



Are Emergents Rejecting the Soul's Existence?

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One of the important shifts among Christians has been the rise of the “emergent church.”¹ A number of pastors, authors, and bloggers, such as Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, and many more, have written extensively about the shifts the church in the west is undergoing as we transition from the influences of the period called “modernity” to “postmodernity.”² For example, McLaren makes a number of observations of how the church has been influenced in largely negative ways by modernity, but now Christians need to learn how to live faithfully in postmodern times, which McLaren calls being a “new kind” of Christian.³

When people discuss the emergent church, they typically focus upon emergents’ views of knowledge, ethics, the gospel, salvation, and other doctrinal issues. But, as I keep reading emergents, or academics that are influencing them, I see another pattern that might be at the root of these other topics: the rejection of modern dualisms. This includes a wide range of dichotomies, such as heaven or hell; orthodoxy versus orthopraxis; evangelism or social action. But, according to Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, often the rejection of modern dualisms includes a tendency to reject the traditional Christian dualism between body and soul in favor of a “holistic,” “relational” anthropology. This new view often takes the form that humans do not have souls as their essence (i.e., their essential nature, and what makes us the same person through time) or substance (what has and unifies all our parts and qualities).⁴

This rejection, however, has major implications for traditional understandings of Christianity. Christians have taught that the soul of the believer is what can survive the death of the body, will then be with the Lord, and one day will be reunited with a resurrected body. But if we do not have souls, then there will be

significant implications for these and other Christian teachings.

I will survey reasons why some key emergents (and some key academic influencers) are rejecting body-soul dualism, and I will sketch some alternative proposals. Then, I will address to what extent we should accept them. These views lead to some disastrous consequences for any emergents that reject body-soul dualism: (a) we cannot have eternal life; and (b) we will be incapable of having interpersonal relationships.⁵



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Rejecting Body-Soul Dualism

According to Doug Pagitt, modern thought often is dualistic.⁶ To him, flesh-versus-spirit dualism reflects the influence of a Gnostic way of thinking, which implies conflict.⁷ Under that kind of view, Pagitt assumed his body was one thing and his spirit another, that he is “a collection of distinct parts.”⁸ To him, this Gnostic way of thinking separated flesh (which was bad) from spirit, or soul (which was good), rather than treating humans as integrated wholes, and these ideas still influence us today.⁹

Instead, Pagitt opts for a theology of “integrated holism,” which includes creation, even matter, at the smallest level. Matter is “made of energy packets and not ‘little hard balls of matter,’” which requires “not only different theological conclusions but different presuppositions.”¹⁰ One presupposition to reconsider is “the idea that there is a necessary distinction of matter from spirit, or creation from creator.”¹¹ Instead, as

Pagitt explains, "I have started to get my head around this idea that everything is made of the same stuff, the same energy, interaction, and movement."¹²

Similarly, in his fictional *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, Brian McLaren's protagonist, Neo, explains how the Greeks bifurcated reality into immaterial and material realms. They tended to treat the immaterial (including the soul) as higher, more real, and morally superior, in relation to the material (including the body and creation), which was subject to change.¹³ In contrast, for the ancient Jews, there was "one world, one universe, a universe with matter and life and God, not chopped up between real-ideal versus illusory-material, between spiritual and physical, supernatural and natural."¹⁴

These ideas impact human beings' personal identity (their being the same person through time and change), and their hope for life after death. Neo suggests:

[I]magine that at that point in the future...the point from which God is sending each present moment with all its possibilities toward us...God holds all of God's memories of all of us. When we get there, not only will we be what we are at that final moment, but also we will find all that we have ever been—all that God has remembered—and we will be reunited with all we have ever been. We won't be only the little sliver of ourselves that we are at this instant we call the present. We will be the composite of ourselves through our whole lifetime, all...gathered in the mind and heart of God. All the momentary members of our life story, the me of a second ago, the me now, the me that will be in a second—all these members will be re-remembered, reunited, in God's memory.¹⁵

Importantly, there is nothing about us that enables us to remain the same person through changes. Instead, God's memory unites all our "slivers."

What then is a person? Drawing from Neo, the character Dan suggests that persons emerge in synergy with certain biochemical reactions.¹⁶ In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren develops his notion of the person in reference to the emergence of the mind and soul. McLaren depicts the interrelationships between body, mind, and soul with three (more or less) concentric rings. The body is in the innermost one, from which the mind emerges. From that "unity" the soul emerges.

From the integration of the faculties of the human body—which includes the brain...the mind emerges with its own faculties (will, memory, anticipation, analysis, classification, contrast, cause and effect, imagination, etc.). It can be differentiated from the body (think

of someone in a persistent vegetative state), but it is not disassociated from the body (think of mental illness, learning disabilities, the effects of narcotics or alcohol or caffeine). From the integration of the faculties of the body and mind, the soul emerges with an ethical and aesthetical and relational dimension—the person whose story includes a body and mind, but is not limited to a body and mind.¹⁷

Clearly, McLaren does not see the soul as one's essential nature. It is a higher, emergent reality but never disassociated from the mind-body. Accordingly, humans seem to be primarily material bodies with emergent properties that depend upon the body for their existence.

Several self-identified Christian philosophers and theologians influence these rejections of body-soul dualism. Nancey Murphy, a professor of Christian philosophy, offers several reasons why we should reject the soul as our essence. First, she claims that "science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness."¹⁸ Second, "philosophers have argued cogently that the belief in a substantial mind or soul is the result of confusion arising from how we talk. We have been misled by the fact that 'mind' and 'soul' are nouns into thinking that there must be an object to which these terms correspond."¹⁹ Third, she claims that body-soul dualists have been unable to explain persuasively how an immaterial soul can interact with a physical body (i.e., the "interaction objection").²⁰ "Cartesian" body-soul dualism actually fosters this objection because it posits our bodies and souls are radically different and not deeply related.

Instead, Murphy endorses a type of physicalism, in which humans do not have souls. Instead, we are made up of physical stuff. For her, the soul is a "functional capacity of a complex physical organism."²¹ Emergent leader Tony Jones is sympathetic with Murphy's views. He has suggested that her nonreductive physicalism²² is the best explanation of the unity of persons in the Old Testament.²³ He also mentioned that "a lot of them [emergents] would jibe with that [nonreductive physicalism], but I don't think that too many of them have thought much about it."²⁴ Also, the philosophical theologian LeRon Shults has been influenced by her, and he too embraces a kind of nonreductive physicalism.²⁵

New Testament interpreter Joel Green contends that, due to the evidence of neuroscience, biblical studies, and philosophy, humans are basically physical.²⁶ Despite our

English translations, he argues that terms in the original biblical languages do not clearly support the soul as our essence or the existence of a disembodied, intermediate state.²⁷ Even though bodies change constantly, and the person (and not just the body) dies at death, Green still thinks we can survive death and be the same person.²⁸ His basis is a narrative and relational unity of the person which constitutes each of us. These “are able to exist apart from neural correlates and embodiment only insofar as they are preserved in God’s own being, in anticipation of new creation.”²⁹ So, our unity and identity lies in our sustained relationships and our stories.

The late evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz also influences emergents. With John Franke, Grenz argued that the soul as our essence fails to do justice to our rational and moral capacities.³⁰ To Grenz, modern dualistic thought led us to emphasize saving “souls,” as though bodies have no eternal importance.³¹ This view suggests that sin resides in the body, so redemption involves overcoming our bodies.³² Last, the words “soul” and “spirit” do not refer to substantial entities that form part of our ontological nature.³³

Overall, these arguments reject the soul as our essence, and embrace a holistic, relational view of humans, which for many leads them to physicalism.³⁴ Now, let’s assess these proposals.

Assessing Emergent Alternatives to Body-Soul Dualism

Positively, Green, Pagitt, and others are right; biblical authors presuppose a deep unity of human persons as normative, and our bodies are not the prison of the soul, to be escaped by death. Even in the eternal state, we will enjoy a resurrected body. Further, emphasizing getting souls into heaven when we die can be misconstrued to imply that the body really doesn’t matter, even now. Yet, we are to work now to conform our lives to Christ’s. And, the believer’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. So, the body matters to God and should to us.

Further, Murphy is right to criticize “Cartesian” body-soul dualism; if our bodies and souls are so radically different, it is hard to conceive how they could interact. Descartes also stressed rationality; yet, while rationality is important, there is more to us than just beings thinking things. We also need relationships with others, especially God.

Now we’ll critically examine this family of views. Let’s focus upon personal identity, i.e., what makes each of us the same person, regardless of the changes

we undergo. This is not one’s social identity (the cultural group with which one most closely identifies), or a sense of identity (how we tend to view what gives us significance).

In philosophy, the law of identity states that for one thing to be identical to something else, both things have to have all their properties in common. There would be one thing, not two. So, what would be the basis for our personal identity if we were just physical? Our bodies continually change over time. At twenty-six, I had various physical traits. Moreover, I had married Debbie and lived in California. At fifty-one, I have changed bodily and autobiographically. I have less hair. I teach at Biola and am a father.

Yet, somehow, I am the same person. How? The traditional answer (from Thomistic body-soul dualism) has been to appeal to the soul as our essence, which does not change essentially, yet can change accidentally.³⁵ But without the soul, what might the answer be? There would not be an essential aspect to us that “grounds” all the various changes we can undergo and still be the same person. Our physical parts, narratives, and relationships are always changing. Yet, if someone has had several relationships and is now in an irreversible coma, we don’t suggest that a “former” person has ended, and a “new” one now exists. Instead, we include the period of being comatose in that same person’s story.

If we reject the soul as one’s essence, we seem left with the view that we are a grouping of physical parts, relationships, and other narrated episodes. But there is nothing intrinsic to this grouping that keeps it the same. The set of all the properties that make up the person at one time will not be identical to the set at another. Thus, there is no actual sameness of person through time and change.

This conclusion has serious implications. I would not be the same person now that “I” was at twenty-six when I married Debbie Hubbard. But though I have grown in many ways, I still am married to her. Also, I wouldn’t be the same man who trusted Jesus in 1978 to forgive all my sins. So, the man who was adopted into God’s family then is not the one who lives now. I would not have that relationship with God now, nor will I after I die, because the person who dies will be different, too. Thus, the promise of eternal life seems empty.

Contrary to Green’s and McLaren’s claims, it is not primarily about what God can somehow do (i.e., preserve my narrative, or remember my “slivers”) to sustain me in existence. Instead, there is nothing about

me that can maintain my identity through changes. Even relationships themselves, which emergents rightly stress, whether to other humans or God, become impossible, for they require that we are literally the same person through change that can enter, maintain, and grow in relationships.

Likewise, our stories cannot ground our personal identities. They too are made up of various parts (chapters, episodes) which would be added to other parts of our lives. But they have nothing in themselves that remains the same through change; instead, they presuppose the sameness of a life about which a story can be told. So, Green is mistaken to appeal to our stories and relationships as that which can maintain our personal identity.³⁶

Still, what about the "interaction objection"? Our ability to change in many ways suggests a deep unity between body and soul. Thomas Aquinas' (Thomistic) body-soul dualism affirms this, for the soul is the form of the body. The soul, not DNA, even directs the development of the body and its parts.³⁷ Moreover, the soul is the basis for our being active agents; so, a person can actively choose to move the body.³⁸

Moreover, the "interaction objection" seems problematic for the Christian physicalist. For God to have a relationship with humans, they have to be able to understand each other's meanings in ongoing communication. That presupposes that we are a deep unity, and that we maintain personal identity through time and change. Ironically, without a good basis for personal identity, a physicalist view cannot support our ability to have relationships, with God or humans.³⁹

What about Green's arguments from his interpretations of scripture? My purpose in this article is to look mainly at the philosophical aspects of this issue, thus space and purpose prevent a full treatment of the meaning of biblical language and concepts. But let me raise a couple issues at present. First, I think Green should address implications of John 3: 3-14.⁴⁰ There we see Jesus teaching that entering into a relationship with God requires our being born again by the Spirit. Additionally, what is born of the Spirit is spirit (v. 6), and the Spirit is not physical; how then can there be truly spiritual qualities in humans that are just physical? Yet, Green might counter that these verses should not be interpreted this way; rather, they just address our being in relationship with God.⁴¹ However, as we saw above, this move will not help, for it does not seem we can have a relationship with God on his physicalist view.

Also, I think he should consider Mark 12: 18-27, in which the Sadducees test Jesus about the resurrection. In verse 26, He underscores the fact of the resurrection,

which Jews then would have understood as a general one at the end of time (cf. John 11:24, where Martha expresses this view). Yet, He also quotes Exodus 3:6, where God spoke to Moses in the burning bush and said that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In verse 27, Jesus adds this: "He is not the God of the dead [or, of corpses], but of the living..." However, at the time when God spoke with Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, and even still by the time of Jesus' statement, they would not yet have been resurrected. Now, if we follow Green's views that when the body dies, the person likewise dies, it does not seem possible for God to be their God, because they weren't alive, but dead. But, the body-soul dualist has an answer to this, for living persons, who are essentially their souls, can live apart from the body, even after death, even though God's ultimate plan is to reunite them with resurrected bodies.

What is sin in a physicalist view? It cannot be a condition of the soul. For some, sin seems to be disruption of relationships. That is a manifestation of sin, but it hardly does justice to how the Bible depicts sin.⁴² As a physical phenomenon, it also is hard to see how sin would even be a moral matter, for physical stuff can be characterized thoroughly by description (what is the case). But morality is characterized by prescription, what ought or ought not to be the case in our actions or characters. But if we cannot account for sin as a moral issue, there would be no real need to be rescued from sin. In effect, this physicalist view denies sin's reality, but that is a deception, which ultimately comes from the father of lies.⁴³

A Caution

Not all emergents embrace the exact same views; therefore, we should examine each person's views carefully. But there does seem to be a tendency, at least among some emergent leaders as well as many of their influencers, to reject the soul as our essence. But, as we have seen, this is a boundary emergents should not cross.

Notes

1. Tony Jones, former national coordinator of Emergent U.S., seems to conflate the notions of the emerging church and emergent in *The New Christians* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008). Before, "emerging church" tended to include any Christian involved in the discussion about how to live faithfully as Christians in postmodern times, whereas "emergent" had been used to refer mainly to those who are part of Emergent Village.

2. By "modernity" I mean approximately the period from Descartes (1596-1650) to today, which is a transitional time, from late modernity to postmodernity.

3. See his *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

4. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 236. On the soul as our essence and substance, see J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 285-303.

5. In "'Emergents,' Evangelicals, and the Importance of Truth: Some Philosophical and Spiritual Lessons," in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent*, ed. William Henard and Adam Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), I address another issue, that we cannot know reality (whether creation, including other people, or even God) if all our access to reality requires interpretation.

6. E.g., see Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 78-9.

7. *Ibid.*, 81.

8. *Ibid.*, 78.

9. *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

10. Doug Pagitt, "The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology," in Robert Webber, gen ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches* (Zondervan, 2007), 142.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Pagitt, *Worth*, 76-7.

13. Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 51.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 152-3.

16. *Ibid.*, 194.

17. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 280-1.

18. Nancey Murphy, "Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues," in Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, ed., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 18.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 7-9.

21. Preface to *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* xiii. See also "Avoiding Cartesian Materialism," in her book, co-authored with Warren Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

22. Murphy distinguishes between reductive physicalism (which usually is atheistic), in which causation is always from the lowest levels to the highest, and nonreductive physicalism, which she prefers. Murphy's view is causally nonreductive because causation also can be from whole to part. Yet, she favors ontological reductionism; that is, we are composed of just physical stuff.

23. E-mail from Tony Jones, February 28, 2006.

24. Tony Jones e-mail correspondence, Oct. 20, 2008 (inserts mine).

25. E.g., see his *Reforming Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 2, 179, 213.

26. See his *Body, Soul, and Human Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

Green though does not seem to be directly associated with emergents, but he uses Murphy's views; thus, his ideas are illustrative of this overall view.

27. On Hebrew and Greek terms, see Green, 35-71; on the intermediate state, see 140-80.

28. E.g., Green, 179.

29. Green, 180.

30. Stanley J. Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 197.

31. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 171.

32. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 761-2.

33. *Ibid.*, 239.

34. Let me qualify that while Grenz's thought might suggest physicalism, he did not explicitly endorse it.

35. For Aristotle, each human has a human soul as his or her essence. The soul is the set of our ultimate capacities. Thomas Aquinas extended Aristotle's philosophy. The soul is our essence and is created by God in His image. Also, unlike Cartesian dualism, there is a deep unity between soul and body; the soul is the essence of a person, and it directs the development of the body. For a contemporary Christian explanation of Thomistic substance dualism, see J.P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 199-206.

The soul also can undergo certain types of changes. We each have capacities for rationality, interpersonal relationships, and more. As we mature and develop, we can develop these capacities. But they may be developed to different degrees in each person. Those kinds of changes may be called accidental, in that they are not necessary for that human being to be that person. For example, I have had the capacity to understand philosophy ever since I was conceived, but that capacity was not developed until I engaged in formal study. In that sense, a capacity's development is contingent upon other factors. In contrast, if I lost something essential to me, then I would cease to exist altogether. This does not mean that I cannot change in profound ways. But I cannot change essentially on this view, lest I lose my identity (what makes me who I am through time and change).

36. See Green, 180. Furthermore, stories themselves seem to be just more physical stuff for him, so they too will be changing. For a more in-depth treatment of the problem of the "narrative unity" of the self, see chapter six in my book, *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003).

37. See J.P. Moreland Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 204-13.

38. Here, I am referring to an "agent" as a person "who is in some sense the originator of one's own actions and, in this sense, is in control of one's action" (Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 268).

39. Murphy might appeal to God's working at the quantum level to interact with us. Yet, whatever else may be true at the

quantum level, these things still are physical, so the same problems resurface.

40. All of my biblical references are to *Holy Bible: New American Standard* (Anaheim, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1977).

41. Thanks to my colleague, Joe Gorra, for this suggestion.

42. For example, Jeremiah underscores our heart's default bent, that it is desperately deceitful (Jer. 17: 9).

43. 1 John 1: 8 says "if we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Verse 10 strengthens this: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."

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