

The Divine Constitution of Human Life

Biblical Anthropology and the Question of Whole-Person Mental Health

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Abstract

This working paper begins with a question that sits underneath much of my current work: What is a human being, and what changes when mental health is approached from a model of the person that includes spirit, soul, and physical body? Drawing primarily from Johann Tobias Beck's nineteenth-century biblical psychology, I explore a Christian anthropology in which human life cannot be reduced to cognition, emotion, or biology alone. I then place that anthropology in conversation with contemporary questions in psychology, embodied emotion, moral injury, meaning-making, and the neuroscience of religious and spiritual experience. I am not arguing that biblical categories are scientific equivalents of modern psychological constructs. Rather, I am asking whether these traditions describe overlapping dimensions of human experience that deserve more careful study. This paper is part of my ongoing development of a methodology and applied modality concerned with the convergence of mind, soul, physical body, and spirit.

Author's Note

I am currently developing a methodology and applied modality concerned with the convergence of mind, soul, physical body, and spirit. These working papers document the questions, theoretical propositions, and research directions informing that work. They are intentionally exploratory. Where I make theological claims, I identify them as theological; where I discuss scientific findings, I distinguish those findings from my interpretations and hypotheses.

The Question Beneath the Symptoms

Mental health care has become increasingly sophisticated in its understanding of the brain, behavior, trauma, attachment, physiology, and social environment. I value that progress. At the same time, I keep returning to a more basic question: Are we working from a sufficiently complete picture of the person?

For many people, suffering is experienced not only as a collection of symptoms. It can feel like fragmentation: I do not feel like myself. Something in me is divided. My body is reacting to something my mind cannot seem to resolve. I know what I value, but I repeatedly act against it. I have lost meaning. I feel spiritually cut off. These descriptions are not interchangeable with diagnoses, but they point toward dimensions of experience that diagnostic language alone may not fully capture.

My interest is in the convergence. I am exploring what becomes visible when psychological, biological, embodied, moral, existential, and spiritual dimensions are allowed into the same conversation without collapsing one into another.

A Historical Biblical Anthropology

Johann Tobias Beck's *Outlines of Biblical Psychology* offers one historical Christian attempt to describe the human person through the categories of spirit, soul, and body. In this framework, these dimensions are distinguishable but deeply interrelated. The soul is not simply a synonym for the modern psychological mind, and spirit is not simply a nineteenth-century word for the brain. Beck is working within a theological anthropology.

That distinction matters to me. I do not want to make Scripture sound scientific by replacing biblical words with neuroscientific ones. Nor do I want to use neuroscience as proof of theological claims. I am interested in a different question: Can an older anthropology raise useful questions about dimensions of human functioning that contemporary mental health care studies under different names?

For example, biblical language repeatedly connects inner life with desire, conscience, identity, embodiment, choice, meaning, relationship, and orientation toward God. Contemporary psychology and neuroscience investigate many of these phenomena through different constructs and methods. The presence of conceptual resonance does not establish equivalence. It does, however, create an interesting place for inquiry.

Embodiment, Meaning, and Inner Conflict

One reason this historical framework interests me is that it does not imagine inner life as disembodied. Scripture often describes distress through the body: the heart, bones, bowels, breath, fatigue, appetite, pain, and physical heaviness. Contemporary science likewise recognizes that emotion is embodied and that interoception, autonomic activity, sleep, stress physiology, and other bodily processes participate in mental health.

The same is true of moral and existential experience. People can suffer from guilt, shame, violated values, loss of meaning, or conflict between what they believe and what they repeatedly do. Psychology has language for some of these experiences, including cognitive dissonance, moral injury, identity disturbance, and maladaptive behavioral patterns. Christian theology has other language. Neither vocabulary should be casually substituted for the other.

What interests me is whether a whole-person model can hold these layers together while remaining precise about what each discipline can actually claim.

Spirit, Soul, and Body as a Research Question

At this stage, I am treating the spirit-soul-body framework as an anthropological and theoretical proposition, not as an empirically established clinical model. That means the questions are more important than premature conclusions.

How do spiritual beliefs and experiences interact with identity, emotion, cognition, physiology, and behavior? How do experiences interpreted as encounters with God affect a person's meaning system and subsequent functioning? When someone reports profound spiritual transformation, what psychological and physiological changes accompany that transformation? Can spiritual practices produce durable changes in attention, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, or behavior?

These questions are increasingly approachable scientifically. Research in neurotheology and the neuroscience of religious and spiritual practices demonstrates that prayer, meditation, worship, mystical experience, and other spiritual practices are associated with measurable neural and physiological activity. That evidence does not prove theological claims. It does establish that spiritual practice and experience are legitimate subjects for scientific investigation.

Toward an Applied Methodology

I am currently developing a methodology and applied modality concerned with the convergence of mind, soul, physical body, and spirit. I am intentionally not naming or presenting that methodology as an established treatment at this stage. I am documenting the ideas beneath it, studying adjacent literatures, identifying what can be measured, and asking where genuine gaps remain.

A future model in this area would need to do more than sound integrative. It would need clearly defined constructs, ethical boundaries, operationalized interventions, appropriate populations, contraindications, measurable outcomes, and empirical testing. It would also need safeguards against using spiritual explanations to obscure medical or psychiatric conditions.

My Christian convictions are not hidden within this inquiry. They are part of why I am asking these questions. At the same time, intellectual integrity requires me to distinguish conviction from evidence and theological interpretation from scientific finding.

Questions I Am Carrying Forward

The questions guiding my next stage of inquiry include: What constitutes a sufficiently whole model of the human person for mental health care? Which aspects of spiritual experience can be operationalized and studied without reducing them to biology? How should researchers distinguish spiritual interpretation from measurable psychological and physiological outcomes? What does healing mean if symptom reduction is only one dimension of human flourishing? And what might become possible if mind, soul, body, and spirit are investigated together with both spiritual seriousness and scientific discipline?

I do not yet know the full answers. That is precisely why I am doing the work.

References

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