

*How the Gospel Is Good News
for Our Physical Selves*

What God Has to Say about Our Bodies

SAM ALLBERRY

Foreword by Paul David Tripp

“I am very happy to endorse this book with the highest level of enthusiasm. I have been waiting for Sam to produce this book, and it does not disappoint. All aspects of living in fallen-and-yet-to-be-renewed bodies are comprehensively and biblically addressed with lucid writing that is a pleasure to read. Sam’s compassion for all the ways in which people suffer in those fallen bodies is full of understanding and tenderness. Please read this book with every expectation of being enlightened and edified.”

Kathy Keller, Assistant Director of Communications, Redeemer
Presbyterian Church, New York City, New York

“One of the most confused aspects of our culture relates to how we see the body. That confusion often extends to the church, despite the fact that our faith is centered around the Word who became flesh. In this wise and practical book, Sam Allberry casts a vision of the body that is neither beastly nor mechanistic but instead is creaturely and Christ informed. After reading this book, you will be better equipped to think through questions from eating disorders to the transgender debate to transhumanism, as well as the more perennial questions of how to think about ‘soul’ and ‘body’ in terms of the gospel. You will come away with even more awe and wonder at the words of one who said to us, ‘This is my body, broken for you.’”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of
the Southern Baptist Convention

“Evangelicals have excelled at many things; theological reflection on the body isn’t one of them. If you’re thinking, ‘I’ve seen many books on the church!’ then your assumption proves my point. Far more attention has been devoted to Christ’s spiritual body than to our physical selves. But we desperately need guidance here, for we inhabit a confused age that waffles back and forth between body obsession (my body is the most important thing about me) and body denial (my body is irrelevant to who I really am). Feel the whiplash? This book is medicine for the moment. I’m thrilled it now exists.”

Matt Smethurst, Managing Editor, The Gospel Coalition; author,
Deacons and *Before You Open Your Bible*

“This book is good news for everybody, everywhere. There is a plethora of books written by women about the body these days, but men have bodies too, and a perspective on them that is often overlooked. I commend Sam’s words to everyone who needs to think more about their body and the bodies of others.”

Lore Ferguson Wilbert, author, *Handle with Care: How Jesus Redeems the Power of Touch in Life and Ministry*

“Winsome. Quotable. Simultaneously relevant and timeless. *What God Has to Say about Our Bodies* manages to be both deeply positive and hopeful about our bodies while also being deeply compassionate toward those who suffer in their bodies, especially with broken bodily longings. Clearly forged through long years of honest conversations in the pastorate, Allberry embraces the hard questions, gives wise and measured guidance, and will convince and inspire you with his core thesis: ‘We can trust Christ with our bodies.’”

Alasdair Groves, Executive Director, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; coauthor, *Untangling Emotions*

“Pastor-theologian Sam Allberry has given a gift to the church: a volume full of texture and beauty related to God making us enfleshed persons. For far too long, evangelicals have neglected the significance of the body as an integral part of our embodiment and discipleship. So much of the current cultural confusion persists, both inside and outside the church, because we’ve misunderstood the gift of the body and the message it would teach us about God. Sam Allberry has ably remedied that gap. Read this book.”

Andrew T. Walker, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Fellow, The Ethics and Public Policy Center

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How the Gospel Is Good News for Our Physical Selves

Sam Allberry

Foreword by Paul David Tripp

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To my favorite body of all, the church
family at Immanuel Nashville.
Thank you for continuing to make Jesus
non-ignorable to me, week by week,
through gospel teaching and gospel culture.
I love you.

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Foreword

THERE IS AN INHERENT DANGER in writing a foreword for a book you haven't written: you consent to write the foreword before reading the book. But I agreed without any fear because I know Sam Allberry, and I have enormous respect for the depth, clarity, and practicality of his gospel voice.

I have good news for you—the book you're about to read is not only good, culturally relevant, and easy to read, but it is also an essential book. This book should be on the desk of every pastor, ministry leader, parent, or any Christian who wants to think their way through the body confusion of this moment in the human community.

I want to tell you why this is such an important book. The gospel of Jesus Christ is profoundly more than a message about our entrance and our exit. Often the gospel gets reduced to the “gospel past,” that moment when, by grace, we saw our sin and trusted in Christ for our forgiveness and reconciliation to God. Or the gospel is lessened to only the “gospel future,” the glorious destiny that is secured for us by grace. Many believers have a pretty good grasp of the gospel past and the gospel future, but they live with a significant gap in the middle of their gospel. They don't understand how the present implications of the person and work of the gospel change how to think about and respond to everything right here,

right now. Sadly, many Christians suffer from living in a relatively constant state of gospel amnesia, the fruit of which can be seen all around us.

Much of my writing has sought to unpack the *now-ism* of the gospel of Jesus Christ for married couples, parents, Christian leaders, and those going through midlife or suffering and in the areas of sexuality and money. The gospel is that profound narrative of God's redeeming grace in Christ Jesus, and that narrative provides a way for us to see everything in life. Between the "already" of our conversion and the "not yet" of our homegoing, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the world's best hermeneutic—that is, the best interpretive tool God has ever given. It is how we make sense of ourselves and all that we encounter as we journey through the broken world that is our present address. It may sound trite, but I tell people all the time to put on their gospel glasses and take another look at something in their life and see how it looks different to them when they look through the lens of the gospel.

I don't think there is a better example of what I have just described than *What God Has to Say about Our Bodies*. The brilliance of this book is that it enables you to look through the lens of the gospel at an issue that has never been more culturally and spiritually important—the body. In so doing, it cuts through the cultural confusion and gives us clarity as to who we are as creatures made in God's image. And what I appreciate so much is that as Sam does this, there is not a hint of theological arrogance, no pseudo-Christian snarkiness, no trivializing of the deep identity struggles of others, or no war with the culture. This book is shaped not just by the *message* of the gospel but also by the *character* of the gospel, which makes it even more approachable, convicting, encouraging, motivating, and hope giving.

I have spent much of my writing ministry unpacking the gospel for the heart, proposing that change that doesn't start as deep as the heart may be temporary behavioral modification but isn't truly change. I've applied that message to various dimensions of everyday life, but as I've done so, I have had a concern. I have been bothered that an overspiritualization of the gospel would leave us with a Christian culture that is body ignoring, if not body negative. It has worried me that we would come to see people as disembodied hearts. A gospel for souls that excludes or overlooks bodies is not the gospel of Scripture. The gospel without a theology of the body is a truncated, inadequate gospel. A church that doesn't have a robust gospel theology of the body will be unprepared to meet this generation's philosophical, psychological, sociological, scientific, and media challenges.

We are in a moment when society is asking questions like never before. We cannot go to our social media sites, watch something on Netflix, or read our digital newspaper without hitting this discussion again and again: *Who are we? What do our bodies mean? What does sex mean? What is gender anyway?* This discussion should not make us afraid, and we surely don't have to become part of the confusion, because God has answered these questions for us in his word. The answer is splashed across the pages of Scripture in historical narratives, divine declarations, wisdom principles, and in God's commands and promises. This unsettling moment in culture is a moment of opportunity for us. We can move out in tenderhearted love and grace and speak with surety into the difficulty precisely because God has spoken to us with clarity.

As I mentioned earlier, what you are about to read is a critical book because it gives you a robust theology of your body. No, I don't mean an esoteric, academic, and impersonal handling of the

topic. I mean a theology that has the dust of everyday life on it. It's theology that lives where you live and speaks into places where you struggle. It's theology that is bold and clear while being gracious and tenderhearted. It's the kind of theology that ends up not only helping you to understand yourself but also makes you thankful for God, for the wisdom of his word, and for his Son, who shares the majesty and humanity of a body with us.

I am thankful for *What God Has to Say about Our Bodies*, and I am sure when you finish it, you will be too. I can't think of a book that speaks more clearly and more winsomely to our culture's widening dysphoria. My prayer is that it will result not only in clarified thinking but in hearts filled with gratitude and worship for the one who formed our bodies in the garden and will give us new bodies that are form-fit for our final home.

Paul David Tripp
December 3, 2020

Introduction

SOMETIMES WE TEND TO NOTICE our body only when something is wrong with it. A new pain develops. Or we become self-conscious about some aspect or other of our appearance and wish it was different. At other times we can be happily oblivious.

I remember when, as a young schoolchild in biology class, I first saw one of the plastic models of the body's internal workings—the skeleton, the organs, the intestines, and so on—and being both curious and a little repulsed. It was so complex and intricate and yet a bit gross too. It was weird to think that all of that was going on inside me. I didn't want to know much more about it. When some medical issue or other arises, I find out what I need to know to understand what the doctor is telling me. But other than that, I live in generally happy ignorance.

While we tend to focus on our body when it's letting us down, it's easy to ignore it when it comes to spiritual matters. Even the word *spiritual* suggests we're talking about the nonphysical. So when it has come up in conversation that I'm writing a Christian book about the body, many have said, with a quizzical look, something like, "Do you mean the church, and how it is like a body?" That seems to make more initial sense than a book about our actual bodies.

That is why I've written these pages. The first surprise for some of us might be how much the Bible has to say about our body. The second is how the gospel of Jesus Christ is *good news* for our body.

Your body—my body—is not just there, happening to exist. It means something to God. He knows it. He made it. He cares about it. And all that Christ has done in his death and resurrection is not in order for us one day to *escape* our body, but for him one day to *redeem* it. Far from being a spiritual irrelevance, Scripture tells us our body is meaningful—so much of discipleship in the New Testament is spoken of in bodily terms—and it is part of God's eternal plan for us.

PART 1

CREATED BODIES

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

The Body and Its Creator

WHENEVER AMERICAN FRIENDS and I engage in friendly discussion about the relative advantages of life in our respective countries (I am British), I tend to feel I'm on the losing side. Sure, life in Britain has lots going for it. We have cream teas, country pubs, moderate weather, chocolate that doesn't taste like wax, and castles that aren't made of plastic. But America has a lot going for it too: optimism, proper lemonade, customer service, better dentistry, and the Grand Canyon. But when it looks like all is lost for dear old Britain, Boxing Day becomes the clincher. In Britain, December 26 is a public holiday, and it's one of my favorites. After all the hype and gastronomic overexertion of Christmas Day, Boxing Day (so called because it was when you'd box up gifts for the poor) is a day to exhale a little. You can rest a bit, pick up and start to enjoy the gifts received the day before, join the cousins, and take the dogs for a walk. In short, you can retain the Christmas vibe but

at a more genteel pace. There's lots to do but nothing much that urgently needs to be done.

As I write, it is Boxing Day. Yesterday was Christmas. At church, we heard the apostle John's iconic summary of what happened in Bethlehem so many years ago: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). That's the claim behind Christmas: God became man. For many, the scandal is the claim that there is a God at all. But even more electrifying—both when John first wrote those words and for us today—is the claim about what this God *did*. He became flesh. Theologians call it the "incarnation."

At the center of the Christian faith is the belief that by coming to earth as one of us, Christ could die for our sins, rise to new life, bring us into fellowship with God, and begin the process of putting right all that's gone wrong. But at the center of that claim, tucked away where we don't always see it, is the notion that to become one of us, Jesus had to become *flesh*. To become a human person, he needed to become a human body.

Become a body, not simply don one for a few years. He could, in theory, have turned up as a ready-made thirty-year-old male, prepared to immediately gather his disciples, teach about God's kingdom, and head to the cross. But really becoming one of us took more. To truly become human, Jesus needed to become a fetus in the womb, a baby in a cot, a toddler stumbling about as he learned to walk, a teenager going through puberty, a fully grown man. It wasn't enough to have a body. He needed to truly be one.

Jesus's incarnation is the highest compliment the human body has ever been paid. God not only thought our bodies up and enjoyed putting several billion of them together; he made one for himself. And not just for the Christmas season. The body of Jesus

was not like my Christmas pullover, little more than just a festive novelty. No. His body was for life. And for far more than that. After his death he was raised bodily. And after his resurrection he returned to his Father in heaven, also bodily. When he ascended into heaven he didn't ditch his humanity like a space shuttle ditches its booster rockets (to borrow a phrase from N. T. Wright). Becoming human at Christmas was not meant to be reversible. It was permanent. There is now a human body sitting at the right hand of God the Father at the very center of heaven.

Bodies matter. Jesus couldn't become a real human person without one. And we can't hope to enjoy authentic life without one either. That his body matters is proof that mine and yours do too. He became what he valued enough to redeem. He couldn't come for people without coming for their flesh and without coming *as* flesh.

C. S. Lewis sums it up neatly:

Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body—which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body, that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in Heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness, our beauty and our energy.¹

This is part of what makes Christianity stand out. It has been common among other religious (and nonreligious) belief systems to demean the body, along with our physicality—to see it as something unspiritual or in need of escaping.

In contrast, the Bible sees our body as a good (if imperfect) creation of God. It is a gift.

We're not used to thinking of our body as a gift. Perhaps one reason is that when we think of our body, we tend to think of the frustrating limitations it places on us. This is true even when it is working well. At the peak of our strength and fitness, our energies and capacities are still finite. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted" (Isa. 40:30). We can't be and do all that we would want. We're constrained. Physical life is, by definition, one of being contingent when perhaps we would rather be free. I'm sure this is one of the reasons behind our fascination with the idea of life unconstrained by our physicality. It is a popular trope in science fiction.

In C. S. Lewis's novel *That Hideous Strength* a secretive scientific lab is attempting to establish a form of human existence that is not dependent on our bodies. It is presented as a great leap forward; our bodies as nothing but an unfortunate constraint that needs to be escaped. As one of the characters puts it:

In us organic life has produced Mind. It has done its work. After that we want no more of it. We do not want the world any longer furred over with organic life, like what you call the blue mould—all sprouting and budding and breeding and decaying. We must get rid of it. By little and little, of course. Slowly we learn how. Learn to make our brains live with less and less body.²

Needless to say, in the novel it is this pursuit that leads to all kinds of evil. And, in any case, most of us wouldn't put it in such a mad-scientist sort of way. But we can nevertheless come to resent the hindrances our body brings, and it is easy for us to see the ways in which our body is a limitation rather than an opportunity.

In the novel (and subsequent movie) *Ready Player One*, humanity in the near future does most of its living in a virtual reality world called the OASIS where we can choose our own appearance. It is not hard to see the appeal:

In the OASIS the fat could become thin, the ugly could become beautiful, and the shy, extroverted. Or vice versa. You could change your name, age, sex, race, height, weight, voice, hair color, and bone structure. Or you could cease being human altogether, and become an elf, ogre, alien, or any other creature from literature, movies, or mythology.³

We're not ditching the body altogether, but we're able to make it take whatever form we could ever want. We exchange what we were born with for something more idealized; something that really feels exactly as we would want ourselves to be.

In one case the body is escaped; in the other, exchanged. But in Christianity neither of those is what we need. The body is intrinsically good, not bad. So it doesn't need to be abandoned or changed into some completely different form. In the words of the apostle Paul, it needs to be redeemed: "We wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). It is a gift. In a sense, right now, a broken gift in some ways as we'll come to see. But a gift nonetheless.

Handmade

Only one of the presents I got for Christmas yesterday is truly unique. It's not a slight on any of the other gifts, but this one has a property that sets it apart: it was handmade. A friend made me a beautiful, framed, artistic rendering of a favorite Bible verse. To

my knowledge it is the only gift I received this year that was not mass-produced. That's not to say it is intrinsically more valuable than the other gifts, but it does make it unusually meaningful.

The Bible shows that our bodies have been very carefully made by God. King David put it famously in the following prayer to God:

For you formed my inward parts;
 you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 (Ps. 139:13–14)

God's craftsmanship is not just restricted to David's outside but includes his inward parts. All that he is, both the inner and outer aspects of his being.

David speaks of being made with great care and attention. He has been individually handcrafted. That is not to say his body is perfect. As we'll see later, our body is actually broken; it's not entirely as it was meant to be, and we have all sorts of issues with it. But David can say even of his imperfect and fallen body that it has been "fearfully and wonderfully made."

Fearfully Made

Just think about that language. I think of my friend making that Christmas gift for me. I imagine her lips pursed as she drew the words of the passage and then colored and illustrated them. David says he has been made *fearfully*. Were we to know the full extent of the intricacy of God's workmanship, we would rightly be in awe.

We approach what this means when we see new parents hold their baby for the first time. It looks like it's happening in slow

motion as they very carefully pick up and then take care to support the baby in their arms. There is a sense of appropriate fearfulness. They are aware of the sheer preciousness of the little bundle in their arms.

Well, David would say they don't know the half of it. A baby is far more precious and awe-inspiring than we realize. It's not just the delicate body of a baby. Even when we've long outgrown our new-baby cuteness, when we're long past our physical best, and when our body shows all the frailties and limitations of advancing age—whatever stage we're at, we have been fearfully and wonderfully made. We could not begin to measure the value of our body, however it looks and however we feel about it.

Individually Made

There seems to be a trend for artisanal products—coffee shops, bakeries, and the like. When I first noticed this, I didn't know what *artisanal* meant, other than assuming it meant (in the case of the bakery) “misshappen and expensive.” But I eventually realized it meant “traditional” and “nonmechanically made.” A person made it, not a machine. It may have some imperfections, but even those are proof of authenticity.

Similarly, we human beings are not the product of a factory or the process of copy-and-paste. Our distinctive physical individuality is intended. We have been made by the ultimate artisan. Our God has produced billions of human bodies, but we are not mass-produced. We've each been handcrafted with infinite care. David says we have been “knitted together” in our mother's womb. Now, I've never knitted a stitch of anything in my life, but I've watched others, and it is wonderfully hands-on—each and every stitch individually knit by hand.

Purposefully Made

Being handcrafted means none of us has come about by accident. Our body is not random or arbitrary. I know people who were not planned by their parents—a sensitive issue indeed. They were an “accident,” a surprise, and those among them who are aware of their origins can struggle with long-term relational insecurity. But when it comes to God, no one is unplanned. Every one of us is the product of God’s deliberate choice. However many people there turn out to be in the whole of human history, not one of them will have been an accident.

The Bible doesn’t just affirm that we are all, in some way, the result of God’s work, that we have come about because of him. It says much more than that. We’re not just the outcome of God’s activity; we are the product of God’s intention.

Think about it this way. Imagine I am preparing a meal for a group of friends. I have decided, somewhat ambitiously, to cook a meal with several complicated dishes. I am attending to one of these, getting a sauce just right, when I detect the faint smell of smoke. I realize that the meat in the oven is burning. Edible, but burnt. I serve it up anyway. The meal is not going to kill anyone, and parts of it may even be nice, but no one is going to ask for the recipe. Or imagine—and this is less likely—I pull off the entire meal with aplomb. Each component turns out the way I want. It is a success. It may not be perfect in every respect, but nevertheless *this* is what I want my guests to enjoy. In both cases I have produced the meal. In both cases it is the fruit of my labor and work. But only in the second case is the resulting meal what I *intended*.

It is a bit like that with our bodies. It’s not that God made them (but didn’t particularly care how they turned out). He purposed them. They are what he intended them to be. We can affirm, as

David does, even of these imperfect bodies, that God made them and that he meant to.

Personally Made

All of this means that you have the body God meant for you to have, even when not everything about it is wonderful. It may have any number of problems. It may be a mix of your parents that you didn't want (your dad's eyes and your mother's nose, perhaps, rather than the other way around). But it does mean that God knew what he was doing when he made your body. We can often feel about our body the way we feel when we pick up a hand of cards at the start of a game—why did I have to be dealt this? But in the case of our body, it wasn't random shuffling of the deck or luck of the draw.

The intentionality of our bodies obviously runs counter to how many people think in the Western world today. One article I recently read made the following comment: "Most of us have the bodies we occupy because of luck of the draw."⁴ Tellingly, this was simply stated as self-evident fact rather than as an argument. It is easy to just assume our physical origins have no plan or purpose behind them.

If our body is not accidental, it must also therefore not be incidental. If it were merely the product of accidental processes, we could justifiably write it off as having no theological significance. Our body would tell us nothing substantial about who we are. Our sense of self would be found entirely elsewhere, with no necessary reference to our body. But if we have been created, then our body is not some arbitrary lump of matter. It means something. It is not peripheral to our understanding of who we are. For all the difficulties you may have with it, it is the body God wanted you to have. It is a gift.

If this is so, it has some crucial implications for how we are to think about our body.

Being Grateful for Our Body

Our first response to our body should be to give God thanks for it. I am conscious that the words I'm writing are very hard for some to read. They're hard to write. As with so many, my body has been the cause of some very deep pain for me. I know people whose body has even made them think seriously about taking their own life. Our body can lead to horrific suffering—both physical and psychological. The Bible does not deny this and in fact is able to uniquely account for it, as we shall see in due course. Accepting our body as having been fearfully and wonderfully made does not mean we have to pretend everything about it is good.

But however difficult we may find it, the bodily life we have remains a gift from God, one for which we need to be thankful. It is the means he has given for *you* to exist in his world. In the Bible, thankfulness to God is central to our human life, which we see reflected in how Paul describes humanity's turning away: "They did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (Rom. 1:21). Ingratitude is actually part of the foundation of all sin. Failing to honor God—removing him from his throne and rightful place in our lives—happens alongside and because of our lack of giving thanks to him. Not to give thanks is to forget the goodness of God. It is to neglect the truth that he is, at heart, a God overflowing in kindness and generosity—every good gift comes from him—and that we are fundamentally recipients of his kindness (even with all the complications of life). That Paul couples honoring God with being thankful toward him shows us that unless we see God as fundamentally good, we will find

little reason to follow and worship him. Thanksgiving is that foundational.

If thanksgiving is foundational to our Christian life, it should be foundational to how we view our body. We are creatures made by a good and gracious Creator. If even fallen and imperfect bodies are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” then we can and should thank our maker for them. It is better to be alive in these bodies than not to be alive at all, even when that life is experienced with great pain.

For those of us who are deeply unhappy with our body, and even resentful of it, the path to a healthy response needs to begin with thanking God. Hard though it may be for us to understand, God meant for us to have our particular body. Your body is a gift.

Being Physically Present

We also need to realize that being embodied means that we are designed to relate to one another physically. Ours is the generation perhaps most in danger of forgetting this. We are able to relate to one another in nonphysical ways. In the last twenty-four hours, I’ve had online face-to-face conference calls with people from three other countries. Some of the colleagues I work most closely with live on other continents. Two of my best friends live several time zones away. That we can maintain, let alone enjoy, such relationships and friendships shows how much we take today’s technology for granted. When some missionary friends of mine had a baby in Thailand, their parents back in the UK could see pictures of their new grandchild within minutes. An earlier generation of missionaries, who could only send pictures via unreliable and slow postal services, would be staggered by how much we can connect. Those living in another country far from you now don’t feel much farther away than if they simply lived in another town. We have

resources and opportunities that are staggering when we stop and think about them. In some hugely significant ways, technology has triumphed over geography.

But not completely. Alongside these unprecedented opportunities come some very real dangers. Social media means we can be in contact with a huge number of people spread over a potentially huge geographical area. We can message one another and see each other very easily. It can feel like life is hugely relational—all that contact with all those people all the time. But in reality, it is a very incomplete way to relate to others. It gives an illusion of being highly connected but is in fact an insufficient means for cultivating healthy relationships. There is no substitute for physical presence. Hearing people's voices on a call can be wonderful; seeing their faces on a screen even more so. But presence is uniquely meaningful.

Scripture shows us the importance of physical presence in numerous ways. Paul reflects on the time he spent with the Christians in Thessalonica:

So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. (1 Thess. 2:8)

Christian ministry for Paul was much more than merely imparting gospel information. He and his colleagues shared their lives with the Thessalonians. His ministry required presence. This is made very plain from the way he continues:

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face. (1 Thess. 2:17)

Leaving them was a tearing. Separation was painful. Paul longed for a reunion. Presence with them mattered.

Or consider what John says:

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. (2 John 12)

John's letter is short not because he is lacking things to say to his friends, but because the medium of a letter is ultimately inadequate. "I would rather not use paper and ink." He might say today, "I'd rather not have screen time or online chat." What he wants is to be physically present. That is what will make his joy complete. It's not that there's no joy to be had in online, virtual, or distant relationships, but the joy we can get from them is limited. We need more.

There's a lovely example in Acts of just what physical presence can mean. Paul is in the final stages of his long, arduous journey to Rome:

And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. (Acts 28:14–15)

When the Christians in Rome hear that Paul is finally almost there, they travel out to meet him and accompany him on the final leg of his journey. That might not immediately mean much to us, but bear in mind that the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns are some thirty to forty miles or so from Rome. Traveling that

distance without cars was no small gesture. As far as we know, they had no urgent business to conduct with Paul. It wasn't a matter of completing some shared task. They just wanted to be with him. They wanted Paul to have their company when he finally arrived at Rome. They wanted to be present.

And what an impact their desire had on Paul. It had been a long and arduous journey to this point. Yet seeing that these believers had come all that way just to be with him made a big difference. He thanked God. It gave him *courage*. Just their presence spoke of a solidarity that strengthened Paul and gave him a much-needed boost. Presence really does matter.

Sometimes we approach relationships far too functionally. Sometimes we keep ourselves from others because we're not sure we'll be much use, especially when it comes to being with those in some kind of need. Maybe we've never been particularly good with words and feel sure we won't know what to say. Or we're not good with making meals or doing practical jobs. But passages like this remind us of the good that can be done through sheer physical presence. It probably wouldn't occur to many of us that we could ever be a spiritual encouragement to someone of the stature of the apostle Paul. What could we say that he didn't already know? But these ordinary believers were a genuine help to him just by making the effort to accompany him for the final day or so of his travel.

A friend of mine pastoring a very difficult congregation once pointed out a member quietly sitting in the front pew. "He has the spiritual gift of turning up." This man was evidently very faithful in his attendance in a church that was hugely volatile. Just seeing him encouraged his pastor.

Nothing else can do what physical presence does. Other ways of relating to one another can wonderfully enhance our physical

friendships, but they can never actually replace them. Physical presence matters because we are physical people.

Being Careful Online

Online ways of relating help us overcome some of the limits of our body. We can be in more than one place at once. We can limit what people see of us. We can select the sort of image of ourselves we think best expresses who we want to be. We can log off when we've had enough. But the limits of our physical body are good for us. We're not meant to be everywhere at once. We're not meant to be free from the constraints of being part of a physical community. Being present is a vital part of what it means to be human.

The corollary is also true. If physical presence is a way of honoring our humanity, it is also sadly true that we can all too easily dehumanize those we are not physically around. Something about that form of relating makes it easy to treat people very differently from how we would if we were sitting across from them. This is especially true of our online interactions. When we only experience people as avatars with opinions that rub us the wrong way, we can forget that behind the words is real flesh and blood. They become little more than a position to oppose, so we can find ourselves saying things we would never say if we were sitting across a table from them. Why? Because we're not *with* them. We forget they are people; not just positions we might disagree with. Our priority is how getting these things said will make us feel rather than how hearing might make them feel. Even without realizing it, we can be demeaning and extraordinarily hurtful.

A couple of years ago, the writer and professor Karen Swallow Prior was hit by a bus and very nearly killed. Her recovery was slow and arduous. But she shared some time later that some subsequent

attacks she endured online had been more painful than the physical ordeal she had been through.

Our words are powerful. The apostle James likens them to the spark that can ignite an enormous forest fire, and to the deadly poison of an assassin. How much more is this the case when someone is not physically before us. When we are actually with people—even people we don't know well—we naturally and quickly develop the ability to empathize with them. We can see their facial expressions and pick up on their body language. We recognize their sensitivity to things we might be saying. We are aware of what kind of impact our speech is having. If we say something that turns out to be hurtful, we're more likely to realize that and respond accordingly. But when people are hidden behind a screen, all that really seems to matter is making sure we're right and they're wrong. So we can be dismissive of them, or mock what they say, or twist their comments into something we know they wouldn't have meant. We just want to win. They're no longer humans but targets to be bull's-eyed. And all the while, poison is being disseminated, and whole forests are ablaze.

The response is to recognize this and to make every effort never to say something to someone online that we would never say in person. We must treat each word we type as if it was being offered to someone sitting across the table from us. Presence matters. In its absence we need to be all the more careful not to dehumanize.

Being Aware of Appropriate Touch

A recent article highlighted a growing trend in a number of urban areas: professional cuddling services.⁵ Paid cuddlers are available for hire by those who feel as though they do not experience adequate physical contact. Some are single; others are happily married. But

all feel a sense of being “touch deprived,” to use the phrase of a researcher quoted in the article. I’ve heard it described elsewhere as “skin hunger.”

Now some of us might be inclined to roll our eyes. But the fact that such businesses are cropping up is quite significant. There are those in our churches and communities who only very rarely experience healthy touch. Pastor Zack Eswine admits how he “had not imagined . . . how little a widow experiences touch as it is meant to be. Family members live at a distance and visit sporadically. Beyond the pokes of medical people, the elderly often enter a famine of touch as if dwelling in the desert years of their lives.”⁶

It is not just the elderly, of course. Professional cuddling agencies report having a wide range of clients. We increasingly find ourselves in a culture that doesn’t know how to do physical contact. The slogan of one of these agencies seems to have put its finger on the issue (so to speak): “We’re sex obsessed but touch deprived.” There is much to this. In Western culture we have collapsed sex and intimacy together to the extent that it is hard for people to conceive of intimacy that is not sexual at its core. So, more and more, we associate touch with being sensual rather than familial.

Churches should provide a remedy by being places where healthy and appropriate touch is encouraged. Paul tells Timothy to treat older men as fathers and older women as mothers (1 Tim. 5:1–2). Churches are meant to be families, so it is entirely appropriate that I greet a church member of an older generation in the way I would greet my own parents.

All of us are to “greet one another with a holy kiss,” Paul says on more than one occasion (Rom. 16:16; 2 Cor. 13:12). That will not be the natural form of greeting for every culture in every time, but the principle is clear: we are to greet one another in a physical way

that's familial. For most of us in the West, that will involve at least a handshake or perhaps a hug. In some cases (when greeting our spiritual mothers, for example) it might mean a kiss on the cheek. But whatever it is, we must give thought to the appropriate place of touch in our church life.

Boundaries must exist, of course. Not all expressions of physical affection are equal. Paul seems to anticipate that in his language of a "holy" kiss. Zack Eswine contrasts two kinds of physical touch in the New Testament:

The first is Judas's kiss of Jesus's cheek. This kind of kiss misuses physical touch in order to consume or preserve its own selfish wants, lusts, desires, or agendas (Luke 22:47–48). In contrast the "holy kiss" envisions a way for Christian community to recover in Jesus how human beings were originally meant to touch each other. Physical touch is meant as a holy act. Few of us know in an experiential way what it means to touch or be touched in a sacred way. Profane touch has mentored and broken most of us.⁷

Instead of "profane touch," we are to learn to cultivate in our churches "gospel touch":

Gospel touch, then, is meant to resemble the touch normatively appropriate between family members. This is your guide. Therefore, abusive, neglectful, presumptuous, or sensual touch has no place in the tender touch of gospel life and ministry.⁸

And what is true of gospel touch should be true of all touch.

The existence of cuddling agencies alerts us to a real issue for many people today, even if these agencies are unlikely to be a

plausible solution to the problem. It is hard to imagine that turning touch into a commercial commodity is likely to meet people's genuine needs for meaningful and familial physical contact. The real answer comes when we return to Scripture and recover a healthy biblical view of what it means to have been "fearfully and wonderfully made" as physical creatures.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). When Jesus stepped into this world as a real, physical human, he reminded us that there is nothing incidental about our physicality. Our bodily life is God's gift to us.

“God’s eternal plan for us involves our body. We can’t write off our physical life as spiritually irrelevant.”

SAM ALLBERRY

There’s a danger in focusing too much on the body. There’s also a danger in not valuing it enough. In fact, the Bible has lots to say about the body. With the coming of Jesus, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”—flesh that was pierced and crushed for the sins of the world.

In *What God Has to Say about Our Bodies*, Sam Allberry explains that all of us are fearfully and wonderfully made, and should regard our physicality as a gift. He offers biblical guidance for living, including understanding gender, sexuality, and identity; dealing with aging, illness, and death; and considering the physical future hope that we have in Christ.

In this powerfully written book, you’ll gain a new understanding for the immeasurable value of our bodies and God’s ultimate plan to redeem them.

“After reading this book, you will be better equipped to think through questions, from eating disorders to the transgender debate to transhumanism, as well as the more perennial questions of how to think about ‘soul’ and ‘body’ in terms of the gospel.”

RUSSELL MOORE

President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Clearly forged through long years of honest conversations in the pastorate, Allberry embraces the hard questions, gives wise and measured guidance, and will convince and inspire you with his core thesis: ‘We can trust Christ with our bodies.’”

J. ALASDAIR GROVES

Executive Director, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; coauthor, *Untangling Emotions*

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