

STATEMENT DR502

RESTORING THE SOUL TO CHRISTIANITY**By J. P. Moreland**

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Throughout history, most people have been dualists, at least in the sense that they have taken a human to be the sort of being who could enter life after death while his or her corpse was left behind. Some form of dualism appears to be the natural response to what we seem to know about ourselves through introspection and in other ways. Many philosophers who deny dualism have to admit that it is the common sense view. When we turn to church history, we see the same thing. The vast majority of Christians have believed that a human being is a unity of two distinct entities — body and soul. (Some have mistakenly held to a trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit.) The human soul, while not by nature immortal, is nevertheless capable of entering an intermediate disembodied state upon death, however incomplete and unnatural this state may be, and, eventually, being reunited with a resurrected body. This is called *substance dualism*.

Emergence of Christian Physicalism

Surprisingly, some Christian thinkers have now set aside substance dualism for some form of physicalism. They claim that a soul is “a functional capacity of a complex physical organism, rather than a separate spiritual essence....”¹

The reasons for this trend are varied and complicated, but two are regularly cited. First, many claim that the rise of modern science has called into question the reality of a substantial soul. Allegedly, neurophysiology demonstrates the radical dependence and, in fact, identity between mind and brain. Second, some assert that Scripture depicts the human person as a holistic unity, whereas dualism is a Greek concept falsely read into the Bible by many in church history.

Neither of these arguments works. Regarding the first, I deal with this argument in great detail elsewhere.² The second argument will be the focus of this article. I will argue that it is seriously flawed and that the traditional view of the church is correct.

Why the Debate Matters

At this point, the reader may be wondering why the church should care about this debate. After all, doctrinal disagreements abound, so why make a big deal about different views of the soul? There are at least four reasons why this debate matters a great deal to the cause of Christ. First, under the pressure of scientism, physicalism is an inappropriate revision of biblical teaching that is central to the core of Christian theology.

Second, most Christian physicalists hold that at death a person ceases to exist and is re-created ex nihilo at the resurrection. Setting aside problems of personal identity and difficulties with scriptural teaching about a disembodied intermediate state between death and final resurrection, this view makes the reality of immortality more difficult to embrace than does substance dualism.

Third, Christianity entails a worldview according to which the physical world is not all there is. There is a vast sea of immaterial being in which God, angels, and, perhaps, abstract objects exist. The traditional view of the soul depicts it as a part of the immaterial, unseen world along with introspective, first-person knowledge of at least part of that unseen world. Substance dualism coheres much better with the immaterial metaphysics of Christianity than does physicalism, and it provides a certain amount of justification for belief in that unseen world.

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Finally, Christian physicalism tends to represent personhood in purely functional terms with the result that full personhood accrues only to a properly functioning brain. One troublesome implication of this view is that some vulnerable members of the human community (e.g., fetuses, handicapped newborns, dysfunctional elderly) are no longer deemed to be persons with value and full moral standing.

Against this background, I offer a biblical defense of substance dualism. Before beginning my defense, it is helpful to know what version of substance dualism I am defending. In my view, the mind and spirit are faculties of the soul, and the soul is an immaterial substantial reality that contains a person's various faculties of consciousness. The soul informs, diffuses, and animates the body and makes the body human. A person is identical to his or her soul and has a body that is intimately united to the soul. While personal identity can be sustained without a body, full human functioning is a holistic functioning of the soul together with the body. At the very least, a Christian ought to hold that a person can sustain personal identity in a disembodied intermediate state while awaiting the resurrection of the body.

Biblical View of the Soul: The Old Testament

The main emphasis in Old Testament theology is on the functional, holistic unity of a human being. But the Old Testament depiction of this unity includes duality of immaterial/material components such that the individual human can live after biological death in an intermediate state while awaiting the resurrection of the body. There are two main foundations for this claim: analysis of Old Testament anthropological terms and comprehensive review of Old Testament teaching about life after death.

Biblical anthropological terms exhibit a wide range of meanings, Old Testament terms as well as New Testament. Perhaps the two most important Old Testament terms are *nephesh* (frequently translated "soul") and *ruach* (frequently translated "spirit").

The Term Nephesh

The term *nephesh* occurs 754 times in the Old Testament and is used primarily of human beings, though it is also used of animals (Gen. 1:20, 24, 30; 9:10) and of God Himself (Judg. 10:16; Isa. 1:14).³ When the term is used of God, it clearly does not mean physical breath or life. Instead, it refers to God as an immaterial, transcendent self, a seat of mind, will, emotion, and so forth (see, e.g., Amos 6:8). According to *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, the term has three basic meanings: the life principle, various figurative usages, and the soul of man that "departs at death and returns with life at the resurrection."⁴

To expand on this point, in some places, *nephesh* refers to a body part, for example, the throat or mouth (Isa. 5:14) or the neck (Ps. 105:18), and it can even be used to refer to a dead human corpse (Num. 5:2; 6:11). It sometimes refers to a desire of some sort, such as for food or sex.

On other occasions, *nephesh* refers either to life itself (Lev. 17:11) or to a vital principle/substantial entity that makes something animated or alive (Ps. 30:3; cf. Ps. 86:13; Prov. 3:22.). *Nephesh* also refers to the seat of emotion, volition, moral attitudes, and desire/longing for God (Mic. 7:1; Prov. 21:10; Isa. 26:9; Deut. 6:5; 21:14).

Finally, there are passages in which *nephesh* refers to the continuing locus of personal identity that departs to the afterlife as the last breath ceases (Gen. 35:18; cf. Ps. 16:10; 30:3; 49:15; 86:13; 139:8; 1 Kings 17:21–22; Lam. 1:1). Death and resurrection are regularly spoken of in terms of the departure and return of the soul. Indeed, the problem of necromancy throughout Israel's history (the practice of trying to communicate with the dead in sheol; cf. Deut. 18:9–14, 1 Sam. 28:7–25) seems to imply that ancient Israel took people to have conscious lives after the death of their bodies.⁵

It is sometimes argued that in these and other contexts, *nephesh* is simply a term that stands proxy for the personal pronoun "I" or "me," and, as such, it simply refers to the person as a totality. (Often the word does not even come through in translation but is simply rendered with the personal pronoun.) One way of putting this objection is to claim that, frequently, the term *nephesh* is used in a figure of speech known as *synecdoche*; that is when a part of something is used to refer to the whole entity (e.g., "All hands on deck!"). *Nephesh* thus does not refer to a part of the person but to the person as a whole psychophysical unity.

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This claim begs the question because it fails to take seriously the fact that it is in virtue of the *nephesh* and not the body per se that the individual human is a living, sentient being capable of the various states of emotion, volition, and so on. Even if certain passages use *nephesh* to refer simply to the whole person (“Bless Yahweh, O my nephesh” in Ps. 103:1), it is the whole person as a unified center of conscious thought, action, and emotion; that is, as an ensouled body to which reference is being made. Further, in cases of synecdoche, even though the whole may be the intended referent of the term, implicit in the employment of the figure of speech is an acknowledgment of the reality of the part. When someone says, “All hands on deck!” he may be referring to entire persons, but he does so by way of parts — hands — that exist and are literal constituents of the wholes of which they are parts. The same is true of the *nephesh* when it is used as synecdoche.

The Term Ruach

The other key Old Testament term is *ruach*, frequently translated as “spirit.” The term occurs 361 times, and the breakdown of some of the specific translations in the KJV are as follows: the Spirit of God (105 times), angels (23 times), the spirit in man (59 times), the wind (43 times), an attitude or emotional state (51 times), mind (6 times), and breath (14 times).⁶ Brown, Driver, and Briggs list nine meanings: (1) God’s Spirit, (2) angels, (3) the principle of life in humans and animals, (4) disembodied spirits, (5) breath, (6) wind, (7) disposition or attitude, (8) the seat of emotions, and (9) the seat of mind and will in humans. Definitions 1, 2, and 4 clearly have straightforward dualist implications, and definitions 3 and 7-9 do as well when we realize that, if dualist arguments are successful, the principle/seat of life and consciousness is a transcendent self or immaterial ego of some sort. *Ruach* clearly overlaps with *nephesh*; however, two differences seem to characterize the terms. First, *ruach* is overwhelmingly the term of choice for God (though it is also used of animals; cf. Eccles. 3:19; Gen. 7:22). Second, *ruach* emphasizes the notion of power. Indeed, if there is a central thread to *ruach*, it appears to be a unified center of unconscious (moving air) or conscious (God, angels, humans, animals) power.

Ruach often refers to the wind, in so far as it is an invisible, active power standing at God’s disposal (Gen. 8:1; Isa. 7:2). In this sense, the *ruach* of God hovers over the waters with the power to create (Gen. 1:2). The term also signifies breath itself (Job 19:17) or, more frequently, a vital power that infuses something, animates it, and gives it life and consciousness. In this sense, the *ruach* in man is given or formed by Yahweh (Zech. 12:1); it is that which proceeds from and returns to Him, and it is that which gives man life (Job 34:14ff.). In Ezekiel 37, God takes dry bones, reconstitutes human bodies of flesh, tendons, skin, and so forth, and then adds a *ruach* to those bodies to make them living persons. Ezekiel 37 is parallel to Genesis 2:7 in which God breathes *neshama* — a virtual synonym to *ruach* that means “the breath of life” — into an already formed body. In both texts, the entity God adds is (1) that which animates and makes alive, and (2) brought about by His *direct* act and therefore not emergent or inherent to the properties of matter. The *ruach* is something that can depart upon death (Ps. 146:4; Eccles. 12:7; Job 4:15). There is no *ruach* in idols of wood or stone, and, thus, they cannot arise and possess consciousness (Hab. 2:19; Jer. 10:14).

Ruach also refers to an independent, invisible, conscious being, as when God employs a spirit to accomplish some purpose (2 Kings 19:7; 22:21-23). In this sense, Yahweh is called the God of the vital spirits (*ruachs*) of all flesh (Num. 27:16; cf. 16:22). Here, “spirit” means an individual, conscious entity distinct from the body. Moreover, *ruach* also refers to the seat of various states of consciousness, including volition (Deut. 2:30; Jer. 51:11; Ps. 51:10-12), cognition (Isa. 29:24), emotion (Judg. 8:3; 1 Kings 21:4), and moral/spiritual disposition (Eccles. 7:8; Prov. 18:14).

In light of our brief study of *nephesh* and *ruach*, it should be clear that belief in some form of Old Testament dualism is justified.

The Old Testament on Life after Death

The Old Testament clearly depicts individual survival after physical death, and this manner of existence seems to be discarnate, that is, without flesh and bones. The dead in sheol are called *rephaim*, meaning shades (e.g., Ps. 88:11). As with most Old Testament terms, *sheol* has a variety of meanings, including simply the grave itself. But there is no question that a major nuance of *sheol* is a shadowy realm inhabited by all the dead (with the exception of Enoch and Elijah).

For a number of reasons, Old Testament revelation about life after death is best understood in terms of a diminished though conscious form of disembodied personal survival in an intermediate state. First, life in sheol is often depicted as lethargic and inactive in a way that resembles an unconscious coma (Job 3:13; Eccles. 9:10; Isa. 38:18; Ps. 88:10-

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12; 115:17-18). On the other hand, the dead in sheol are also described as being with family, awake, and active on occasion (Isa. 14:9-10). Second, the practice of necromancy (communicating with the dead) was believed to be a possibility by the people of Israel because of their belief in a disembodied intermediate state (cf. Isa. 8:19; Lev. 19:31; 20:6; Deut. 18:11; 1 Sam. 28). Even if true contact with the dead cannot take place without God's miraculous intervention (e.g., 1 Sam. 28), there still seems to be the presumption of disembodied conscious life. Third, we have already seen that the *nephesh* — a conscious person without flesh and bone — departs to God upon death (e.g., Ps. 49:15). Finally, the Old Testament clearly teaches the hope of resurrection beyond the grave (Job 19:25-27; Ps. 73:26; Dan. 12:2; Isa. 26:14, 19). It is possible to interpret these resurrection texts in a way that denies a conscious intermediate state, and we will look at this possibility shortly when we turn to the New Testament teaching about the intermediate state. It seems clear, however, that the most natural way to interpret them is in terms of the soul/spirit as the locus of personal identity that survives death in a less than complete state, to which a resurrection body will some day be added.

In sum, the Old Testament teaches that the soul/spirit is an immaterial entity that grounds and unifies conscious, living functions, that constitutes personal identity, that can survive physical death in an intermediate state, and that will be reunited eventually with a resurrection body. When we turn to the New Testament, this dualistic view of human life becomes even more compelling.

Biblical View of the Soul: The New Testament

There are key New Testament passages that appear to use the term *spirit* in a dualistic sense. First we will examine the non-Pauline texts.

New Testament Anthropology: Non-Pauline

1 Peter 3:18-20. According to this text, after Jesus was killed, He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison who had been disobedient during the days of Noah. This is important for two reasons. First, who are the spirits to whom Jesus preached? There are three main interpretations. Some argue that this text refers to the pre-Incarnate Christ preaching to the wicked during the days of Noah. This interpretation is not likely, because it breaks with the chronological order of the passage: Jesus died (v. 18), He preached (v. 19), He ascended to heaven (v. 22). Verse 18 contains two aorist participles (having been put to death, being made alive in the spirit) that set forth actions that occur at the same time as the main verb (Christ died). In other words, the events described occurred at the time of the crucifixion. Interpretations two and three imply that between his death and resurrection, Christ preached either to disembodied spirits in the intermediate state or to imprisoned angels. The former view entails an anthropological dualism, though the text is too ambiguous to allow dogmatism towards either interpretation.

The second reason for the text's significance centers on Christ Himself. Between His death and resurrection, He continued to exist as the God-man in the intermediate state independent of His earthly body. Whatever it was that allowed Jesus to continue to be a human, it could not be His earthly body. The most reasonable solution is that Jesus continued to have a human soul/spirit, a solution consistent with "being made alive in the spirit" (v. 18).

Hebrews 12:23. This text refers to deceased but existent people in the heavenly Jerusalem as "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." "Spirits" is used to refer to human beings in either the intermediate state or after the final resurrection. Either way, deceased humans are described as incorporeal spirits, a description fitting the context in which the heavenly Jerusalem is contrasted with what can be touched and empirically sensed (vv. 18-19).

When this language is used of angels, it clearly entails the idea of an angelic person who is identical to a substantial spirit, and the same implication for human persons is most naturally seen in this text. Moreover, the verbs of Hebrews 12:18-24 are in the present tense, so it is highly probable that the verse is referring to disembodied persons in the intermediate state who await a final resurrection (cf. Heb. 11: 35).

Death as "giving up the pneuma." Several texts refer to death as "giving up the spirit" (Matt. 27:50; John 19:30; Luke 23:46; 24:37; "giving up the soul" (*psuche*) is used in Acts 5:5, 10; 12:23). Most likely, this phrase expresses the idea of the departure of the person into the intermediate state and not simply the cessation of breathing because (1) Jesus committed Himself, not His breath, to God (Luke 23:46); (2) this was a standard way of referring to the disembodied dead in intertestamental Judaism; (3) Luke 24:37-39 clearly uses "spirit" much like *rephaim* is used in the Old Testament, that is, as a discarnate person "without flesh and bones" (v. 39).

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There are also key non-Pauline New Testament passages that appear to use the term *soul* in a dualistic sense. In Revelation 6:9-11, dead saints are referred to as the “souls” of the martyrs who are in the intermediate state awaiting the final resurrection (cf. Rev. 20:5-6). The intermediate saints are depicted as conscious and alive and are metaphorically described with sense perceptible imagery in a way comparable to the Old Testament imagery of sheol. Moreover, Matthew 10:28 says, “And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” In this text, *psuche* refers to something that can exist without the body, and thus “soul” and “body” cannot simply be two different terms that refer to the person as a psychosomatic unity. The most natural way to take Jesus’ words here is as an expression of a Jewish form of dualism.

Non-Pauline Teaching on the Intermediate State. A number of non-Pauline passages are most reasonably taken to affirm a disembodied intermediate state between death and final resurrection. In Jesus’ debate with the Sadducees (Matt. 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40), He specifies the time of the resurrection as a general future event “in the age to come” (Luke 20:35), an understanding of the resurrection embraced by the Pharisees of that time. As the context shows (Luke 20:39), they approve of Jesus’ teaching about the intermediate state and resurrection (see also, John 5:28-29; 11:23-24). Further, Jesus asserts that the patriarchs, as representatives of all people, are currently alive in the intermediate state because “all live to Him” (Luke 20:38; cf. Matt. 22:37, where Jesus grounds His argument in the present tense of the verb: God *is*, that is, *continues to be* their God, and thus, they continue to be).

In addition, there is the Gospel account of the Transfiguration (e.g., Matt. 17:1-13), in which Elijah (who never died) and Moses (who had died) appear with Jesus. The most natural way to interpret this text is to understand that Moses and Elijah have continued to exist — Moses was not re-created for this one event — and were made temporarily visible; thus the Transfiguration passage indicates an intermediate state.

The parable of Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is a description of the intermediate state in hades; it is not the final resurrection in Gehenna (where the lost will be ultimately consigned). It is hard to know how far to press this parable, but it seems safe to conclude from it that Jesus is at least teaching the existence of conscious, living people in the intermediate state prior to the final resurrection. This is clear from the discussion among the departed of people still living on earth with an opportunity to come to faith.

In Luke 23:42-43, Jesus promises the thief on the cross that “today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” The term “today” should be taken in its natural sense, namely, that the man would be with Jesus that very day in the intermediate state after their deaths. In intertestamental Judaism, paradise was taken to be the dwelling place of the faithful dead prior to the final resurrection.⁷ In Jesus’ case, this text, coupled with other New Testament teaching on Christology, implies that Jesus continued to exist as a fully human disembodied person after His death and prior to His bodily resurrection. This clearly demonstrates that the thief existed in a disembodied intermediate state just like Jesus, which is possible only if the thief was more than his body.

New Testament Anthropology: Pauline

When we turn to Pauline teaching, several strong strands of evidence unite to justify the claim that he taught dualism.

Acts 23:6-8. Paul affirms his solidarity with the Pharisees against the Sadducees in affirming the reality of angels, spirits, and the final resurrection. When Paul refers to his acceptance of the “resurrection of the dead,” he is affirming the Pharisaic teaching of the afterlife, which included the notion of the person as a disembodied spirit awaiting the final resurrection.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Among other things, Paul here affirms the idea that dead believers await a future resurrection concurrent with the Second Coming of Jesus. Moreover, Paul’s description of those in the intermediate state as “asleep” simply describes persons who, while conscious and active, are not active in an earthly, bodily way. 1 Thessalonians 5:10 refers to those who are asleep as living together with Christ, a description that does not allow for an extinction/re-creation view of the afterlife.

1 Corinthians 15. This passage underscores the general teaching of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: There will be a future general resurrection at the end of the age (cf. vv. 24, 51-52) following a period of sleep (vv. 18, 21, 51), a period of conscious and active, though diminished, survival in a disembodied intermediate state. Moreover, verse 35 seems to make a clear distinction between persons and their bodies.

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2 Corinthians 5:1-10. Here Paul desires to live until the parousia, because this would mean that he would have his earthly body immediately transformed into his resurrection body and, thus, he would not have to go through an unnatural state of disembodiment. Paul refers to the earthly body, as the “earthly tent” (v. 1); and he describes the resurrection body as a “building from God,” a phrase that cannot refer to a heavenly dwelling since it is something that can be put on (cf. vv. 2-3). Paul refers to the disembodied intermediate state as a state of nakedness or of being unclothed (vv. 3-4), and he explicitly says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (v. 8), thereby affirming the concept of disembodiment.

The larger context of 2 Corinthians adds further weight to this interpretation. In chapter 4, Paul’s theme is that, given the ministry of the new covenant, we should not lose heart in the face of hardship. The progression of Paul’s thought is quite important. In verses 7-11, he addresses the issue of persecution, especially bodily persecution, by claiming that one should continue to manifest the life of Jesus in one’s “mortal flesh” (v.11). Part of our endurance comes from our hope of resurrection, which he compares to Jesus’ resurrection. (Note: Jesus was not recreated at His resurrection; He continued to exist consciously as the God-man between His crucifixion and resurrection, at which time He was reunited with his body, now a resurrection body). Paul further places our hope on the new covenant ministry and on the assurance that though the outer man is decaying, the inner man is being renewed (vv. 12-18).

The natural question this raises is, what sort of hope do we have if the body itself is destroyed? In chapter 5, Paul addresses this by teaching about the intermediate state and its relationship to the future resurrection. If this interpretation is correct, then it has clear dualistic implications (see also Phil. 1:21-24).

2 Corinthians 12:1-4. Paul tells of an experience he had 14 years earlier. In verse 3 he says that he does not know whether he was still in his body during the experience or whether he was disembodied. It doesn’t really matter which was correct. The fact that Paul allows for the possibility of his own disembodiment is sufficient to show that he recognized that his personhood was not identical to his body. It is because Paul understood himself as a soul/spirit united to a body that this was a real possibility for him.

The clear teaching of Scripture, then is that a human being consists of both body and soul. Although some Christian thinkers deny this conclusion, their denial is not supported by Scripture, which overwhelmingly sets forth a dichotomy of soul (spirit) and body.

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1 Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, “Preface,” *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* ed. Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), xiii.

2 J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

3 See Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1984), 45-51.

4 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953, 1977), 220.

5 In some modern translations, *nephesh* is translated as “man,” “self,” “being,” and so forth. In earlier translations such as the King James Version, it was translated “soul.” In any case, the context should be used to determine the meaning of *nephesh*.

6 See Morey, 51-53; Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 32-39.

7 See John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989),