

On Nature Vs Nurture: Some Ruminations and Proposals

Over the past several weeks, I have been able to spend some time meditating and teaching on what Paul says to the Corinthians about the body in 1Cor 6.12-20. Paul here has some underlying assumptions about the body that don't seem to be shared by the Corinthians. They seem to hold to the fact that the body has no future and, thus, no ultimate purpose. It is disposable. What matters is what is "spiritual," something they seem to be defining as immaterial, intangible aspects of their humanity. This would go a long way to understanding why Paul would spend a great amount of time on the resurrection of the body in 1Cor 15 as well. (I don't know about you, but I'm glad they had these problems in one respect. If they hadn't, we might not have that glorious chapter on the resurrection.) Paul corrects their thinking about the body by telling them that the body is spiritual. The body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body and God will raise up the body just as he raised up the Lord's body (6.13-14). Our bodies, Paul says, are members of Christ and are therefore not to be joined to prostitutes (6.15). Joining our bodies to another in a sexual relationship is a spiritual experience. It makes us one body with the other person. This is why it can't be done. Our bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit (6.19). Paul's underlying assumption about the body is that it is good in itself being a part of the creation that God declared "very good" (Gen 1.31).

The Corinthians were putting a sharp division between the physical and the non-physical aspects of humanity; what many would call the physical and the spiritual. Paul redefines "spiritual" for the Corinthians to include their embodiedness. Later he will do this very explicitly when he speaks about Jesus' and our resurrection as being in a "spiritual body." He doesn't mean an immaterial body. Rather he is speaking of a physical body transformed and energized by the Spirit of God. Jesus rose with a very physical body that could be touched and could eat, yet it was a spiritual body. So, we too will have this type of spiritual body.

The implications of this are far reaching, but I want to home in on a question that has puzzled me for a long time; especially since I have to deal with it on a regular basis in counseling situations. This is the question of nature vs nurture. Are people who they are by genetic disposition, or are they reared in such an environment to make them who they are? Do people have certain tendencies because they are genetically predisposed (i.e., they can't help it), or are they taught these ways and are, shaped, by others to live this or that way?

These are questions that we are facing as a culture at every turn. Many people believe that some people are born with a homosexual gene or a genetic disposition to alcoholism. This is supposed to end all debate as to whether or not someone can do something about his actions. He is no longer responsible because "he was born this way." Those who try to justify homosexuality, for example, in the Christian world will say, "God made me this way." Some Christians will dismiss this as complete and utter nonsense. There is no homosexual or alcoholic gene. People are responsible for their actions. This is a spiritual problem and they need to be transformed by a relationship with Christ. Well, while I believe that people are responsible for their actions and need to be transformed by a relationship with Christ—and can be!—I am not so quick to dismiss the genetic disposition to certain activities. I say this because the human person can't be understood as a radical dichotomy between physical and non-physical aspects.

Whenever we phrase the question, “Is this a genetic problem or a spiritual problem?” or “Is this a matter of nature or nurture?” the questions intimate an unscriptural view of man; a view of the body that Paul is fighting against in Corinth. The body in all of its created qualities is spiritual. This at least implies that our DNA, which is a physical structure in our bodies that determines much about our appearance, is as much a spiritual quality as it is *merely* physical. Just as we inherit eye color, hair color, skin tone, muscle structure, and things as such from our parents, we also seem to inherit personality characteristics. Parents know this implicitly and see it from a very young age. What parent doesn’t see some personality quirk in his child and say to his spouse, “You know, he gets that from you!” While each person has a personality unique to himself, there are aspects of his personality that are passed down from his parents.

Seen and unseen characteristics about us are tied to our physical make-up. Take, for example, hormones. Hormones dictate mood and drives/appetites. These appetites can be fulfilled in sinful and non-sinful ways, but they are not in some “spiritual realm” that stands over against the physical realm. There are physical attributes in our bodies that create and sustain these drives and appetites. If certain hormones are low, then the appetites decrease. If they are high, then these appetites increase. The physical presence or absence of these little structures in our bodies create or decrease our desires. They are integrated with one another.

Sin affects the body. Jesus demonstrated this when a paralytic was brought to him and to heal him he said, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven” (Matt 9.2). Some take this to mean that this man was over-riden with guilt and that is what paralyzed him. When Jesus released him from his guilt, then the man could walk. I believe Jesus is telling us that sin gets in our bones as it were. Once sins are forgiven, the devastating, morbid affects of sin are done away with. Again, this is shown with power in Jesus own resurrection. Once sin was dealt with, his body was raised from the dead (cf. e.g., Rom 4.25). Sin has radically corrupted our whole person; not just the “spiritual” me but the whole me. My body is racked with sin and its affects. My body literally embodies the curse which will eventually lead to my physical death. Sin is not a mystical gas substance that floats around in my body but is detached from it. Sin is a part of every cell in my body.

Our bodies as bodies carry in them our sin. Our bodies somehow seem to be wired certain ways when we live certain types of lifestyles. To put it crassly, our lifestyles can become part of our genetic make-up, storing up sin mysteriously. Since we are genetically tied to our parents, it stands to reason that these sinful genetics can and are in some way mysteriously inherited by our children. In a very obvious and tragic example, think about crack babies. They are born addicted to crack because they inherit this problem from their mothers while they are in the womb. This addiction is not a merely “physical problem” over against a “spiritual problem.” It is both.

Lesser recognized sinful patterns seem to become imbedded in the very structure of our bodies seeing that our bodies are spiritual beings. And when we join ourselves to another individual in sexual union and have a child, those spiritual qualities may indeed be passed on to the child. The child is not born a blank slate. So, if a father and/or mother abuse alcohol, there may be a predisposition to abuse alcohol. If parents are sexually immoral, there may be a greater temptation toward sexual immorality. The physical union between a man and a woman is deeply spiritual, making them one body (1Cor 6.16). The fruit of that union is that they are one body in a very new, transformed way. A child is not the only expression of the one-body union, but he is

the very tangible expression of the one-body that is created in sexual union. Again, it follows then that he would carry the very one-body characteristics of father and mother; attributes that we can see as well as attributes we can't see.

I would say, then, that we should expect that there would be some predispositions toward certain lifestyles from the children of parents who live a certain way. Parents of adopted children experience this frequently. They bring the child into the home, rear the child as their own, but the child doesn't act like their biological children. Some of this can most certainly be attributed to the knowledge of their adoption. There are psychological aspects of feelings of rejection and such that must be dealt with. But before the child is even cognizant of some of these realities about his life, he acts differently. The parentage of the child does need to be taken into account if we take God's creation and its order seriously.

Now, some have taken this to mean that they now have an excuse to sin. "This is who I am. I inherited this from my parents. I can't help myself. I'm a genetic alcoholic." As I have already said, I have no problem believe that people may indeed be born with a predisposition toward certain lifestyles. But now that it is a "physical problem" and not a "spiritual problem," does that define who you are and give you the right to give in to all of your impulses? Again, if one asks that question, the premise is skewed. The physical and spiritual can't be separated in such a fashion.

Here is my proposal: God in Christ is redeeming genetics. Your genetics are a part of creation and your creaturliness and aren't to be seen as somethign taht is pitted against the so-called spiritual. Our old "in Adam" genetics are indeed corrupt. But just like everything else, God doesn't annihilate the old creation but transforms it in the resurrection of Christ. In baptism God breaks the old genetic ties and gives you a new family history. You are a truly a part of a new family. But this doesn't mean that all the work is over. There are present aspects to your salvation as well as future aspects to your salvation. Baptism gives you a new beginning that sets you on the course to maturity. Maturity is the process of growing up to be like God, which involves taking dominion over creation. Dominion over the creation begins with your own body; your own genetics.

So, let's say that because of the sexual immorality of your parents, even if you never knew them, you seem to be more disposed to that lifestyle. It is not the result of "nurture" but of "nature. But because sin never lies dormant but is a spiral downwards, you have a tendency not to be satisfied with heterosexual relationships. You are going further down into sexual sin by moving into homosexual relationships (cf. Rom 1.18ff.). What are you to do? This is your genetic disposition. Are you to accept this and merely come out of the closet and declare to the world that "God made me this way," which means that it is okay to carry on with this type of lifestyle? The answer is, No. God says that those who practice this lifestyle will not inherit the kingdom of God (1Cor 6.9-10. By the way, this goes for a number of other sins as well, even heterosexual sins. I only mention this sin because it is a hot button genetic issue in our culture today.) You can't live this way and be a Christian.

So what are you to do since you are disposed this way? Well, this is where the nurture plays a huge part. As the image of God and a part of the creation, you are called to take dominion over the creation—your body, your genetics—and develop them for the glory of God. It takes diligence

and hard work because we must fight thorns and thistles that want to invest the ground of our bodies (Gen 3.17-19). Development requires diligent cultivation and fighting the curse. But this is our life-long calling.

The first thing that must be done is to recognize what God *says* about who we are or who we are supposed to be and accept that as foundational for how we define ourselves. Our drives, impulses, and genetics don't define us. God declares that we are his image made and re-made in Christ Jesus. There are certain ways that God's image lives. Those are the standards to which we are to conform our lives no matter what way our impulses lead us. As everything in the Christian life, this is a matter of faith. Being a matter of faith means that it is a matter of believing God's word over everything that I see or feel. It is a matter of believing and submitting to God's definition of who I am and not who the world tells me I am.

Modern science (at least in some corners) seems to link our activities up with genetics. As already stated, I agree with them to a great degree on this fact. We are working roughly with the same data: genetics. But facts never go uninterpreted. The world takes these facts and tells you, "Your genetics define you. They tell you who you are." You are just a big ball of evolved impulses. To deny your impulses and drives and their gratification is to deny who you are. But just as Paul was disabusing the Corinthians of worldly wisdom, so we need to be as well. Yes, your genetics tell you much about yourself, but they can't be the ultimate authority in your life. You are not the sum total of your genetics. Once you realize this, you can stop using your genetics as an excuse for sin. You may have genetics and other issues that keep you from being thin, for example. But that is no excuse for gluttony. You may have genetics and other issues that make you more sexually charged up than others. But that is no excuse for sexual immorality.

Parents can't accept certain sinful dispositions about their children and continue to allow them to use these things as excuses. They must be called to believe who God declares them to be and live according to that, taking dominion over their bodies. They must "fight" the ground with all its tendencies to bring up thorns in order to make it fruitful. But, again, this is a fight to which all of us have been called.

This brings us to medications. I am no expert. I only offer here some general observations. Sometimes there are chemical deficiencies or imbalances that can be helped by medicines. Medicine is really just another form of food that we can take for different types of nourishment. Sometimes we need certain types of nourishment for different things going on in our bodies. There is no problem with taking medicines as help for certain issues. But medicines are not *the* answer all by themselves. Medicines can't substitute for the difficult work of discipline. They are only aids. They help you get to where you can develop disciplines in your life. Sometimes, they can eventually be discontinued when you "re-wire" your body through certain disciplines. This may not always be the case, but it can certainly be done.

Parents and individuals that face these issues of dispositions and proclivities to sinful appetites and behaviors should first acknowledge the truth of their situation. Denying it is not helpful. After identification it must be determined what God says about those tendencies. How do they pervert what is good? What does God tell me that I should be doing with this desire? Then they must take steps to nurture, cultivate proper fruitfulness in this area. The body itself can be re-wired to one degree or another in many ways. Sin is being undone in us. Not to believe that is not

to believe what God has declared in Christ and his resurrection. But I am not naive enough to believe that this can be overnight or even over the course of our entire lives. It is a consistent fight. But in the fight there is progress. And it is progress that doesn't just affect us, but it affects generations to come.

While we should sympathize with one another in our weaknesses as our Lord Jesus does (Heb 4.15), we should never allow the weaknesses we inherit or develop to become excuses for sinful lifestyles. Recognizing these things is helpful because then we can name it and begin to work with it as we are supposed to. The dispositions, urges, desires, and impulses of our bodies are to be brought under the lordship of Christ and to be used as instruments of righteousness for him (Rom 6). Not to do so is sinful disobedience, plain and simple. Again, this is not to say it will be easy. Putting to death the sinful deeds of the body is not easy (Col 3.5). But it is the life to which we have been called, and it is the difference between inheriting and not inheriting the kingdom of God.