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Being the Temple of the Holy Spirit:

To what extent might physical fitness be a component of Christian spirituality?

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

What is the issue this dissertation explores?

Increasingly, the United Kingdom (along with the affluent West in general) is suffering the effects of a potentially catastrophic pandemic. This is not COVID-19, which received blanket media coverage and provoked huge public debate. Rather, this is the hidden-yet-obvious pandemic which dare not speak its name. It is the elephant in the national living room. It is the pandemic of obesity, with all its associated morbidities, from increased risk of suffering and death from numerous secondary causes (see below) to the effects on the national economy.

According to the National Health Service (NHS):

> *Global obesity rates have tripled since 1975, and the UK ranks among the worst in Europe. Obesity and poor diet are linked with type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and increased risk of respiratory, musculoskeletal and liver diseases. Obese people are also at increased risk of certain cancers, including being three times more likely to develop colon cancer… [and]… nearly two-thirds of adults in England are overweight or obese.*[1]
>
> (NHS UK, 2019)

Government figures indicate that obesity will soon overtake smoking as the single greatest cause of preventable death, and that obesity is currently responsible for more than 30,000 deaths each year and a shortening of lifespan by 9 years. Remarkably, annual U.K. expenditure on treating obesity and diabetes exceeds combined annual expenditure "on the police, the fire service and the judicial system combined." [2]

(Public Health England, 2019)

[1] NHS UK (2019). The NHS Long Term Plan. Available at: https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/online-version/chapter-2-more-nhs-action-on-prevention-and-health-inequalities/obesity/ Accessed 20.06.23

[2] Public Health England (2019). Health matters: obesity and the food environment. Gov.UK. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-obesity-and-the-food-environment/health-matters-obesity-and-the-food-environment--2 Accessed 20.06.23

Clearly, obesity places a tremendous strain on individuals, families and the NHS. However, although I highlight obesity to illustrate the problem, it is only *one* of a range of difficulties associated with *poor physical fitness*. These difficulties include musculoskeletal weaknesses such as muscular atrophy and osteoporosis as well as cardiovascular conditions. In addition, poor physical fitness can contribute to poor mental health (e.g. low self-esteem, poor self-image, depression) and have negative relational/social implications.

Alongside growing recognition of the scale of such problems, there seems at the same time to be a laudable move towards the acceptance and valuing of people of all shapes, sizes and abilities. Marketeers are under pressure to move away from presenting unrealistic images of physically 'perfect' people in advertising. The call has been to drop the size-zero supermodels and replace them with larger figures, blemishes and all, who better represent everyday people. In 2015, supplement company Protein World attracted brickbats (and an investigation by the ASA[3]) over its now-infamous "Are you beach body ready?" poster campaign, with concerns expressed about eating disorders, negative self-image and 'fat-shaming' against women.

Meanwhile, the health and fitness industry flourishes, with more gyms, diet clubs and personal trainers doing business. It appears that the public, whilst wanting to accept and value larger people, still aspires to be fitter *personally* and still recognizes the need for physical exercise which, alongside healthy nutrition and appropriate rest/recovery, is a key component of physical fitness:

> *There is little doubt that proper habitual exercise training is a significant factor in reducing the severity of cardiovascular and other diseases among the people of the world.*
>
> (Fox, Bowers and Foss, 1989, p.417).

There is a tension here between the desire to affirm people of all sizes whilst recognising there are good reasons to avoid becoming overweight or obese. Even the words

[3] Sweney M. (2015). 'Beach body ready' ad banned from returning to tube, watchdog rules. The Guardian 29 April. Available at: The Guardian - https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/apr/29/beach-body-ready-ad-faces-formal-inquiry-as-campaign-sparks-outrage Accessed 20.06.23

'overweight' and 'obese' are sensitive ones and sometimes considered unhelpful, yet they are medical terms. The uncomfortable truth is that being overweight or obese has real implications for health, no matter how taboo it might be to say so.

In recent years, the NHS has emphasised proactive support for people to tackle the underlying causes of ill health for themselves (rather than relying on doctors to treat their symptoms). For example, it is a matter of fact that "a negative caloric balance must be achieved in order to lose weight" (Hatfield, 1989, p.228) and innovative approaches are being adopted within the NHS to help people achieve this, and other outcomes, where appropriate. Prescriptions for supervised exercise are one example of people being encouraged to be more active as part of taking responsibility for their fitness. This general approach is enshrined within *supported self-management*, namely:

the ways that health and care services encourage, support and empower people to manage their ongoing physical and mental health conditions themselves.

NHS England (no date).[4]

It is understood, then, that there are serious problems associated with poor physical fitness, and that people should take responsibility for themselves, ideally within a supportive societal and governmental framework. However, whilst looking after our bodies is clearly a good idea, in this dissertation I push further and argue that here is an issue that *Christian theology* speaks into. The problem is that Christian theologians and ministers seldom do so, even where they take seriously the need for Christians to be attentive to our physicality itself. As Fraser Watts writes, "there is a surprisingly rich and extensive literature" (Watts, 2021, p.3) about the body but it remains true that "the body is not a coherent subfield of research" (*ibid*.) within theology. There is "a very scattered literature" (*ibid*.) that seems to have little to say about physical fitness. No surprise then, that there appears to be deafening silence from the pulpit.

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[4] NHS England (no date). NHS England: Personalised care: Supported self-management. Available at: https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/supported-self-management/
Accessed 20.06.23

It is as though bodily care is not part of the religious 'brief' although "humans are embodied creatures" (*ibid.* p.1) and therefore our bodies are part of God's intended plan for us. Looking after them should surely be afforded at least some ecclesiological airtime, yet there seems a "Christian ambivalence about the body" (*ibid.,* p.12) and a "tendency to take a negative view" (*ibid*. p.13) of it.

The purpose of the dissertation

There is a health crisis in our society. Christianity can speak into it, yet the church does not give voice. This dissertation will explore potential reasons for this and press for change. While there is an abundance of Christian resources and teaching on how we might nurture and develop our *spiritual* fitness, precious little of this overtly encompasses the nurturing of our *physical* fitness. Instead, it appears that the body and its maintenance is unconsciously overlooked, or even consciously frowned upon, as if the notional danger of narcissism outweighs the clear and present danger of un-healthiness in our nation.

It is not as if Christians are immune to the health problems discussed earlier. Indeed there is some evidence from the U.S.A. that Christians, especially Baptists, are among the worst affected of the religious groups:

> *A 2006 Purdue study found that fundamental Christians are by far the heaviest of all religious groups led by the Baptists with a 30% obesity rate compared with Jews at 1%, Buddhists and Hindus at 0.7%.*
>
> (Nokes, 2015, p.6)

The author of the Purdue study, Professor Ken Ferraro, describes churches as a feeding ground for the problems of gluttony and obesity and points to the role of church leaders in addressing this, saying:

> *"If religious leaders and organizations neglect this issue, they will contribute to an epidemic that will cost the health-care system millions of dollars and reduce the quality of life for many parishioners."*
>
> (Ferraro, cited by Patterson Neubert, 2006).

There is a fundamentally *spiritual* imperative here too. As Sam Allberry observes, "Bodies matter. Jesus couldn't become a real human person without one." (Allberry, 2021, p. 21). In the Bible, "there is no separation of body, soul or spirit" (Runcorn, 2006, p.97) and yet too often such a split is suggested, with "profound and damaging" (*ibid*. p.100) consequences:

> *I learned at an early age that my body was a distraction where God was concerned.*
>
> Runcorn, 2006, p.95)

Where might the idea of embracing our physicality fit into the embodied lives that we live, and how might attending to our physical fitness engage with other aspects of Christian spirituality? The dissertation will add to those voices calling for "a positive spirituality of the body" (Ryan, 2004, p.21) in asking that more attention be given to the theology of an *embodied* spirituality, and the need for Christian leaders – and the body of Christ that is the church – to recognise that caring for our bodies is a matter of good stewardship:

> *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*
>
> (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Methodology: How will the dissertation be structured?

We begin with a *review of theological literature*. Next, there is an *empirical research* piece, offering input from an ecumenical cross-section of church leaders. A *theological reflection* follows, before a *conclusion* is drawn.

The dissertation draws upon the approach to practical theology set out by Helen Cameron and others, employing a modified form of the "four voices approach" (Cameron and Duce, 2013, p.xxx). This considers what the *espoused, operant, normative* and *formal* theologies have to say, holding them in conversation with one another. *Espoused* theology is that which "people say about what they do" (*ibid*.), whilst *operant* theology is what they "actually do" (*ibid*.). The *normative* voice draws upon authority from Christian tradition including the Bible, liturgy and "key texts from the church's tradition" (*ibid*.) and finally the

formal voice is brought by the "academic theologians" (*ibid*.) as they work "to understand the tradition" (*ibid*.).

Here, the formal voice that comes from the literature review will be in conversation with the espoused and operant voices heard within the empirical piece. Normative theology gives voice throughout, and it is recognized that my own voice will also be heard, especially in the reflective section. My background includes several years studying Sports Science and subsequently working as a fitness instructor, and inevitably my long-held convictions about the importance of caring for oneself physically informs my thinking and my theology, as of course does my being in Baptist ministry.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Definitions

Here we briefly define *physical fitness* and *Christian spirituality*. These are not explored exhaustively, but working definitions are offered to anchor the dissertation.

Physical Fitness

Physical fitness can be defined in several ways, but within the physical education and sports science academy the formal definition is normally given as:

> *"the ability to carry out daily tasks with vigor and alertness, without undue fatigue, and with ample energy to enjoy leisure-time pursuits and meet unforeseen emergencies."*

(ACSM, 2017)[5]

This three-fold definition allows room for individuality in that *daily tasks* and *leisure-time pursuits* vary from person to person even if *unforeseen emergencies* affect us all. However, there is a degree of commonality too, insofar as most of us will be obliged to walk, bend, lift objects etc. every day. The tasks we can address, and the vigour and alertness with which we do so, will depend on our level of fitness.

Similarly, a lack of fitness may limit, or force the cessation of, certain leisure pursuits that we may wish we could (still) do. As to emergencies, these may range from running for a bus to avoiding one, from catching one's balance or breaking one's fall to coming to the aid of others (running to help, performing CPR etc.). Clearly, many medical 'emergencies' can be avoided or handled more easily if one has a good level of physical fitness.

[5] ACSM (American College of Sports Medicine) (2017). *ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription*. Chapter 1: Benefits and Risks Associated with Physical Activity. Wolters Kluwer.
Available at: https://www.acsm.org/docs/default-source/publications-files/acsm-guidelines-download-10th-edabf32a97415a400e9b3be594a6cd7fbf.pdf?sfvrsn=aaa6d2b2_0
Accessed 28.06.23

Christian Spirituality

Spirituality is a constituent part of theology, which "embraces, informs and sustains spirituality." (McGrath, 2001, p. 27). However, in contrast to our definition of physical fitness, it is harder to identify a formal definition of spirituality.

When we think of our spirituality as Christians, the temptation is to consider ways of seeking God and bringing Him into our lives. This may involve setting time aside, locating ourselves in certain places and engaging in special practices, yet Christian spirituality is "lived in the midst of the world" (Runcorn, 2006, p.5) and we rightly recognise that God is *always* with us. Indeed, it is God's purpose that we should be brought into loving relationship with Him, "as we share in the greater life of God." (*ibid*., p.90).

Our spirituality is not best expressed as our seeking God, but rather as our response to the call of God who first seeks us and invites us to abide with Him. Answering the invitation positively "thrusts human beings into life *with* God" (Foster and Helmers, 2008, p.vii). It is our lived-out response to God that comprises our spirituality, which may be defined as:

> *the way in which Christian individuals or groups aim to deepen their experience of God*.
> (McGrath, 2001, p.3).

It is worth noting that McGrath's definition is inclusive. It does not separate things that are concerned with the 'spiritual' from the physical (material) or temporal realms, as some definitions tend to.[6] For this reason, we adopt it here as our standard.

Key Themes

Theme 1. Duelling with Dualism

One theme that emerges from the literature is the idea of Platonic dualism, Aristotelian pushback against this, and the development of early Christian theology that seeks an accurate hermeneutic of New Testament teaching against this philosophical backdrop.

Plato's view of the soul includes Desire (Gk. *epithymetikon*), which motivates a person to indulge its physical pleasures or appetites, and Reason (Gk. *logistikon*), which gives rational

[6] As for example, the Collins dictionary does: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/spirituality Accessed 10.07.23

guidance. Spirit (Gk. *thymoeides*), the third part of the soul, brings emotion into the mix. For Plato, these three reside in different parts of the body, yet the soul itself *pre-exists* the body and does not die with it but is reincarnated within another body. The body then, being material, temporal and mutable is, Plato argues, *non-essential* and lesser than the soul, even though subjecting the soul to bodily urges.

Plato's thinking was contested by Aristotle, who saw no dichotomy between body and soul. For Aristotle, body and soul exist in unity and are inseparable, so that a human is an *embodied soul* – the soul animates the body, which is matter to the soul. Such an interdependency between body and soul fits well with the Hebrew Old Testament account of God's creation of humankind, accurately translated as follows:

> *then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*
>
> (Genesis 2:7, NRSV)

The Septuagint, however, renders this passage differently, replacing the Hebrew words meaning "living being" (Hebrew: *nephesh hayyah*) with the Greek words *psyche zoe*, or "living soul" when transliterated into English. Thus in a Greek reading the Biblical account could be seen to agree with a Platonic separation of a material, mutable and temporal *body* (formed from the dust) and the living *soul*.

Wiseman points to Philo of Alexandria as a "considerable influence" (Wiseman, 2004) on writers such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria who later "took up this Platonic strain" (*ibid*.). Thompson, also exploring the roots of "a prevailing suspicion of the body" (Thompson, 2008, p.154) identifies a "deep ambiguity" (*ibid.)* at the heart of Christian spiritual tradition. On the one hand, God's creation (including the body) is held to be good, but on the other, there are all those 'desires of the flesh' that are held to be bad. Thompson notes that the blame for this "corporeal concern" (*ibid*. p.155) is often "laid at the feet of Neoplatonic philosophy" (*ibid*.), but also identifies a root within patriarchal aspects of Judaism which held a "suspicion of both passion and the body (especially in its female form)" (*ibid*.). Patristic thinking then amplified New Testament passages that make some nuanced distinctions between body and soul – e.g. Matthew 10:28, in which Jesus

encourages his listeners not to fear those who might (only) kill the body but rather God who has dominion over both body and soul.

Thompson, like Wiseman, finds evidence within Philo, Clement of Alexandria, Anthony of Egypt and Augustine of an "ambiguous spirituality" (*ibid*. p.156), wherein the body is celebrated as good yet simultaneously seen as a "drag on human salvation" (*ibid*.). In exploring these Patristic offshoots of dualism, Thompson notes concerns around sexuality (a theme to which we will return) before going on to hope for "a more creative, unitary, non-dualist" (*ibid*. p.164) understanding of body, soul and human sexuality.

Watts, too, identifies a Christian ambivalence regarding our physicality, in which there are echoes of Plato's view of the body as that which imprisons the human soul and subjects it to fleshly urges. This leads to a position wherein a "positive doctrinal view of the body co-exists with moral panic about carnal pleasure." (Watts, 2022, p.16). Lamenting a distinction that the church "gradually lost" (*ibid.,* p.18) between the Biblical use of the words 'soul' (Gk. *psyche*) and 'spirit' (Gk. *pneuma*), Watts says it remains important to distinguish between the body and the so-called 'desires of the flesh' for which the body has traditionally been blamed (as if it were somehow separate from the rest of us). Watts notes that the apostle Paul uses language to distinguish between 'body' (Gk. *soma*) and 'flesh' (Gk. *sarx*). This distinction is "really important in St. Paul's thinking" (*ibid*., p.16) – Paul wrote that what the 'flesh' desires goes against the Spirit and vice versa (Galatians 5:17), but importantly this is not a judgement against flesh itself but rather against our sinful nature. '*Sarx*' in this context represents this sinful nature which, like flesh, is perishable – it must perish since it stands in opposition to that which is imperishable, i.e. God.

The current literature then, steers us away from dualism, yet cautions that the essentially Platonic idea of body and soul as separate lingers on in our spirituality, for example when Christians talk about the afterlife. Tom Wright suggests that here our theology has strayed from that which the New Testament teaches and which is set out in the Nicene creed:

> *In my church we declare every day and every week that 'we believe in the resurrection of the body'. But do we?*
>
> (Wright, 2007, p.22)

This straying away, he argues, plays itself out subtly in hymns, poems, films and even funeral services that are nominally Christian but do not seem to reflect the idea of resurrection bodies and a new earth but prefer instead the idea of getting the soul into "a disembodied state in a place called heaven" (Wright, 2016, 4:37-52) This is, says Wright, to be "fooled by the incipient Platonism" (*ibid.*) of Western culture, whereas Pauline theology speaks of an "immortal physicality" (*ibid*. 5:16-5:19) that goes "through death and out the other side" (*ibid.*). Of course, Jesus is the supreme example of this immortal physicality.

Theme 2: Incarnation and the Body of Christ

Dickerson, arguing for a spirituality that reflects "God's earthy, fleshy embodiment" (Dickerson, 2004) challenges the church's "destructive practice" (*ibid*.) of separating out our spiritual lives from our physical lives. In Baptist ecclesiology, pinning down a normative voice is not always straightforward, given the "strongly congregational" (Clarke, 2021, p.19) denominational emphasis in matters of both governance and hermeneutics. However, the Baptist *Declaration of Principle* has something definite to declare in its Christology, which helpfully links our spirituality directly to Jesus's physical body:

> *God is manifest in Christ, and Christ is manifest to us in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ is the final authority because in him God is made visible in flesh and blood, and this new reality is revealed to us through the Scriptures.*
>
> (Fiddes *et al*, 1996, p.19)

For me as a Baptist, here is a voice that not only reminds the Baptist 'body of Christ' of the incarnation but links Jesus's bodily reality with His being the "final authority" in all matters pertaining to "faith and practice"[7] – which is another way of saying our spirituality. The fact that Jesus had a body must mean the body is important, and not to be separated out from our spiritual lives.

[7] Baptists Together website: https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=111290#:~:text=1.,2. Accessed 18.07.23

Peterson *et al* offer another Biblically-rooted theology of the body, within which they identify (and debunk) some common Christian misconceptions:

1. The body does not matter (being secondary to the soul).
2. What we do with our body is disconnected from our soul (dualism).
3. Exercise does not matter (because our bodies do not matter).
4. Physical appearance and athletic ability define me (body idolatry).
5. Care for appearance (rather than character) is the best way to attract (and keep) a godly spouse (again, the danger of *over*-emphasising the body is cautioned against).

(Adapted from Peterson et al, 2021, pp.2 – 5)

There is a helpful recognition here that we are neither to denigrate nor idolise the body. Godly *character* is held to be of highest importance but at the same time the importance of the body is also recognised:

> *God has ordained that the human body be an essential aspect of humanity during our earthly existence, as well as in the new creation where we will exist in a glorified, embodied state… The normal state of human existence, therefore, is an embodied existence.*
>
> (Peterson et al, 2021, p.6)

Humans exist as embodied beings because God "purposed to create them in that fashion" (*ibid*.), and having made us in His image, God *entered humanity* in Jesus, who whilst being without sin, was *not* without a body. There is an important point here. If we accept that abusing our body is sinful, we also remember that it was, for Anselm at least, precisely to atone for humankind's sin that God Himself became embodied. This was God's will, just as it was God's will to give each of us a human body in the first place. On Anselm, "the whole will of a rational creature ought to be subject to the will of God" (Anselm, 1909, p.24) and that must include the will we exercise over our bodies as we seek to deepen our experience of God.

There was nothing about Jesus's body that made it different from our own and it should be clear from our discussion thus far that it was Jesus, not distinct or separate from His body, who was born, lived and was crucified.

Theme 3: Temple Maintenance

In John's gospel, Jesus drives people from the temple (John 2:15-22) and when challenged for a sign, makes the prophetic declaration "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body at this point. The people of Israel had previously worshipped God in the tabernacle, then in the temple – these were the places where God was thought to reside. Now, Jesus declares the *human body* (in this case, His own) to be God's temple; that is, the holy place where God resides.

If Jesus were to tell us He would be attending our church next Sunday, one suspects we would make great efforts to 'clear the temple' – making sure all was ready for His visit with a flurry of cleaning, etc. Of course, Jesus *is* present when we gather in His name – and I wonder if He might be more concerned with our collective maintenance of His temples of flesh rather than our churches of stone. In his exhortation to the church at Corinth that they should recognise the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul uses the words 'you' and 'your body' interchangeably. The body is "not merely some matter you happen to be responsible for" (Allberry, 2021, p.45) but rather it is "an essential part" of us (*ibid*.) even if not the "totality" (*ibid.)* of who we are.

Allowing that we *are* responsible for this essential part of ourselves, one might imagine our body as being akin to a rented accommodation. Normally, an inventory is taken when a tenancy begins and again when it ends – a penalty being applied should the property not be returned in good order. We are free to treat the property (our body) as we wish but "our freedom in Christ doesn't mean we are entirely without obligation" (*ibid.*, p.139). Hopefully our Landlord will be merciful as He looks upon the temple He has given us stewardship over. "Nothing could be more dignifying than for our bodies to belong to God" (*ibid.* p.150) and we can bring glory to God with our body "no less than our mind, our heart or anything else." (*ibid.).*

The Biblical promise is that we will receive a resurrection body. Again, were the body trivial, why should God choose to give us another? We don't know what our resurrected bodies will

be like, but even if in our current body we are only a "shadow of our future self" (Wright, 2016, 5:45) that does not mean we should abuse, or neglect, what we have already been given.

Theme 4: Habits of Virtue, Habits of Sin

If the church's ambivalence about the body is linked to concern over sinful desires, is this specific to sexual sin, and has it always been so? Although there seems a great deal of historical and contemporary angst about matters of sexuality, there is a wider issue of sin relating to unhealthy human appetites that is addressed both in Christian theology and in the Greek philosophical thinking that helped shape it.

Aristotle, discussing temperance as a moral virtue, locates the need of temperance around appetite or "bodily pleasures" (*The Nicomachean Ethics, III.10, 1117b25-30*) and, although touching on sex, centres his discussion on gluttony as a matter of "self-indulgence" (*ibid*.). His remarks on those who over-indulge make for interesting reading – one wonders how they would be received today when tolerance, not temperance, appears to be ranked among the highest virtues:

> *Hence these [overindulgent] people are called belly-gods, this implying that they fill their belly beyond what is right. It is people of entirely slavish character that become like this.*
>
> (*ibid.* III.XI, 1118b, 15-20)

Thomas Aquinas, student of Aristotle that he was, enumerates both cardinal virtues and, following Pope Gregory, cardinal (or mortal) sins. Thomas discusses both virtue and sin comprehensively, exploring the relationships between venial and mortal sins (*ST*, I-II, Q.8, a.1-6). These latter, traditionally the 'seven deadly sins', included lust but also both *gluttony* and *sloth*. While questions and concerns around sexuality remain on the radar of the church and its leadership, could it be that gluttony and sloth have slipped by undetected in recent times? Is caring for the body by feeding it correctly and being physically active (the antitheses of gluttony and sloth) no longer worth discussing?

Noting the challenge for clergy, especially, to make time for their own physical care whilst feeling the need to be "constantly available" (Dobson, 2014, p. 82) to serve their people,

Dobson draws on Thomas in arguing for the cultivation of a *habitus* that includes attention to our physicality, such that our physical health itself becomes "a witness of Christian faith and love." (*ibid*. p.132).

In this model, good habits are cultivated as virtues, and, since the body "does indeed participate in habit" (*ibid.* p. 7), the cultivation of healthy bodily habits is included within a virtuous life. Such habits include, of course, good practices of nutrition and appropriate rest, alongside patterns of physical exercise, but these should be seen not merely as components of a laborious regimen but rather as consistent, joyful beatitudes.

> *Practices of habits of health shape us so that not only do we become healthier in our bodies and souls, but we also become more virtuous. Through cultivating health, we find ourselves becoming more prudent, more just. More courageous and more temperate.*
>
> (*ibid.* p.73).

None of this is to say that pursuing physical fitness is more important than pursuing (what we might call) *spiritual* fitness, and habits of health should lead us to God, not narcissism, but "prizing godliness shouldn't mean we are indifferent to our physical health" (Allberry, 2021, p.158). Bodily care has a significant role to play, alongside sexual purity, within a physical, embodied view of spirituality and our striving towards a godly life but "there can be a tendency to neglect these things" (*ibid.).*

James Smith draws upon an eclectic selection of literature, from Augustine to Winnie-the-Pooh, in claiming that we are what we love, and that what we love is determined by "the power of habit" (Smith, 2016, p.5). Smith also draws on Thomas Aquinas's discourses on habit as virtue as he argues that what we worship is interdependent with what we *do*. Thus a shopping mall is a place of worship if it is where our love of buying clothes, say, draws us repeatedly. Malls are designed to make us *love* shopping – "Victoria's secret is that she's actually after your heart" (*ibid*., p.41) – and so the mall is "liturgical" (*ibid*.) in its "spaces, its practices, its rituals" (*ibid*.) because it a "*formative* space" (*ibid*. p.55) that builds the shopping habit within us just as a cathedral's design points us to God and is intended to build our love for Him.

Clearly, our Christian liturgy is also designed to be formative, to shape what we do and in so doing shape us. As we do those things, we form habits that build our love for God (reflecting God's first love for us). Thus liturgy is important and Smith want us to notice this in all we do:

> *Be careful what you worship; it will shape what you want and therefore what you make and how you work*.
>
> (*ibid*. p178).

Unfortunately, whilst stating that we are called to "unfold creation's potential" (*ibid*. p. 173), Smith does not explore what this might mean for nurturing our *physical* potential. Despite discussing his experiences of changing his dietary habits and how this has become a "laboratory for understanding rehabituation" (*ibid.* p. 63) the link is not made to a theology that specifically includes physical fitness within a God-honouring *habitus*. Nonetheless, the connection between what we love, what we do and who we are is made clear – what we think and know is important, but what we *do* is formative. This is indeed a lesson taught in the 'laboratory' of physical fitness, where an encyclopaedic knowledge of the history and practice of bodybuilding, for instance, will not add any muscle if one doesn't actually go the gym: we are shaped by what we *do*.

A Further Definition: Embodied Spirituality

Emerging from the themes we have explored comes a clear picture: our bodies are *essential* to who we are – they make us recognisably 'us' and not someone else. Without our bodies we cannot speak, touch, interact, express ourselves, or be the hands and feet of Jesus as we are called to be. In our human existence, "what are bodies are doing, *we* are doing" (Allberry, 2021, p.52) and this includes what we do in our relationship with God. If our spirituality aims to deepen our experience of God, our physical body – and its fitness – will either help or hinder us in this.

This notion of humankind as *embodied* is central to our discussion of the place of physical fitness in spirituality. The way our spirituality expresses itself cannot be separated from our existence as physical beings:

> *How we understand things is embodied in the sense that it is shaped by what we do with our bodies*.
>
> (Watts, 2021, p.4)

This plays out in *every way* in which we might respond to God. For example, in prayer we might kneel, close our eyes or speak out loud. In worship, we might dance, sing or play a musical instrument. Fasting inherently involves the body, both in our electing to deprive it of food and in our bodily responses to that same deprivation, which may additionally affect us mentally and spiritually. As Smith puts it:

> *Christian liturgies can't just target the intellect: they must also work on the body.*
>
> (Smith, 2016, p.85)

Drawing upon our earlier definition of spirituality, we might now define an *embodied* spirituality as one which recognises that our bodies are inseparable from and central to the way in which we seek to deepen our experience of God.

Introducing the Espoused and Operant Voices

Thus far, our exploration of the theological literature has revealed a long historical tradition of ambiguity in the way Christians have thought about the body and its place within our spirituality. Today, the *normative* and *formal* theological voices seem to have something more positive to say about the body, and call for a richer understanding of what it means to answer God's call in a fully human way. There has historically been a distancing of the body from our spirituality but these voices now ask for a holistic approach in which we recognise that we live embodied lives, that God created us with bodies, and Himself became embodied for our sake.

These voices are compelling – but are they voices that have reached the church? Are they heard from the pulpit? As indicated in the introduction, my fear is that they are not, and that across the denominations there remains a silence about care of the body that suggests there remains little space for a fully embodied spirituality in either our *espoused* or *operant* theology.

To some extent, perhaps this is due to a lack of emphasis on attending to bodily *fitness* in the formal voice, even as it has gained a new confidence in calling for embodied spirituality generally. In the literature, there are helpful contributions on the idea of embodied spirituality itself, but relatively little that specifically calls for the nurturing of our physical fitness. There is a plenty to be found about the dangers of sexual sin, both in the church historically and today, but it is harder to hear anything that identifies and names neglect of the body and the casual acceptance of being unfit fairly and squarely as sinful, or calling for change.

This seems to represent a gap in the literature, and my personal observation is that the same gap is evident in Christian preaching. I suggest there is in churches a reticence to talk about the place of caring for the body as part of our honouring God who gave it to us. Despite the overwhelming evidence of a health crisis in our society, I do not recall care of our bodily fitness being preached or taught (outside the church I help to lead), in the innumerable services I have attended. To test my theory, I designed a small piece of empirical research centring on an ecumenical group of church leaders. This offered them the question set out in the title of this dissertation and asked them four questions to explore their theology – espoused and operant – regarding the place of physical fitness in Christian spirituality. The findings are now discussed.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Methodology

I asked an ecumenical group of 15 people, all in church leadership in the same town, to take part in this research. There were 11 respondents. The idea was to understand what importance these church leaders placed upon bodily self-care (in the form of physical fitness practices) when compared with other components of Christian spirituality.

This is a limited piece of research with a small number of participants, but it does offer some interesting findings. Participants were asked (see appendix for questionnaire) to rate from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (of critical importance) the importance they placed on ten different spiritual practices.

They were then asked to rate how important they felt it was for Christian ministers to teach, preach and lead by example on those same practices. These first two questions, then, would give an idea as to their *espoused* theology.

The third question asked participants how often the practices were preached and taught in their own churches. A rating of 1 meant that a practice was never taught, while 5 would represent very frequent teaching. This would give some insight into their *operant* theology, although of course it depended on their reported observations being accurate.

Finally, in the fourth question, participants were asked how often they personally engaged in each of the practices from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently). As with the previous question, the idea here was that some insight might be found regarding participants' *operant* theology as it related to their own practice as Christian leaders.

Results

To protect anonymity, the data have been collated such that a mean score for each question has been calculated. In summary, the data are as follows:

Component	How important are the following components of Christian spirituality?	How important is it for ministers to teach, preach and lead by example on these?	How often are these *actually* presented in your own church as significant components?	How often do you personally engage in each practice?	Mean
Bible Study	4.7	4.7	4.4	4.6	4.6
Prayer	5.0	4.8	4.5	4.8	4.8
Fasting	3.0	3.2	2.5	2.5	2.8
Theological Reflection	3.7	4.2	3.0	3.9	3.7
Sabbath Rest	3.9	4.2	3.4	3.6	3.8
Retreat	3.2	3.5	2.2	2.5	2.8
Accountability partners/groups	3.7	3.7	2.8	3.2	3.4
Confession	3.6	3.7	3.0	3.4	3.4
Self-care (mental health)	3.7	3.5	2.8	3.2	3.3
Self-care (physical fitness)	3.4	3.4	2.5	3.3	3.1

Notes:

Ranking for physical fitness	8th	9th	= 9th	5th	8th
Lowest ranking	Fasting & Retreat	Fasting	Retreat	Fasting & Retreat	

Analysis of Results

1. *Relative importance of self-care (physical fitness practices).*

Caring for physical fitness was regarded as among the *least important* aspects of spirituality, with a mean score of 3.4 / 5 and a ranking of 8th out of the 10 disciplines. Since a score of 1 equates to "not at all important" and 5 equates to "critically important" this suggests that physical self-care was seen as only slightly important, just above the neutrality represented by a score of 3. This result surprised me slightly, as I had not expected to see physical self-care ranked even as high as 8th place. It was interesting to note that retreat (3.2) and fasting (3.0) were seen as marginally less important, and this emerged as a theme across the research.

2. *Importance for Christian ministers to teach, preach and lead by example on the issue of self-care (physical fitness practices).*

The data here reveal an equal rating for physical fitness (3.4) and even lower ranking (9th) compared with question 1. Retreat (and mental health practices) rated only slightly higher (both at 3.5) while fasting (3.2) came in last again.

3. *How often is self-care (physical fitness practices) actually presented as significant (through teaching and preaching) in participants' churches?*

A rating of 2.5 for this question supports my suspicion that not only is fitness not *espoused* as important (per questions 1 and 2) but that this is borne out in our *operant* theology, as evidenced here. Notice that fasting and retreat also continue to be in the lowest rankings.

4. How often are Christian Ministers <u>claiming</u> to engage in self-care (physical fitness practice)?

I have formulated this final heading with a degree of scepticism, as it has been my experience (as a fitness instructor) that people have a tendency to over-estimate their activity levels as much as they under-estimate their calorific intake. I had initially anticipated that the data on this final question might reveal an operant theology of exercise, but it may be more appropriate, in hindsight, to interpret the data more along the lines of an espoused theology.

In any case, although the average ranking for fitness rises to 5th here, the frequency-of-practice rating of 3.3 (where 3 represents occasional activity) remains low even if its ranking puts it just ahead of mental health care practices and accountability partnerships (as well as retreat and fasting, which came joint last).

5. Other observations

As expected, prayer and Bible study were clear 'winners', with mean scores (across all four questions) of 4.8 and 4.6 respectively. At the other extreme, I was surprised to find that with an aggregated mean score of just 3.1 out of 5, self-care in the form of physical fitness practices was nevertheless edged out of last place by both retreat and fasting (both scoring an aggregated mean of 2.8). The rankings remained the same even when the data for question 4 (with its possible over-estimation of personal practice) was removed from the equation.

<u>Conclusions</u>

While this is limited research with a small sample of participants, it does seem to point to a broad agreement between the espoused and operant theologies of the participants as to the place of self-care (in the form of physical fitness practices). Such care is seen as a relatively *unimportant* aspect of Christian spirituality, and it appears to be rarely taught or modelled, or thought of as particularly important to be taught or modelled, across churches in the geographical area represented. The participants have some recognition that they themselves ought to exercise, but claim to do so only occasionally.

Of the aspects of spirituality listed, retreat and fasting ranked even lower than physical fitness. This is, on the face of it, somewhat baffling, as there is a rich tradition of each (including many references in Scripture) in Christian spirituality. Explaining this is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I offer some observations:

Regarding retreat, it has been my observation that much time is given to the promotion of retreat at Christian conferences I have attended and literature I have read. I admit to having smiled wryly at this given that, on balance, I believe people need to be rather *more* active, not less. On reflection, however, perhaps the speakers and authors are onto something if retreat is being overlooked as much as my limited research indicates. Life is busy and demanding for Christian leaders, and retreat should be incorporated into our *habitus*.

Regarding fasting, I admit to another smile here – of all the disciplines that might be needed in a nation struggling under the weight of obesity and its associated ills, fasting (as part and parcel of an intertwined spiritual and physical *habitus*) really ought to have its place!

Moving Forward

On reflection, further research and thinking in this area might not position retreat and fasting separately from physical self-care. It may have been better to have incorporated within an understanding of physical self-care both retreat (which is normally restful) and fasting (which is increasingly being explored, in the form of intermittent fasting, as part of a healthy eating plan). It does not require further analysis of our data to conclude that, had I done so, an even more challenging picture would emerge regarding the perceived importance of physical self-care practices.

If the normative and formal theological voices are not saying very much about physical fitness, this research seems to indicate, as expected, that the espoused and operant voices are saying even less. Indeed, where they are saying anything at all, they appear to be saying that caring for ourselves physically is not very important in Christian spirituality.

REFLECTIONS

Reflexivity

In this chapter, I reflect upon the conversation between the four theological voices. However, as someone who has been shaped, physically and theologically, by my lifelong engagement with physical fitness, I do not come into the conversation impartially; my own prejudices and biases, alongside my joyful experiences of helping others improve their fitness, are also reflected here.

It is the nature of *habitus*, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (Gogolin, 2006)[8] that whilst we may think and act with free agency this is normally within the confines of the structuring structures of our sociological background, which in my case includes not only my upbringing in the Catholic church and my subsequent journey towards Baptist ministry, but also my being steeped in the values and traditions of physical culture and its attendant practices. I am therefore aware of my predisposition towards embracing physical fitness as a good thing but I am, I hope, also mindful that it is God, not physical fitness itself, that is the greater good we should attend to.

Physical Fitness and Embodied Spirituality: A Conversation

Four Hushed Voices

Watts describes a "strange lack of interest" (Watts, 2022, p.1) and a "conspicuous silence" (*ibid*.) about the body from most religious leaders which he finds "puzzling" (*ibid.* p.2). This resonates both with the empirical research presented here and my own experiences – the espoused and operant voices are hushed, if not completely silent.

The recent literature, however, *does* have something positive to say about the body, and is, it seems, listening afresh to the normative voice of Scripture in calling for a holistic, embodied spirituality. However, while the formal voice has helpful things to say about the body *in general*, on the matter of physical fitness *specifically* it is harder to discern. There

[8] Gogolin, I. (2006). Linguistic Habitus. Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics, 2nd edt. 194-196. Concise Science Direct. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/pierre-bourdieu Accessed 06.08.23

are exceptions – Rusty Nokes, coming from a background as a fitness trainer, offers a daily journal that encourages the inclusion of physical and spiritual exercises alongside a healthy physical and spiritual diet, identifying physical fitness principles and applying them to "analogies with spiritual fitness" (Nokes, 2014, p.7). Melanie Dobson, drawing on Thomas Aquinas, champions the development of a holistic *habitus* of health, including "both moral and physical health" (Dobson, 2014, p.24). Unfortunately, theirs seem to be somewhat isolated voices, and although the idea of embodied spirituality itself is now heard being heard from the academy, it remains puzzling as to why physical fitness does not receive more attention.

Voicing a Proposal

My proposal is that the formal voice should speak more clearly to the wider issues presented by Pauline theology that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, since this has broader implications for our physicality, and embodied spirituality, than the literature suggests.

In our ancient philosophical and Christian traditions, sloth and gluttony were spoken of as "disgraceful" (The Nicomachean Ethics, VII.6, 1149b20--30) and as "capital vices" (ST, I-II Q.84, a.4). Such ideas seem to have been almost forgotten, or are at least no longer voiced. I think this is unfortunate – people are not being given guidance from their spiritual leaders in a way that befits God's intention for our bodies, at a time when public health is in crisis. We do, of course, need to be careful and sensitive in our own use of language as we echo these voices again.

It is hoped that once the formal voice is heard, the espoused and operant voices may also begin to speak into these issues, where currently it appears that only *one* issue (that of sexuality – see below) is being voiced from the pulpit regarding our physicality.

A Pre-occupation with Sex?

Even as we emerge from a historically ambivalent view of the body and its place within our spirituality, in the literature there remains an almost exclusive focus on *sexuality* as the big issue when it comes to the problems we face in leading embodied lives as Christians. Our operant theology seems to reflect this too – my experience has been that where bodily

struggles are mentioned in preaching and teaching, codes of ethics, denominational conversations *and* the current literature, it is overwhelmingly in reference to sexuality. In recent times this has involved in-fighting over what may or may not be considered sinful, as witness, for example, current debates on same-sex attraction, sexual identity, and what does or does not constitute Christian marriage.

Thompson, in his chapter "Temple and Temptation: Spirituality and the Body" (Thompson, 2008, pp. 153 – 165), devotes considerable space to an exploration of sexuality, and this goes to my point that when discussing the difficulties associated with the body, most theological roads signposted 'temptation' seem to lead to the avenue of sexuality, leaving unexplored the broader implications of Paul's exhortation to treat the body as God's temple.

Paul wrote to Corinth (and Rome) about sexual purity because he habitually addressed difficulties in the churches he was nurturing, and it is unsurprising that sexual immorality was an issue in the Greco-Roman world – and, of course, it remains one today. However, bodily neglect and its consequences were not, in New Testament days, such pressing issues, and there was less of an imperative to address them explicitly. Church patriarchs and theologians through the ages followed Paul's specific lead, invariably addressing the vexed questions of sexuality when discussing the body.

It seems to me that this trend continues – we remain focussed on sexuality and ignore the wider issues implied by Paul's temple metaphor despite the current crises in public health. As another example, Allberry argues that sexual sin is an especially serious case "because it is a sin against our own body" (Allberry, 2021, p. 52). Although he allows that there are "many ways" (*ibid*.) we might abuse and "degrade" (*ibid*. p.53) our bodies, he singles out sexual sin as a sin against ourselves as a whole person "because God has designed sex to *involve* the whole person." (*ibid*.). Thus, he argues, sexual sin is not only an abuse of our body but "a violation of your whole self" (*ibid*.).

For me, this narrow focus on sexual sin means that the wider implications of what it means to honour God with one's body are being forgotten or neglected. This can be accidentally compounded by well-intended moves to affirm people and counter modern issues around body shame. Returning to Allberry's take on sexual sin, I believe that other sins against the

body (gluttony, sloth) cannot be separated out from their impact on the whole person either – do they not amount to a violation against our whole selves too?

Deadly Sins

There is, in Thomas Aquinas, an authoritative voice to which we might listen on this question. The focus on sexual sin seems somewhat at odds with the traditional teaching, developed by Thomas, on the (seven) capital vices, or 'mortal/deadly sins', where we find three that might be considered 'sins of the flesh', of which only one (lust) pertains to sexual sin versus two (gluttony and sloth) that represent overindulgence and physical inactivity. Surely a holistic interpretation of Paul's teaching on the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit (together with the critical state of our nation's health) demands that we take seriously *all* of these issues?

Just as there are consequences for the sin of sexual immorality, so too there is a price to pay for the sins of bodily neglect if only by its own consequences, since "wrongdoing carries the seeds of its own penalty." (Fiddes, 1989, p.93). In the often-intertwined cases of sloth and gluttony, the health statistics tell us with certainty that these are wrong for our bodies, and that they carry penalties that can be deadly indeed. Where then, is the chorus of theological voices to sensitively and graciously point this out? Where is the harmonious call to include within our *habitus*, and our liturgical repertoire, the practices of physical fitness, alongside prayer, Bible reading, theological reflection and the rest?

Towards a New *Habitus*

Activity, Recovery, Nourishment: Some Parallels

We consist of body, mind and soul, and so a holistic approach to spirituality is required. In training ourselves for godliness, then, physical training is of some value, both for the present life and the life to come (c.f. 1 Timothy 4:7b-8). Such training should encompass a "healthy spiritual and physical diet" (Nokes, 2014, p.68) alongside exercising "spiritually and physically" (*ibid*.) and appropriate rest as interdependent parts of the virtuous *habitus* of health envisaged by Thomas Aquinas.

In nurturing our physical fitness we should attend to three broad components, which may be termed *activity*, *recovery* and *nourishment*. These are interdependent and we might notice further parallels here with other aspects of our spirituality. Just as it is necessary to take nourishment before and after exercise, and to rest and recover before training again, we must likewise attend to our spiritual nourishment (e.g. Bible reading, worship, fellowship) and take time to recuperate after what may be strenuous periods of activity (e.g. pastoral ministry or mission).

Jesus instructed the disciples to rest (Mark 6:31) after they had been on mission, and it is interesting to note that in the realm of physical fitness, development does not occur whilst exercising but in the recovery phase afterwards (assuming nutritional needs have been satisfied). There is a place, then, for rest, relaxation and retreat in our Christian *habitus* and these should be championed especially if they are, as the research piece suggests, being overlooked by church leaders. However, note that the disciples had been busy on mission before Jesus instructed them. Insofar as practices of rest are virtuous, and part of a *habitus* of health, we should rightly include a degree of regular exertion alongside them. Whilst we require both play and relaxation "because we cannot work continuously" (The Nicomachean Ethics, x.6, 1176b30-35) we must be *active* to be virtuous since "a virtuous life requires exertion." (*ibid*.).

Consistency: You Are What You Do Habitually

Another helpful parallel can be found when we notice that consistency and (therefore) discipline are fundamental to success in developing physical fitness. Applying these qualities to our spirituality is as important as the three components of activity, recovery and nourishment themselves. In calling Christians to attend to their bodies within a "fusion of spiritual and physical fitness" (Nokes, 2015, p.5), Nokes implores readers to "be tenacious" (*ibid.,* p.70) in working on fitness both physical and spiritual, since "going through the motions is ineffective" (*ibid*.).

Nokes's approach is drawn from his personal practice and he too notices the parallels between physical and spiritual habits of exercise, rest and nourishment as, for example, when he knowingly warns of the dangers of "spiritual junk food" (*ibid.* p.7) as much as physical junk food. As already noted, a consistent nutritious diet is called for (scripture,

teaching, worship, fellowship etc.), but (physical) fasting, too, comes with an array of benefits. Aside from its value in restricting our caloric intake (and consequently helping control body weight) fasting has spiritual benefits including, according to Thomas, "in bridling the lusts of the flesh" (*ST.* II-II, Q.147, a.1) as well as helping us turn our minds more easily to God and (after Augustine) in cleansing the soul by way of an act of contrition. Here, again, we might notice an interdependency between the physical and spiritual.

Like Nokes, Melanie Dobson draws from personal experience in noticing this same interdependency of the physical and spiritual. Her work in developing Thomas's thinking about virtue is informed by her struggles with serious illness which led to deep reflection on how our physicality cannot be separated out from our spirituality, or from God. For Dobson, habits of health "develop through human dedication and effort" (Dobson, 2014, p.65) but are "infused" (*ibid*.) with the theological virtues of faith, hope and love that are "gifts from the Holy Spirit" (*ibid*.).

Dobson insists that as we are shaped by our "practices of habits of health" (*ibid.*, p.73) so that our health becomes "part of our character" (*ibid*.), yet still it is the love of God that is both the driving force and the ultimate end. The "way we acquire such habits" (Smith, 2016, p.187) that shape us is, of course, "through practice and repetition" (*ibid*.) – as any student of physical fitness would confirm.

Leading by Example

The research piece carried out herein is limited, but it suggests a lack of recognition amongst church leaders that there is an important issue here that should be addressed through teaching and preaching. To have credibility in doing so, we must lead by example in valuing our bodies and caring for their fitness. The formal definition of physical fitness refers to going about life with vigour and alertness, without undue fatigue, and with ample energy to enjoy what we are doing. How might a lack of vigour, alertness and energy in, say, a minister, worship leader, youth worker or across a diaconate affect the spiritual life of their church? I suggest that it may have a highly detrimental effect both on the congregation and on themselves. Perhaps this may be dispiriting to Christian leaders who have never considered physical fitness to be a Christian virtue, and have neglected their body. Psychologist Russ Harris, discussing physical self-care within the framework of value-based

actions espoused within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), writes from a secular standpoint but makes a helpful observation about our values and our bodies:

> *A value is like your body: even if you've totally neglected it for years, it's still an essential part of your life, and it's never too late to connect with it.*
>
> (Harris, 2007, p. 232).

If Christian leaders are willing to accept that we should set an example in our behaviours relating to, say, sex, drugs or alcohol, are we also willing to be exemplars here? Will we value our physical fitness and take a lead on healthy habits of exercise, nutrition and rest? Where we start from is unchangeable, but what we can do is commit to "moving forward in a valued direction." (*ibid.* p.245). From the standpoint of a Christian leader, Smith summarises the challenge neatly:

> *If I am going to be a teacher of virtue, I need to be a virtuous teacher*.
>
> (Smith, 2016, p. 161).

The Body of Christ

For congregants too, a lack of fitness is bound to impinge, in some ways, on their experiences of God and their ability to serve God and other people. The unfit person may not be able to engage fully in certain spiritual yet bodily activities, like pilgrimage, that can deepen our experience of God. I recently enjoyed a retreat which involved rough camping and hiking with heavy rucksacks. It was by design challenging and brought a sense of both physical and spiritual pilgrimage. It occurred to me that numerous Christian friends would not have been able to participate. This experience, itself an example of physical and spiritual interdependency, would be inaccessible to some not through unavoidable issues such as advanced age or disability, but because they simply would not be fit enough to participate.

Consider such relatively 'easy' practices as corporate prayer and congregational worship. If we are physically unfit it might be difficult or impossible to attend, whether for a Sunday service, a prayer meeting, or a small group. That is not to say we must come to church to pray and worship, and sometimes age or infirmity make this impossible, but an avoidable lack of physical fitness can impinge on our communal experiences of God.

Cultivating our health, suggests Melanie Dobson, makes us “better able to care for the health of others and of our ecclesial communities” (Dobson, 2014, p.132) and this illuminates the necessity of attending to our fitness so that we might use our bodies to serve within the body of Christ. Leaving aside the special cases of the very elderly, infirm or people with disabilities, if we are not physically fit for service, through our own bodily neglect or overindulgence, this calls into question whether we are fit for service in the spiritual sense, as people called by God to serve others. Our proper response to this call involves the “use of our entire being” (Peterson et al, 2021, p.7) within a Christian *habitus* and community that glorifies God “in all that we are as embodied beings” (*ibid*.).

CONCLUSION

Attending to our physical fitness should certainly be considered an important component of Christian spirituality. Writing to the nascent church at Corinth, Paul named the body a temple of the Holy Spirit, saying we must glorify God in our bodies. Whilst Paul was specifically encouraging sexual purity, his words have wider implications for the way we treat – or mistreat – our bodies. In the modern age, abuses of the body for sexual pleasure remain a serious issue within the Christian church, but if we are to glorify God in our bodies then we should also take seriously the grave problems associated with neglecting our physical fitness.

There is a national and global health crisis that is closely linked to an avoidable lack of physical fitness. Paul's metaphor speaks into this, and therefore the Christian church should also speak into it. Sadly, there has been historical ambivalence about the body and even as we emerge from this we still fail to talk with positivity about our physicality in church.

Although the current literature calls for an embodied view of spirituality, where the body is spoken of in ecclesial communities it still seems that the conversation is dominated by concerns relating to sexuality. By contrast, conversations about overweight and obesity (in the context of good stewardship over God's temple) are not happening. We know that public health is important, and we know that ill health causes immense problems for individuals and families (not to mention public finances and the NHS), yet there remains a reticence to discuss it.

It is time to recognise again, in our liturgy, our preaching and teaching, that the body is important. Since what we do is formative, Christian theologians and ministers should take a lead in promoting a virtuous *habitus* of health that takes seriously our physicality and our fitness. The judicious inclusion of physical fitness practices within such a *habitus* may easily be seen to be advantageous to everyone, but for the Christian there is a further imperative – we are not our own, but God's, and we are expected to maintain the temple of God in such a way as to bring glory to God. Failure to do so should be challenged, in the same way that other areas of sin are challenged – that is carefully, sensitively and lovingly.

Difficulty is always faced when dealing with areas of human broken-ness – as with sexual sin, alcoholism or drug addiction, for example – where our teaching and preaching ought not to condemn people but rather to have them seek and find redemption. 'Speaking the truth in love' should be done with great care, but the truth is that our bodies need to be looked after and it is our duty to do so. Even those Cartesian thinkers who consider our bodies as "extraneous temporary vehicles" (Smith, 2016, p.3) to transport our minds must concede that every vehicle needs some maintenance. Where the vehicle has fallen into disrepair, this should be gently pointed out, not overlooked. Corrective action will then, we must hope, be taken with God's help and the support of the church.

It is often said that Christian leaders, preachers and teachers should practice what they preach, and herein lies a particular challenge. If we are to exhort people to honour God with our bodies, we must first honour God with our own body and be open to formation in this area. This will require vulnerability, so that in our reflection we might accept, acknowledge and confess where we have been falling short. Such a vulnerability would be expected of Christian leaders when it comes to other areas, but I wonder if we are yet ready to talk about that elephant in the room called obesity, and return to naming gluttony and sloth as the causal sins that usher it into the room and are its keepers?

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APPENDIX: Empirical Research Survey Questions

Being the Temple of the Holy Spirit: To what extent might physical fitness be a Component of Christian spirituality?

1) Please indicate the importance you place on the components of Christian Spirituality listed below by circling a number from 1 to 5. A rating of 1 would indicate that you feel that this is something not at all important in Christian spirituality, whereas a rating of 5 would indicate that you believe it to be of critical importance.

Bible study	1	2	3	4	5
Prayer	1	2	3	4	5
Fasting	1	2	3	4	5
Theological Reflection	1	2	3	4	5
Sabbath Rest	1	2	3	4	5
Retreat	1	2	3	4	5
Accountability Partners/Groups	1	2	3	4	5
'Confession'	1	2	3	4	5
Self-care (mental health practices)	1	2	3	4	5
Self-care (physical fitness practices)	1	2	3	4	5

2) Now please consider the importance of each of the components for *Christian Ministers* to teach and preach on, and to lead by personal example. Rate again from 1 to 5, where 1 = not at all important and 5 = critically important.

Bible study	1	2	3	4	5
Prayer	1	2	3	4	5
Fasting	1	2	3	4	5
Theological Reflection	1	2	3	4	5
Sabbath Rest	1	2	3	4	5
Retreat	1	2	3	4	5
Accountability Partners/Groups	1	2	3	4	5
'Confession'	1	2	3	4	5
Self-care (mental health practices)	1	2	3	4	5
Self-care (physical fitness practices)	1	2	3	4	5

3) Please tell us how often these practices are *actually* presented (through teaching and preaching) in your own church as significant components of Christian Spirituality. (1 = never, 2 = very rarely, 3 = occasionally, 4 = quite often, 5 = very frequently)

Bible study	1	2	3	4	5
Prayer	1	2	3	4	5
Fasting	1	2	3	4	5
Theological Reflection	1	2	3	4	5
Sabbath Rest	1	2	3	4	5
Retreat	1	2	3	4	5
Accountability Partners/Groups	1	2	3	4	5
'Confession'	1	2	3	4	5
Self-care (mental health practices)	1	2	3	4	5
Self-care (physical fitness practices)	1	2	3	4	5

4) Please tell us how often you as a Christian Minister engage in these spiritual practices yourself. (1 = never, 2 = very rarely, 3 = occasionally, 4 = quite often, 5 = very frequently)

Bible study	1	2		3	4	5
Prayer	1	2		3	4	5
Fasting	1	2		3	4	5
Theological Reflection	1	2		3	4	5
Sabbath Rest	1	2		3	4	5
Retreat	1	2		3	4	5
Accountability Partners/Groups	1	2		3	4	5
'Confession'	1	2		3	4	5
Self-care (mental health practices)	1	2		3	4	5
Self-care (physical fitness practices)	1	2		3	4	5