of body and soul between death and the final resurrection.

We then attended to the claims of reformational Christians who allege that we cannot have it both ways. Affirming the dichotomy of body and soul at death posits a division in human nature which they say is unfaithful to Scripture itself and which leads to other unbiblical dualisms. Both charges turned out to be unfounded. Scripture definitely does present us with a body-soul distinction and teaches the

temporary dichotomy of human existence between death and the resurrection. Unbiblical dichotomies turned out to be derived from unbiblical worldviews or unbiblical notions of body and soul, not from the body-soul distinction as such. Such unscriptural ideas are not found in the Catechism's teaching about body and soul.

So on the level of biblical teaching we find ourselves in agreement with the Catechism. The Bible teaches both the unity and the separability of body and soul. And there is no conceptual or practical difficulty in doing so. We ought to be confessional.

But we should also be reformational, at least in part. For the reformational emphasis in our tradition has rightly emphasized Scripture's vision of the unity of human nature before God. It has worked out many implications of that biblical vision which are only implicit in the Catechism and the other confessions. In addition, it has offered valid criticisms of many ways in which the history of Christianity has failed to measure up to the rich biblical vision of the Kingdom of God. For these reasons we ought to be both confessional and reformational.

The Bible and the Catechism teach both the unity of human nature in life and its division at death. It is therefore incumbent upon Reformed theologians and philosophers to construct conceptualizations of human nature which articulate those teachings in a coherent and helpful manner. This task has been undertaken since the age of Calvin. The Reformed scholastics and Reformed scholars in more recent times have attempted to account both for the unity and divisibility of human nature. This includes some of those who have inspired the reformational movement. Both Berkouwer and Dooyeweerd are critical of unbiblical views of body and soul in Christian theology. However, neither of them denies the distinction as such or the reality of the intermediate state.

It is here in theology and philosophy—not on the level of biblical or confessional teaching—that the issue of unscriptural influences on our concepts of body and soul properly arises. For the history of Christian thought is full of borrowings from Greek philosophy. The use of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic ideas in classical Christian anthropology is undeniable. In more recent times the influence of Descartes, Kant, the Romantics, phenomenology, existentialism, and analytic philosophy can be found in various Reformed theories of the human constitu-

tion. The key issue is whether using these ideas helps to clarify the biblical view of human nature or in fact distorts it.

Here is where the dialogue must continue. We may have different opinions about whether a particular philosophical idea clarifies or clouds the biblical picture. We might have different attitudes toward mainstream philosophy in general. Some of us might synthesize a position using insights from other philosophers based on a general notion of common grace. Others of us might be inclined to view all traditional philosophy, even Christian philosophy, as misguided and attempt to start over from an exclusively biblical framework.<sup>7</sup> But all of

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*The Bible teaches both the  
unity and the separability of  
body and soul.*

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us will recognize the need for critically reviewing the history of Christian anthropology to rediscover how our forebears attempted to formulate a biblical theory and where they went off track. In this task the reformational tradition can help us. For it has been at work on the project for decades.

The Bible teaches the dichotomy of body and soul at death. The confessions are thoroughly Scriptural, not Greek in affirming that doctrine. But there has been Greek influence on how Christian theologians have defined body and soul, not all of it consistent with the biblical view, and not all of it shaping the life of the church in obedient ways. If we can all recognize these things, then in the academic discipline of anthropology as well as in our doctrine of humanity we can all be both confessional and reformational.

#### NOTES

- 1 Biblical Christians who reject the traditional body-soul distinction as an unscriptural Greek notion can be found in many denominations and traditions today. In the Christian Reformed context such people are most often associated with the neo-Kuyperian "reformational movement," the followers of Klaas Schilder, and/or the Free University of Amsterdam, where rejection of the classical body-soul distinction seemed to function as a kind of orthodoxy for some philosophers and theologians. Thus I refer to the "reformational critique" of the body-soul distinction. It should be emphasized, however, that not everyone in this movement, or all of its leading figures, rejects the body-soul distinction as such, but only unbiblical versions of it. Both Berkouwer and Dooyeweerd are examples.

- 2 I have not documented these well-known charges in this paper. What I present here is my understanding of them based on twenty-five years of reading, listening to lectures, and privately conversing with those who hold them. In fact I embraced them as my own views for over a decade.
- 3 An example of this sort of critique is found in Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1984), Chapter Seven, "The Development of Dualism."
- 4 The section that follows is condensed from my book, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), Chapters Two through Seven. Extensive documentation from primary and secondary sources is provided there.
- 5 At other times it speaks of spirit and flesh. Paul distinguishes ego ("I") and body or flesh in speaking of death. The New Testament uses various terms to refer to the same reality. Body and soul are one way.
- Reformational scholars object to using what happens at death as an approach to anthropology: that body and soul separate at death does not make them distinct during life. Not only is this objection illogical, however ("what is actual is possible"); it is unbiblical. The Bible itself uses the very same terms to describe human life and what exists after death. What exists after death was part of what existed during life. That is not the speculative conclusion of traditional anthropology using death to define life.
- 6 See Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), Ch. 6, for an account of Thomas' views and how they have been misunderstood by Protestants, including Shaeffer, Van Til, and Dooyeweerd.

7 This is a disputed point between some reformational scholars and me. In *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* I defend "holistic dualism" as an accurate pre-philosophical worldview description of biblical anthropology and attempt to relate it to traditional and contemporary philosophy. "Holistic dualism" does not necessarily entail two substances, although it does not rule this out. "Holistic" signifies the biblical emphasis on the unity of human nature. "Dualism" merely indicates that we can "come apart" at death, surviving as persons with the Lord. I have been criticized by reformational thinkers for "borrowing" and reforming standard philosophical concepts rather than creating new ones which are "radically biblical." I confess that I do not know how this radically different approach could avoid saying many things similar to what has been said by others before, even if the synthesis is different. Wouldn't that be "borrowing" and reforming?

I am willing to be flexible about terminology, however. I wrote my book for that vast majority of philosophers and theologians who deny the possibility of dichotomy at death and thus deny the intermediate state. That is why I stressed "dualism" while insisting that it is "holistic." Prof. John Kok's paper asks whether something like "ontically dual holism" is a better term. He does so for two reasons. First, "holism" captures how God created us, whereas "duality" emerges only in connection with the unnatural occurrence of death. Second, the Reformed and conservative Christian communities still suffer more from a failure to recognize the integration of Christian living than the divisibility of human nature. In the context of our dialogue I am willing to embrace the term "ontically dual holism" for these reasons and am grateful if Kok's suggestion moves us closer together.