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## Souls Seeking Leadership

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# Souls Seeking Leadership

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by John H. Kok

**T**he Friday morning chapel at a large Christian college I was visiting began with Socrates' admonition that one should care diligently for his soul. I sat aghast. How could a Christian philosopher lead the college community to worship using Plato's injunction that men devote their lives to the intellectual pursuit of reason, so as to prepare their immortal souls for death and the afterlife in the eternal, unchanging realm of the heavens?

When I confronted this philosopher after chapel, he admitted that Socrates was no Christian but that Plato (who actually wrote the words) was on the

right track, even if he favored it for the wrong reason—philosophical prejudice rather than Old Testament erudition.<sup>1</sup> I begged to differ, at least in part.

That pagan thinkers can be right for the wrong reason is true only in one sense. Pythagoras can be said to have been on the right track with respect to traditional harmonics and the numerical ratios of their frequencies, but for the wrong reason—we know that reality is not numbers. But what this correspondence *meant* to the Pythagoreans is hardly what it means to a Christian who acknowledges that the numerical aspect of things is just that, namely, one of many irreducible modes of creaturely being laid in the structure of creation by The Creator. Yes, taken in its context musical harmony *means something different* to Pythagoreans and to Christians. So also the words of Socrates' admonition, "care for your soul."

One important goal of Christian higher education is to better equip the Christian community to discern and test the spirits of our age. A Christian mathematician, for example, should be able to discern between an approach to mathematics that claims that only *it* gives precision and must underlie any sort of reliable knowledge and an approach that views mathematics as pure formalism, arbitrarily created by people with little or no concern for meaning. But a Christian mathematician should also be able to articulate what mathematics is and means to someone who knows that our world belongs to God. So also general education courses like "Perspectives in Biblical Theology" and "Perspectives in Philosophy" should aim to enable college students to better understand and articulate, among

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other things, the overarching and ever present biblical basics of *creation, fall, redemption through Jesus Christ by the power of his Holy Spirit*, and *consummation*, not as concepts, but as realities that we can count on.

In this article I would like to respond to John Cooper's recent defense of "holistic dualism" as the best way of articulating the Bible's view of man. I find his *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (1989) an exciting and thought-provoking study with which I am often in agreement. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that what he defends is defined more by death than by life everlasting, that by being asked to choose between monism and dualism we are forced to answer the wrong question, and that, as a result, the seven chapters at the heart of his book are done a disservice by being labeled "holistic dualism."

I will begin with a few comments about the accurate use of language; discussing words and how we use them is not as silly as some of my students think it is. I then move to the "isms" questions and the very present abnormality of death. In conclusion, my major concern in all this becomes visible: I am concerned with students who are being fed Plato as though it were the gospel, and with Christians who have not been taught the difference between Plato's soul and theirs.

### Language Matters

God's intention runs deeper than one's holding to and religiously repeating right words. In addition to impressing them upon our children, talking about them at home and in the car, at night and in the morning, committing them to rote memory, and sticking them on our bumpers, bulletin covers, and refrigerators—in addition to hearing and religiously repeating the words of God—we have also to *do* the will of God. But how can we do this when our own words flounder as we try to convey the meaning of such basic realities as atonement, blessing, covenant, and death? Many Christians intuitively do what the Lord requires of them, but they are often at a loss for words to explain why they do what they do. And when they try, their words are often strewn with clichés and ill-phrased descriptions of the Christian way. Language, obviously, is not the issue. And actions often continue to speak louder than words. Nevertheless, language does matter.

Many of the students in my philosophy class, even after their required semester of Biblical Theology, are still convinced that they *have* a soul and an immortal one at that. To which I reply: If you say "I have a soul," who exactly is the "I" that has it? They seem surprised, but dutifully write it down anyway, that God did not *give* Adam a soul, but that by the power of God's spirit he *became* a soul, a living being. Some are a bit upset, however, when they hear that it is Plato and not the Bible that says our soul is an immortal substance. Using the wrong words, like thinking the Bible says something that it doesn't, can nurture disappointment and even disgust.

Based on my classroom experiences, I ask myself: Why do so many from Reformed, Christian homes uncritically assume that they, like everyone else, *have* a soul and an immortal one at that? Why are they so comfortable with what is in fact a biblically slanted distortion of Plato's view of body and soul and with Socrates' definition of death as their separation? Why are they surprised to hear that God did not *give* Adam a soul, but that by the power of God's spirit he *became* a soul? What do we take to be real when it comes to being human?

### Is the Bible's Anthropology Holistic, Monistic, or Dualistic?

I wholeheartedly agree with John Cooper's description of what he calls the Bible's "functional holism."<sup>2</sup> Human beings are of one piece, called in every phase and facet of their lives to glory in their maker. Why don't we hear this more often in our circles? I am convinced, and I think Cooper would agree, that the task of leaders in the Christian community must include articulating and emphasizing "the goodness and desirability of an earthly, bodily existence lived richly in terms of all the relationships God created for human life. [Christians are called to prize] food, family, friends, and a faithful walk with the Lord in the community of his people. That is what life was created to be" (78)! Amen! This holistic vision demands, and when obeyed results in, an earthly life of praise and thanksgiving to our Creator in everything we do, from art to zoology.

Although Cooper deals with this holistic vision of human life with an ease and flair the Christian community should seek to emulate, his primary focus in *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* is more

polemical than inspirational. The subtitle reads: *Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*. In this debate he argues against monism and sides with an anthropological dualism, though not without highlighting the devastating influence of various brands of religious and social dualism that have plagued the history of the church: sacred/secular, supernatural/natural, church/state, and forms of racism and sexism.

Cooper rejects monism for basically one reason: its incompatibility with individual personal existence during an after-death before-resurrection "intermediate state." In arguing his case he draws a distinction between holism and monism. Old Testament scholars, we are told, use holism and monism interchangeably to indicate that "the Israelites viewed human nature as a 'unity' of personal and bodily existence. Soul and body, the mental, physical, and spiritual are so essentially tied together that were they somehow separated, a human being would not only cease in every way to function, she would actually cease to exist" (38). Cooper agrees with the emphasis on unity, but argues decidedly for holism and against monism. The Bible's functional holism is said to affirm the functional unity of the human being in its totality, to underscore the "integration and interrelation of all the parts in the existence and proper operation of the whole. It views an entity as a single primary functional system, not as a compound system constructed by linking two or more primary functional systems" (50). Cooper contrasts functional holism with ontological holism (read: monism)<sup>3</sup>—the only apparent difference is functional holism's indeterminacy with respect to the question of the separability of the soul at death: ontological holism, per definition, does "not allow for continued personal existence after death in any sense whatever."<sup>4</sup> He quite rightly argues that such a position does not meet the standard of Scripture. Hence, ontological holism is disqualified and the door is open to dualism.

Functional holism, however, remains standing. It does not go so far as to make existence of the whole a necessary condition for the continued self-identical existence of the parts (52). As Cooper defines it, functional holism simply makes no pronouncements on the status of the person after death. The emphasis in functional holism is on the whole in its functioning on this side of the grave.

When I limit myself to that focus, to being human on this side of the grave, the holistic emphasis relates to human functioning via the heart. The human being in its totality is directed by the living habits of the heart—*religious holism*, if you will. In all of the magnificently diverse ways of human functioning, from parenting to politics, from birthing to the care of the elderly, we are called to serve and magnify the Lord and giver of life. Human beings are religious creatures; either freely serving The King or addictively bound to some idol, in everything they do. When we are talking religion, life is indeed of one piece.

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*If you say "I have a  
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"I" that has it?*

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Human functioning itself, directed by the heart in obedience or disobedience, more readily fits the bill of pluralism, of multi-faceted diversity, than of either monism or dualism. My being a breathing, feeling, distinguishing, formative, communicating, social, buying and selling, aesthetically and politically sensitive, fond of family, and faith believing creature is evidence of a *functional plurality* in human nature that, given the reality of religious holism, will be directed in its plurality of functions either toward God or away from him. In saying this I am articulating not so much a functional holism as a functional pluralism guided by a religious holism.

Cooper does not only make work of rejecting monism. We also see him, sometimes even in a sweat, trying to prove the dualistic qualification of his holistic dualism. In fact, I get the impression that Cooper is at times so taken up in proving the separability from the body of some self-identical thing that continues to exist after death, that whatever this separable "x" is pales next to the fact that it can exist separate from the body.<sup>5</sup>

The duality Cooper defends to the limit is not one that, as is traditional, divides the diversity of irreducible modes of human functioning into two or three groups. Mind-matter, spiritual-physical, grace-nature, intellectual-emotional-bodily dichotomies and trichotomies are not what he has in mind when claiming that the Bible's view of man is dualistic.<sup>6</sup> Cooper's anthropological dualism

could never serve to divide academic disciplines into administrative units like the hard sciences and the liberal arts, or the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. No, the point he is pushing is the soul's ability to be separate from the body at death. This constitutes dualism for Cooper. The extent or weight of Cooper's minimal dualism is hard to define because, all told, it has only one defining characteristic: merely the separation of—soul, mind, spirit, person, ego, self—call it what you will, from the body.

### Shaky Dualisms Or Shady Monisms?

Now, if I were an anthropological monist, this single indicator of dualism might well be such a large pill that swallowing it would dwarf any desire to ask about further details. But I am not a monist, and what I would like to know is exactly what kind of dualism is being suggested. A shaky dualism is not much better than a shady monism.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear to me, for example, whether Cooper accepts or rejects a *substantial* dualism. I find this a particularly interesting question for a number of reasons.

First of all, once you say that soul and body are two different substances, having essentially different characteristics, the possibility and nature of their interaction becomes extremely problematic. Descartes suggested an interaction occurring in the pineal gland. In his very early years the Dutch philosopher Dirk Vollenhoven maintained that a human being is a complete substance, made up of two qualitatively different substances, soul and body, which when not united to each other were considered to be incomplete substances—in itself, not such a bad point. But to explain the interaction of soul and body, Vollenhoven came to the conclusion that spatially extended substances cannot interact with nonspatially extended substances and hence that both must be nonextended and ideal, i.e., similar in nature to Platonic ideas, but different in that the body reveals itself in euclidean time and space. Cooper, however, does not discuss the question of interaction to any extent.

Another reason the question of substance is important is the fact that substance is so often tied to a self-sufficient ability or right to exist. Ontological holism, for example, as defined by Cooper, defends the whole as single substance and denies that any elements “constitutive of a human being can be an

individual substantial entity on its own” (73). My response is a very general, but nevertheless foundational one: What can exist separately as an entity on its own? Is there anything under the sun that is substance in this sense? Is there anything that has come from nothing or knows no genesis? Is there anything that is not interwoven with other things within creation? No human being is an island to itself nor is there anything that is truly individual. But everything is dependent upon the upholding and sustaining hand of God. And where this dependence is granted, must not our investigation of whatever it be, pivot on the nature of its relation to God?

But let me come back to the question of monism and dualism. I am not convinced that *monism and dualism* are exhaustive positions.<sup>8</sup> I say this first of all because in general these terms beg a common context and secondly because given what we know in the light of Scripture neither man nor reality, neither anthropology nor ontology, need be characterized as monistic or dualistic.

Monism and dualism are similar in taking an insight into the structure of creation, and making it into an absolute truth—in the process of which the insight into “general revelation” is warped and distorted. In its broadest sense monism proceeds from some one original unity, claiming everything is or comes from or can be reduced to a foundational unity, while dualism proceeds from an original duality, claiming that the unity we find arises later and is secondary. When comparing monism and dualism, the latter will often be the more attractive for the simple reason that it is less one-sided and can account for diversity. On the other hand, dualism leaves one with two ultimately separate parts, dimensions, or aspects whose unity needs to be explained.

Acknowledging a duality does not necessarily make one a dualist.<sup>9</sup> To accept the duality of obedience and disobedience or to recognize that humankind comes in two genders is not to subscribe to dualism. People become dualists when they not only assume the validity of some duality, but also claim that it is the *origin* of everything else. For example, dualism holds sway when people elevate *male* and *female* into principles with respect to which everything else in society, if not in the universe, can be explained. In order to explain the phenomenological unity we experience, some means must then be provided to explain the co-incidence of these principles; for example, love, friendship,

or peace. But for dualists it is always a communing of what was originally two. The duality is original, the unity arises later and is secondary. In other words, dualism begins with more than one origin, with two equally original correlate realities. As far as I am concerned that is as unbiblical as you can get. The origin is not two, but one. We begin with God. Christians are monotheists. But that does not make them monists. God is the origin, but there is at the same time a fundamental difference between him and his creation. Ontologically, Christians are not monists, but neither are they dualists. It is simply the wrong question.

In dismissing monism and dualism I am not suggesting, as Cooper does with respect to Plato's dualism and Aristotle's holism, that the Christian alternative is dangling somewhere in between. I disagree when Cooper concludes that the truth combines elements of the two extremes.<sup>10</sup> All too often Christians have assumed that Christian theorizing and scholarship is some kind of intellectual limbo between the extremes, a matter of *modifying* the views of this person or that.<sup>11</sup> I am convinced that when we begin to see things in the light of Scripture we see the same world everyone else does, but that we see it differently. Christians must learn to transcend the false problematics of those who are wondering and wandering in their worlds without God.

I can begin to illustrate what this means with respect to a biblical anthropology by drawing upon the mature work of Dirk Vollenhoven. He too emphasized the value of proceeding from the whole, in this case from the "living being" *coram deo*, in relationship to God, and then looking for differences; distinguishing them in their context, rather than breaking things down and then trying to put them back together or working with a scalpel to separate the whole into parts from which it is then said to be constituted.

Before continuing, however, I think that it would be good to distinguish a number of differences to be kept in mind along the way. First is the difference between *differences*—they are—and *distinctions*—people make or do not make distinctions. Hopefully, people only distinguish things that are different. There is also a difference between dividing or dissecting (a frog) and distinguishing (its body parts or organs). With respect to soul and body, I may and can do the latter, but cannot do the former. So

also, there is a difference between distinguishing the whole and its constitutive parts (me and my feet or kidney) and distinguishing differences in their context.

### Is Soul and Body A Scriptural Dualism?

In the early 1930s Vollenhoven talked about scriptural dualism for a few years, contrasting it with a host of unscriptural dualisms. As a label, "scriptural dualism" did not last very long. But what he meant and continued to emphasize is that the Reformed tradition in acknowledging the sovereignty of God holds dear the difference and relationship

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*In all human functioning,  
we are called to serve and  
magnify the Lord.*

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between the God of Scripture and a creation that is subject to his word and will. Creator and creature are distinct but, thank God, also connected. Negatively, scriptural dualism implied for him the rejection of a theory, an unscriptural dualism, that he had found all too close to home—in his own past—and came to call partial theism—the view that the difference between Creator and creature is found repeated within the cosmos. His book *Calvinism and the Reformation of Philosophy* (1933) is in many ways a self-critical exercise to rid the Christian mind of the notion that the constitution of human beings mirrors the distinction and relationship between God and creation.

The basic contours of what he put in place of that dualistic, partial theistic anthropology continue to ring true for me. In the foreground stand God and his Word. Human beings are souls, earthlings, human creatures of God, born of a woman Eve, "the mother of the living," and represented before God by a mediator, the first Adam, by whom came death, and now the second Adam, in whom is life everlasting, Jesus Christ.

For human beings the relationship of all humankind to the God of the covenant is crucial. The same is also true for individual human beings in their totality, with body and soul, from the inside out. Of these two, the inside, the heart, the soul, the inner man, is primary. The direction-setting (for my part, spiritual) heart, is the central core of man;

for out of it are the issues, the wellspring, of life (Prov. 4:23), for good or for evil, in love or in hate, for God and for his creatures. What lives in one's heart directs the bodily cloak of integrated and modally irreducible functions. The spiritual core—our living obediently or disobediently—permeates—in, under, and through—everything we are about; from the way we spend our money, to what we do in bed, to the kinds of groceries we buy, to whether we recycle, to how and why and what we adore during our lifetime. All of those things and more are moved by and rooted in what lives in our hearts, i.e., by religion, by our response to the Word of God.

God does not put souls into bodies. He didn't do that to us and he didn't do it to Adam. The Bible tells us that God created man out of the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life, and he became a living soul, a living being; called to serve our God and enjoy him forever, from the inside out, in everything he does. Is this a monistic or a dualistic view of man? I would say, it's neither. It's a biblical, scriptural anthropology. There is unity here: people are of one piece, wonderfully woven into a coat of many colors; we are called to love our God with everything we've got in everything we do; Christ comes to save souls—whole people—not just their insides. And there is also duality: obedience and disobedience; male and female; as well as the duality of inside and out, of heart and functions, of soul and body. But there is no *monism* and no *dualism*. That this or that or both are capable of separate existence is also out of the question. Even individuals—things distinct—are not different in their own right. It all belongs to and is totally dependent upon the creator and upholder and sustainer of life. No one and no thing can exist apart from him.

In saying all this I am not suggesting that Cooper disagrees; his point again is the separability of the soul at death. However, as I see it, one of Cooper's reasons for tackling the body-soul issue in the first place is a dualophobia that he has experienced among some Reformed thinkers who propound a functional pluralism and a religious holism. If dualophobians, people who fear dualisms, are those who lament and seek to avoid the introduction and devastating consequences of dividing human life in two, then I too, I dare say, am one of them; but then so is Cooper, who does his reader the service

of distinguishing four pernicious forms of dualism (religious, axiological, functional, and social) (198ff). His point in doing so, of course, is to show that maintaining the separability of the soul (i.e. anthropological dualism) is, in Vollenhoven's terms, a scriptural dualism.

Does Cooper have a point here? Is it possible to be paranoid of a body-soul distinction in any anthropology that aims to be Christian? To this second question I answer in the affirmative and do so without wincing because Cooper himself documents grounds that should instil caution into the ears of any Christian dealing with these issues. Cooper mentions Platonism, for example, and points out two main, anthropologically relevant emphases of traditional Christian Platonism: "that human beings consist of a material body with its physical-biological needs and functions and a substantial immaterial soul with its conscious mental and spiritual functions; and that the life to come is more real, more purely spiritual, and hence more God-glorifying than our present earthly pilgrimage" (41). However familiar this still sounds to many Christians, Cooper, quite rightly, adds immediately that neither "of these emphases is found in the Old Testament, and both can almost certainly be ruled out by what it does stress." But if Cooper is correct, and I am convinced he is, in positing that "a large portion of the [Christian] tradition is uncritically Platonistic" (104), then why should that not be said more often to more Christians with respect to Platonistic interpretations of the Bible? Why do students have to wait until they are sophomores in college to hear that Plato's other-worldly orientation continues to warp the lives of Christians when it comes to so-called "spiritual" matters like redemption, church, and heaven? Not that we have to harp on Plato. But don't we have to open our communal eyes to the distortion that Plato's thoroughly unbiblical dualisms bring with them? If we continue to be uncritically Platonistic in our reading of the Bible's talk of souls and bodies, of this world and the next, then why don't Christian leaders warn against it? Are we failing as leaders to help the Christian community come to terms, for example, with the discovery that at times John Calvin's "philosophical prejudice [i.e. his own self-consciously Platonistic categories] caused him to misconstrue the biblical text" (105)? Can we handle hearing that about Calvin? Or do we reserve that

for small theological discussions among like-minded people? Can we handle hearing that about ourselves?

Delight in detecting dualisms, of course, can get out of hand and literal dualophobia can have debilitating consequences. That I question the dualism in Cooper's anthropology has nothing to do, hopefully, with either. The question for me is rather: What should have the last word in characterizing a scriptural anthropology?

### What Has the Last Word In a Scriptural Anthropology?

According to Cooper, "what happens when we die" is the key issue in addressing the monism-dualism debate (1, 116). The separability from the body and continued existence after death of something personal is the hallmark of a dualistic anthropology; denial of the same yields a monistic anthropology. There are for Cooper no other logical possibilities. I was disappointed to read, for example, that to deny dualism and affirm the intermediate state—something I could see myself saying—"is to hold a logically incoherent position" (116).

In the pages above I have tried to show that "monism or dualism" is not the exhaustive disjunction Cooper takes it to be. For the moment, however, I want to ask a slightly different question: Is what happens to people when they breathe their last the key issue in defining a biblical anthropology?

Are not people, convinced by Cooper's insightful study, going to carry with them a sense that the biblical view of man is indeed a holistic dualism? That certainly seems to be Cooper's desire. But, I ask again, why should what happens when we die, something about which we know so very little, define the parameters on this side of the grave of what it means to be human? Why should anyone, in seeking to articulate a scriptural anthropology, introduce the label holistic *dualism*, when the only purpose of the term is to underscore the continued and conscious existence of "some identifiable part, aspect, or dimension of earthly [human] existence" during the intermediate state, that is, "beyond the dissolution or dichotomization of the whole" and prior to the resurrection?<sup>12</sup> Or to put it even more briefly, why should what happens when I am dead determine what it means for me to exist now?

I suspect that the answer to why what happens

when we die is so important for anthropology hinges on a commonsense view of the whole and its parts. Doesn't it make sense to say that if at death I come apart—in other words, if at death my soul separates from my body—then it must have been there, as a part of me, all along?<sup>13</sup> What is wrong with saying that?

When we look around us, we see many instances of two becoming one. An apple is the result of sexual reproduction, of two things coming together to become indistinguishably single. A child also is the fruit of a husband and a wife; it is constituted from two components that become indissolubly one. It is incomprehensible that anything or anyone could

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*God breathed into man the  
breath of life, and he  
became a living soul, a  
living being.*

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separate out these two components, let alone that once divided, one or both would be self-identically the same (person) as that child. We also see around us things that are one, becoming two or more. An apple tree can produce tens of genetically identical apples, each of which is individually unique. Water molecules divide into hydrogen and oxygen atoms. But never does a separated part ever maintain the identity of the whole from which it comes.

This line of reasoning provides grounds for some Christians to argue that during the intermediate state our being alive in Christ is an unconscious presence: consciousness without sense perception, a soul without a body, is for these people simply inconceivable. It is indeed difficult to imagine how, without eyes and ears and taste and touch, consciousness beyond the grave could be anything like what we call being conscious here. Yet other Christians, myself among them, equally convinced that there is life after death, respond in kind: that we should *not* be conscious in the presence of the Lord is equally out of the question. Imagine "going to be with Jesus" and not being able to know you're there! (Imagine Christians forgetting that "going to be with Jesus" is an anachronism: We are with him already and continue to be with him and in him!)

I think that it is important to note that both sides to this debate about consciousness not only agree



on the reality of life after death in the Lord, but also that life after death and before the resurrection will be completely different from what we have ever experienced to date. And assuming that God did not put souls into bodies to begin with, these common assumptions are reason enough to be careful about projecting a separable soul back into the present from its future state. There is no need to deny the separability of the soul from the body at death; that is the miracle of life after death. But its separability then and there need not be the mark that defines for us what it means to be human beings *coram deo*.

At death the whole is divided in two in a way similar to the infamous guillotine: the head rolls and the trunk drops. But these two cannot be said to constitute the whole. So also, it seems to me, that while the soul and body do separate at death, they are not the two components that make up the human being. These two, like the rolling head and falling trunk, simply have never existed separately to date. So why should a biblical anthropology be marked as *dualistic*? Would Cooper, building on his notion of functional holism and the separability of soul and body only at death, not have done his readers a better service by suggesting a different flag, like "ontically dual holism," to mark this conceptual balloon? I find "functionally plural, religious holism," though no doubt more cumbersome, even more accurate.

But I want to go a step further. Rather than "what happens when we die," let me suggest a deeper question to which the Bible gives a much clearer answer. This will help us keep our anthropology better in perspective. The question is this: "What is death?"

The crucial issue for Christians in defining their view of man is not a constitutive question, but one of how we understand ourselves in relation to God and to the rest of his creation. Life for living souls is a matter of trusting in God, that is, in taking him at his word and obeying his will for our lives. When that troth is broken, division and death are the result. And being divorced from God, we bring alienation among humankind and brokenness to a world once whole.

What is our view of death? Does our soul depart or do we breathe our last or will life leave us? Wrong questions can, of course, only yield wrong answers. How do we talk about death?<sup>14</sup> Is

it separability that counts, that is foremost in our minds? Who says that death is the separation of body and soul? The Bible never describes death in this way. It is Socrates through Plato, if I am not mistaken, who gives us this definition.<sup>15</sup> Do we operate with a biblical notion of death, or do we uncritically assume Socrates' definition of death?

### What is Death?

The Bible must certainly tell us what death is! We know from Scripture that the origin and end of all things does not lie in humankind but in God, and that the best thing that can happen to humankind is to walk covenantally with him. Death is God's punishment to humankind for breaking covenant with the Creator. To die, according to Scripture, is not something desirable. For example, Paul does not eagerly anticipate dying in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4. Rather than dying ("while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed"), he wishes that Christ would return so that the way to the grave would be averted ("clothed with our heavenly dwelling... we will not be found naked") and be replaced by a sudden but desirable change (we wish "to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life").

That death is not desirable is true for both the first and second death, as Scripture distinguishes these. The difference between these two is found especially in the fact that the first death holds for all those represented in Adam (1 Cor 15:21), while the second death is the eternal, everlasting punishment—requiring continued existence—for those who are not saved in Christ (Rev 21:8). Death indeed is also separation. But what stands in the foreground is the relationship, now broken, in which humankind stood to their environs (*adam* on the *adamah*). Compared to leaving family or friends, leaving the body, i.e. the soul's separation, is something secondary. That is evident in the fact that it only occurs with the first death; with the second death soul and body seem to be reunited (Rev 20:14-5).

Death for humankind is punishment for sin. Like sin, it was not meant to be. Hence, in cosmic perspective, death remains abnormal. John Murray, an outspoken dualist, quite rightly explains: "The separation of body and spirit [or soul], the dissolu-

tion of the unity of the integral elements of man's personality, is abnormal and evil; it is the wages of sin."<sup>16</sup>

But is death only punishment? May death not also be considered liberation? Yes and no (Phil 1:21-26).<sup>17</sup> There is certainly comfort for those Christians who die "early." The punishment of death is accompanied by a blessing. The unity of life as well as relationships with one's environs are broken, but at the same time the battle between *spirit* and *flesh* (Paul's "the good that I would do" etc.), between belief and unbelief, between the obedience and disobedience that wore away at their life is now ended. In addition, those who die in Christ go with the promise (1 Cor 15:42-4) that their body ("this body of death" Rom 7:24) will be raised imperishable, in power and in glory, raised a spiritual body.

And in the meantime? Aren't we going to be like Jesus and go to heaven when we die?<sup>18</sup> Scripture says little about what it will be like after death and before resurrection. During the intermediate state one's relation to God does not change; the bliss enjoyed or the woe endured is, writes Murray, "to the full measure of the capacity of disembodied spirits."<sup>19</sup> The disembodied state, the few times it is represented, is represented as one of full consciousness and is for the saints a joyful presence with Christ.<sup>20</sup> But, when it comes right down to it, we have only hints, whispers, and murmurs about the intermediate state, little more. We really have just enough to know that the righteous dead continue to be safe with the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

Like sin and death, the intermediate state is an abnormal state. Even the name indicates that something is intervening—it comes between and hence underscores the primacy of the unity that being human is. The intermediate state is the result of sin and designates the condition that exists between the event of death and the resurrection—at which time "the integrity of the personality" (Murray, 401) is "reconstituted" (Cooper, 72).

Given the abnormality of the separation that death brings, must we not emphasize that, while I will be me and my wife will be she after-life and before-resurrection, we for that time will most definitely be *truncated* personalities, souls without bodies, earthlings separated from the earth; safe with the Lord, yes, *safe with the Lord*, but nonetheless a bit out of our element. May, no, *should* not a Reformed Christian talk about the after-life before-resurrection state as "an anthropologically deficient mode of existence"?<sup>22</sup>

But is that what we have to look forward to as Christians? Where is the joy, the happiness, the life we have in Christ? What about immortality? "'Anthropologically deficient' sounds so morbid," I hear someone saying. That's right—immortality, life everlasting, is a wonderful gift of grace owing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> We are not inherently immortal. Immortality is something given to human beings; it does not come as "original equipment." Tatian was right when he said as quoted by Pelikan:

"The soul is not in itself immortal, O Greeks, but mortal. Yet it is possible for it not to die."  
In these words Tatian voiced the doctrine

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### *Why should death define the parameters of what it means to be human?*

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that life after death was not an accomplishment of man, much less his assured possession, but a gift from God in the resurrection of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

In Christ we have life, in him we "have it to the full" (John 10:10b)! And so too in death, we know that our life is not our own.<sup>25</sup>

One reason Christians may not be comforted when taking seriously what little the Bible has to say about what happens when we die and the intermediate state that ensues is that we have come to identify the immortality of the soul with the biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body, and in so doing relegated life everlasting to the *other* side of the grave. Interestingly, one of the original polemical targets of the confessed teaching of the resurrection of the body<sup>26</sup> was the pagan notion of the immortality of the soul. As Pelikan explains, quoting Irenaeus:

The pagan or heretical equation of the soul with life and the claim of natural immortality apart from the action of God the Creator were rejected by Christian thinkers on the grounds that "the soul itself is not life, but participates in the life conferred upon it by God," by whose will alone the soul received the capacity to endure eternally. Therefore, "the soul participates in life because God wills it to live; thus it will not even have such participation when God no longer wills it to live."<sup>27</sup>

The life God confers upon his children is eternal life, everlasting life, *now*, and forever more.

I think that everything, including the intermediate state, "looks brighter" when we realize that life everlasting is already, now. We do not have to wait for the trumpet. Robert Morey points out a number of meanings for the phrase "everlasting (eternal) life": (a) In extra-Greek literature and (b) in the rabbinic literature "everlasting life" refers to "an endless quality of life which the righteous receive now as well as in the hereafter." (c) The saints receive it "as a present possession (John 3:15,16,36; 5:24; 6:47,54; 10:28; 1 John 5:13,14, etc.)... at the moment of regeneration (new birth)." (d) Paul writes that this relationship of life in Christ cannot be severed, even by death (Rom. 8:38-9). And, as we all know, (e) "believers are said to enter into the full enjoyment of everlasting life at the resurrection (Matt. 25:46; Mark 10:30; John 6:40, etc.)" (Morey, 97-8).

The Bible does point us to the future, but not toward a disembodied existence in heaven. The future that the Bible looks toward is the resurrection of the body (Ps. 17:15; 73:24; Job 19:25ff; 1 Cor. 15) and the renewal of our home, this earth (Matt. 19:28; Acts 3:21; Col. 1:20; Ja. 1:18).

The Bible points us to Jesus Christ Immanuel. God is with us today; his presence, his power, his word and spirit are here, now; they are realities we can count on. Granted, we go to be with the Lord when we die; but he is here too, right next to us, if we are willing to take him at his word. His power and spirit, like the everlasting life that only he can give, is a reality (and not just a concept or the opinion of Christians). In Christ the last word for us being humans is not death, but life.

### **In Christ, We Have Life**

Although we hang on to life with all we have, Christians sometimes etherealize life. One antidote to an other-worldly orientation is to advocate a notion of earthly spirituality and the fear of the Lord. In imaging God we are called to have dominion, but then dominion as stewardship—bold and humble servants of The King, responsibly involved in creation in all its diversity. Learning to fear the Lord as Savior and King, we come to understand his ways and know how to walk and talk with him. He is

faithful. We, breathing through our noses, are dependent upon God and the world in which he has placed us. Knowing his presence and faithfulness equips us to confront openly our precarious condition of complete dependence and to embrace confidently the pastoral calling that comes in belonging to Jesus Christ.

That is our comfort. "We are not our own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. . . . Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."<sup>29</sup> This reality is our fortification, our strength, our foundation. In times of affliction, trouble, and duress, knowing this truth brings relief and consolation; accepting the fact that our life comes because of Christ's death puts us at ease. But this comfort, this foundation, this reality never leaves us comfortable.

Everlasting life is a gift and also a mandate. Or as Calvin claims: there is a law within the Gospel. Humankind has been placed here on earth by a sovereign God. Even in the midst of sin, suffering, and death he graciously continues to uphold and sustain us as his creatures. Our mission as earthlings is to answer his call by doing his will. That is to say, our vocation as Christians is the proclamation of God's redemption and lordship over his world. This is where we belong: on earth, in his service, and to his glory.

Some day the New Jerusalem will come to the earth. That life to come is without a doubt going to be more real, more purely spiritual, and more God-glorifying than our present life. But fascinated by what is not yet, we must be careful not to trample on what is already. It is possible to mistake our mission. Because we want to go to heaven when we die, we try hard not to be like the world and try even harder not to do anything bad. But like trying to prove logically that belief in God is rational and then only being able to demonstrate that believing in God is not irrational, not doing anything bad does not necessarily mean that you have done anything good. We all too often can't see past the double negatives.

Triumphalism, conquering for Christ, is to be avoided, but also a transhistoric (a-historic) sphere of truth. God walks with us and talks with us in a changing world such that we can understand him in the 20th century as could Abraham ages ago. Life

in Christ is a gift and a mandate, a process and a vision—bringing healing (*shalom*) to his (broken but good) creation.

I can't guarantee that I'll never say "I have a soul." In fact, for some occasions it might be exactly the thing that needs being said. But when I weigh my words carefully, I know that I don't have a soul so much as that I have life, in Christ.

What needs to be said in the Christian community is what that life in Christ means for *today*. Many Christians grow up knowing, quite rightly, that they should not be conformed to this world. Unfortunately, when it comes to articulating what that nonconformity means in a positive sense, an other-worldly orientation surfaces. Many Christians are convinced that they have a soul and that it needs caring for. When asked to explain in positive terms what that means and how that caring is done, the same other-worldly orientation and what-we-have-to-do-to-get-there story emerges. Switching words around from "being not conformed to this world" to "discipleship" from "I have a soul" to "I have everlasting life" is not going to change things. Even teaching our children how to articulate a biblical worldview is not going to solve this problem.

What we need is that the Christian community learn better to *live* the everlasting life we have in Christ. Christians already have that life in him. Now we also have to live it.

Many of my students, like many in the Christian community, do not know how to articulate positively the difference that life in Christ makes now. Most attempts to do so end up doing what only the grave may do—dividing soul and body. They tend to separate (and not just distinguish) the spiritual aspect of their lives from the physical aspect. They live in two worlds. Heaven to them is home, with church and Christian schools as half-way houses; but for the rest they are, without an eye to testing the spirits that pervade it, all too often *uncritically* engaged in the world. Where the world-flight mentality is not operative, we do it—dance, physics, or whatever—just like everybody else does.

Christians are often up on every "new kid on the block" when it comes to fashions, sports, politics, or music, but remain ignorant of the neighborhood within Christianity. They do not know, for instance, how to deal with Christians who talk about body and soul in different words than they do. They either run away with their hands in the air or pass those

other ways off as "just their opinion." We undermine the reality of the God in whom we believe if we don't deal with these questions and issues of everlasting life in Christ *together*.

I am convinced that the souls entrusted to the care of the leaders in the Christian community not only *need*, but are also *seeking* leadership in answering the question, "What does it mean to belong body and soul to Jesus Christ."

What we don't need to hear is "dualism." What living-everyday-before-the-face-of-God difference does the separability at death of soul and body make in this context, living as we are on this side of the grave? In asking this question, I do not mean to suggest that separability makes absolutely no difference. As an answer, it helps when we seek to quiet our curiosity about things that simply have not been revealed to us, particularly concerning the intermediate state. As for what the Christian community has to hear about being human, I would encourage reading and teaching and living what the Bible has been saying all along and what especially the textual analyses in chapters two through eight of Cooper's book remind us.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Compare with John W. Cooper's *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) 76, where he says the same of Christian Platonists. Page references unless noted otherwise are to this book.
- 2 "The Old Testament is resoundingly this-worldly. The fullest possible existence for a human being is to live an earthly life as God created it to be lived. Health, sufficient material goods, enjoyment of marriage and family, meaningful work, standing in the community, freedom from one's enemies, and above all walking in integrity with the God of the covenant—the Israelite who enjoyed these blessings could exclaim, 'It doesn't get any better than this!' When the prophets look forward to the eschatological future, they do not envision heaven for the individual. Their hope is for a New Jerusalem and a new earth, a place where the existence of the Lord's people will again be what it was created to be in the beginning. Human life is tied to the earth. There is no 'pie in the sky by-and-by' for the individual at death. . . ." (41).
- 3 Cooper (49-50) is convinced that holism does not conceptually entail monism. But his explanation amounts to the claim that functional holism does not entail ontological holism. If I understand Cooper's use of these terms correctly, functional holism does not exclude monism; B.F. Skinner was anthropologically a monist, but also most certainly a functional holist. Likewise, at least one of the anthropological monisms Cooper distinguishes (none of which could be correctly described as a functional monism) namely, panpsychism, simply does not fit the grid dictated by ontological holism (51).

- 4 (73). Ontological holism "defines the very being of an entity and its constituents in terms of their systematic unity. A thing in its totality is simply a particular holistic organization. The parts, aspects, and dimensions of the thing have being only in virtue of their status within the whole. Their existence, their nature, and their identity all depend on the whole. So if the whole breaks up, the parts cease to be what they were. No parts can survive the dissolution of the whole intact. . . . In anthropology this means that a person is a single integrated totality of psychophysical functions. If the totality is broken up, neither soul nor body nor person continues to function or exist. For none of these is a separable entity, but all are merely 'aspects' of a single whole" (50-1).
- 5 For example, "For either way you cut it—whether with Kaiser you hold that the deceased person is the 'soul' or with Eichrodt and Wolff that the ghostly person is distinct from the 'soul'—you have some sort of ontological duality, that is, dualism. That conclusion is inescapable. For either way, persons are not merely distinguishable from their earthly bodies, they are separable from them and continue to exist without them. At death there is a dichotomy of fleshly and personal existence. . . . Logically speaking, therefore, the only possible choice is between kinds of dualism, not between dualism and nondualism" (77-8). "The separability of self from the earthly body is a sufficient condition for diagnosing dualism" (101). See also 125 and 181.
- 6 ". . . it appears that both 'spiritual' and 'physical' organs have both 'spiritual' and 'physical' functions" (48). I think he would agree with the Dutch philosopher Dirk Vollenhoven, who wrote in *Calvinism and the Reformation of Philosophy* (33): "When one uses the two words body and soul scripturally, one points to a difference laid by God in human life. But this difference has nothing to do with groups of functions that people arbitrarily elevate to so-called things, only to be stumped in trying to figure out the obviously unsolvable puzzle as to how these two pseudo-things can apparently be one!"
- 7 Cooper distinguishes almost as many monisms as did Vollenhoven, namely between structural (51) and substantial monism; and further between three kinds of substantial monism: materialism, dual-aspect (neutral) monism, and panpsychism (idealism). A more precise classification of dualisms might have provided greater clarity or demonstrated the undefined ambiguity of this term. Cooper himself laments the fact that the term dualism has been used so promiscuously (176).
- 8 Cooper points out that monism or dualism is not always an exclusive disjunction for exegesis: "philosophically indeterminate" texts can be interpreted (n)either monistically (n)or dualistically. Some texts only indicate religious and ethical commitments, rather than the structure of human nature; these texts are to be declared "philosophically neutral" (113-4). It seems to me that "with respect to this particular question" must be implied in both cases. To say without qualification that the great commandment is philosophically indeterminate does not make sense to me.
- 9 Cooper seems to equate duality, dualism, and dichotomy. See, for example, (77) cited in footnote 5.
- 10 For parallels between Aristotle's account and the Old Testament, see (55-6); for parallels between Plato's account and the Old Testament see (79-80). Cooper does warn that these "similarities can be appreciated provided the essential differences between Aristotle and the Old Testament are borne in mind" (73).
- 11 See, for example, Cooper who "very tentatively suggested that had Solomon been a prescient borrower of Greek philosophy, he would have had to modify the views of Aristotle less than those of Plato or the materialists to construct a theoretical anthropology" (73).
- 12 Citations are from Cooper (59), where we also read: "If something of personal existence survives biological death, then personal existence is separable from earthly, bodily life."
- 13 If you take this back to the time of birth the obvious question then becomes: Where did my soul (part) come from, from my parents with my body (traducianism) or from God (creationism)? This question, like "monism or dualism," is a pseudo-problem—it wrongly assumes with Plato that we are made up of two parts.
- 14 Compare NASV "And it came about as her soul was departing (for she died). . . ." and NIV "As she breathed her last—for she was dying. . . ." Genesis 35:18a. Compare KJV "And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived" and NIV "The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived." 1 Kings 17:21b.
- 15 Plato (*Phaedo* 64c): "'Do we believe that there is such a thing as death?' 'Certainly,' said Simmias. 'Is it anything else than the separation of the soul from the body? Do we believe that death is this, that the body comes to be separated by itself apart from the soul, and the soul comes to be separated by itself apart from the body? Is death anything else than that?' 'No, that is what it is,' he said."
- 16 John Murray. *Collected Writings*. Vol. II (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977) 401.
- 17 I would suggest that death may not be considered the ultimate liberation, e.g., in the sense that Clement of Alexandria spent his life preparing to die. Pelikan writes: "[Under the influence of Middle Platonism, Clement] pictured [man] as a dual being like the centaur of classical myth, made up of body and soul; it was the lifelong task of the Christian 'philosopher gnostic' to cultivate the liberation of the soul from the chains of the body, in preparation for the ultimate liberation, which was death." See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 47.
- 18 Did Jesus go to heaven when he died? As I understand Luke 23:46, "Father into your hands I commit my Spirit" has nothing directly to do with the separation of soul and body. It is rather, as in Psalm 31:5, a prayer to the effect of "Go with me, Father, into the grave." As for going to heaven upon dying, John (3:13) writes: "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man." For more about heaven, see, e.g., Cooper (97-8 and 164-5).
- 19 Although I have not the faintest inkling as to the capacity of disembodied spirits, I fully agree with John Murray's discussion of this abnormal state. See his *Collected Writings*, II, 401-3.
- 20 "Soul sleep" is not an option. Quoting from a student hand-out written by Michael Williams for the Perspectives in Biblical Theology class at Dordt College, with which I agree completely:  
"Briefly stated the soul sleep position states that there is no

conscious afterlife preceding the resurrection. The position draws its biblical warrant from Paul's frequent description of the dead as being 'asleep' (1 Cor 11:30; 15:6; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 4:13ff.; 5:10). What the position is saying is this: upon death, the believer lapses into a sleep-like state in which all appreciation of the passage of time is lost. One moment the person dies, and the next moment the person awakes in the resurrection. Thus when Jesus told the thief on the cross that 'today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:42-3), he was really saying that 'as far as your experience of time goes, you will awaken in the resurrection.'

"There are a number of problems with this position. (1) The biblical understanding of death as a conscious state of existence, or at least a state that has the possibility of consciousness, makes the soul sleep hypothesis problematic. (2) The position finesses the statement of Jesus to the thief. There is no evidence that the thesis' perception of temporality was available in the first century. It is rather a quite modern notion, and is thus an anachronism to read it back into the NT period. (3) This position reads too much into the 'sleeping' texts. We typically speak of a dead person as looking like they are asleep. Already by the NT period, 'sleep' was the word employed as a popular euphemism describing death. No more should be read into the texts than that. (4) A radical form of the soul-sleep hypothesis is the annihilation-recreation hypothesis. This position does not deal with the question of 'where is the person between death and the resurrection.' It is problematic for the position to say anything besides that the person ceases to exist in reality, but resides only as a memory in the mind of God. Thus they must be created anew at the resurrection. The biblical doctrine of redemption, however, is always one of the moral renewal of an existing

entity, not its destruction and then the creation of an alternative entity."

21 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979) 94.

22 This phrase is taken from Cooper, 103.

23 See Belgic Confession art. 19, where we confess that Jesus Christ "by his resurrection, gave [his human nature—a real body] immortality. . . ." and art. 37, which says that even the evil ones convicted at the last judgment "shall be made immortal."

24 Pelikan, 30 (citing Tatian, *Or.* 13 [TU 4-I:14]).

25 When God withdraws the vital force, the *ruach* or *neshama*, the life-force or power of breath, "that particular extension of *ruach* ceases to exist. It is not immortal" (Cooper, 53).

26 See the Apostles' Creed. Believing the resurrection of the dead is important negatively in keeping us from a host of misconceptions stemming from Platonists, Aristotelians, and gnosticism, and positively in underscoring the original goodness of creation.

27 Pelikan, 51 (citing Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.34.4 [Harvey 1:383]). As for Ambrose, who thought that Plato had possibly become acquainted with Jeremiah when both were in Egypt: "The treatise of Ambrose on the resurrection voiced the standard view when it argued that the doctrine of immortality was incomplete without the doctrine of resurrection; resurrection meant the conferral upon the body of that deathless life which the soul already possessed. What the [pagan Greek] philosophers taught about the immortality of the soul was not incorrect, only incomplete" (52).

28 See also Luke 9:60; John 5:24; Eph. 2:1-5; 1 Tim. 5:6, 1 John 5:12.

29 Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 1.