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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 109

What Is Man

"What is man" Psa. 8:4.

1. Nay, what am I With God's assistance, I would consider myself. Here is a curious machine, "fearfully and wonderfully made." It is a little portion of earth, the particles of which cohering, I know not how, lengthen into innumerable fibres, a thousand times finer than hairs. These, crossing each other in all directions, are strangely wrought into membranes; and these membranes are as strangely wrought into arteries, veins, nerves, and glands; all of which contain various fluids, constantly circulating through the whole machine.
2. In order to the continuance of this circulation, a considerable quantity of air is necessary. And this is continually taken into the habit, by an engine fitted for that very purpose. But as a particle of ethereal fire is connected with every particle of air, (and a particle of water too,) so both air, water, and fire are received into the lungs together; where the fire is separated from the air and water, both of which are continually thrown out; while the fire, extracted from them, is received into, and mingled with, the blood. Thus the human body is composed of all the four elements, duly proportioned and mixed together; the last of which constitutes the vital flame, whence flows the animal heat.
3. Let me consider this yet a little farther. Is not the primary use of the lungs to administer fire to the body, which is continually extracted from the air by that curious fire-pump By inspiration it takes in the air, water, and fire together. In its numerous cells, (commonly called air-vessels,) it detaches the fire from the air and water. This then mixes with the blood; as every air-vessel has a blood-vessel connected with it: And as soon as the fire is extracted from it, the air and water air thrown out by expiration.
4. Without this spring of life, this vital fire, there could be no circulation of the blood; consequently, no motion of any of the fluids, of the nervous fluid in particular (if it be not rather, as is highly probable, this very fire we are speaking of). Therefore there could not be any sensation, nor any muscular motion. I say, there could be no circulation; for the cause usually assigned for this, namely, the force of the heart, is altogether inadequate to the supposed effect. No one supposes the force of the heart, in a strong man, to be more than equal to the weight of three thousand pounds. Whereas it would require a force equal to the weight of a hundred thousand pounds, to propel the blood from the heart through all the arteries. This can only be effected by the ethereal fire contained in the blood itself, assisted by the elastic force of the arteries through which it circulates.
5. But beside this strange compound of the four elements, -- earth, water, air, and fire, -- I find something in me of a quite different nature, nothing akin to any of these. I find something in me that thinks; which neither earth, water, air, fire, nor any mixture of them, can possibly do: Something which sees, and hears, and smells, and tastes, and feels; all which are so many modes of thinking. It goes farther: Having perceived objects by any of these senses, it forms inward ideas of them. It judges concerning them; it sees whether they agree or disagree with each other. It reasons concerning them: that is, infers one proposition from another. It reflects upon its own operations; it is endued with) imagination and memory; and any of its operations, judgment in particular, may he subdivided into many others.
6. But by what means shall I learn in what part of my body this thinking principle is lodged Some

eminent men have affirmed, that it is "all in all, and all in every part." But I learn nothing from this: They seem to be words that have no determinate meaning. Let us then appeal, in the best manner we can, to our own experience. From this I learn, that this thinking principle is not lodged in my hands, or feet, or legs, or arms. It is not lodged in the trunk of my body. Any one may be assured of this by a little reflection. I cannot conceive that it is situated in my bones, or in any part of my flesh. So far as I can judge, it seems to be situated in some part of my head; but whether in the pineal gland, or in any part of the brain, I am not able to determine.

7. But farther: This inward principle, wherever it is lodged, is capable, not only of thinking, but likewise of love, hatred, joy, sorrow, desire, fear, hope, &c., and a whole train of other inward emotions, which are commonly called passions or affections. They are styled, by a general appellation, the will; and are mixed and diversified a thousand ways. And they seem to be the only spring of action in that inward principle I call the soul.

8. But what is my soul? It is an important question, and not easy to be resolved.

Hear'st thou submissive, but a lowly birth,
Some separate particles of finer earth
A plain effect which nature must beget,
As motion dictates, and as atoms meet

I cannot in anywise believe this. My reason recoils at it. I cannot reconcile myself to the thought, that the soul is either earth, water, or fire; or a composition of all of them put together; were it only for this plain reason: -- All these, whether separate or compounded in any possible way, are purely passive still. None of them has the least power of self-motion; none of them can move itself. "But," says one, "does not that ship move?" Yes; but not of itself; it is moved by the water on which it swims. "But then the water moves." True; but the water is moved by the wind, the current of air. "But the air moves." It is moved by the ethereal fire, which is attached to every particle of it; and this fire itself is moved by the almighty Spirit, the source of all the motion in the universe. But my soul has front Him an inward principle of motion, whereby it governs at pleasure every part of the body.

9. It governs every motion of the body; only with this exception., which is a marvellous instance of the wise and gracious providence of the great Creator: There are some motions of the body, which are absolutely needful for the continuance of life; such as the dilation and contraction of the lungs, the systole and diastole of the heart, the pulsation of the arteries, and the circulation of the blood. These are not governed by me at pleasure: They do not wait the direction of my will. And it is well they do not. It is highly proper, that all the vital motions should be involuntary; going on, whether we advert to them or not. Were it otherwise, grievous inconveniences might follow. A man might put an end to his own life whenever he pleased, by suspending the motion of his heart, or of his lungs; or he might lose his life by mere inattention, -- by not remembering, not adverting to, the circulation of his blood. But these vital motions being excepted, I direct the motion of my whole body. By a single act of my will, I put my head, eyes, hands, or any part of my body into motion: Although I no more comprehend how I do this, than I can comprehend how the "THREE that bear record in heaven are ONE."

10. But what am I? Unquestionably I am something distinct from my body. It seems evident that my body is not necessarily included therein. For when my body dies, I shall not die: I shall exist as really as I did before. And I cannot but believe, this self-moving, thinking principle, with all its passions and affections, will continue to exist, although the body be mouldered into dust. Indeed at present this body is so intimately connected with the soul. that I seem to consist of both. In my present state of existence, I undoubtedly consist both of soul and body: And so I shall again, after the resurrection, to

all eternity.

11. I am conscious to myself of one more property, commonly called liberty. This is very frequently confounded with the will; but is of a very different nature. Neither is it a property of the will, but a distinct property of the soul; capable of being exerted with regard to all the faculties of the soul, as well as all the motions of the body. It is a power of self-determination; which, although it does not extend to all our thoughts and imaginations, yet extends to our words and actions in general, and not with many exceptions. I am full as certain of this, that I am free, with respect to these, to speak or not to speak, to act or not to act, to do this or the contrary, as I am of my own existence. I have not only what is termed, a "liberty of contradiction," -- power to do or not to do; but what is termed, a "liberty of contrariety," -- a power to act one way, or the contrary. To deny this would be to deny the constant experience of all human kind. Every one feels that he has an inherent power to move this or that part of his body, to move it or not, and to move this way or the contrary, just as lie pleases. I can, as I choose, (and so can every one that is born of a woman,) open or shut my eyes; speak, or be silent; rise or sit down; stretch out my hand, or draw it in; and use any of my limbs according to my pleasure, as well as my whole body. And although I have not an absolute power over my own mind, because of the corruption of my own nature; yet, through the grace of God assisting me, I have a power to choose and do good, as well as evil. I am free to choose whom I will serve; and if I choose the better part, to continue therein even unto death.

12. But tell me, frightened nature, what is death
Blood only stopp'd, and interrupted breath
The utmost limit of a narrow span
And even of motion, which with life began

Death is properly the separation of the soul from the body. Of this we are certain. but we are not certain (at least in many cases) of the time when this separation is made. Is it when respiration ceases according to the well-known maxim, Nullus spiritus, nulla vita: "Where there is no breath, there is no life." Nay, we cannot absolutely affirm this: For many instances have been known, of those whose breath was totally lost, and yet their lives have been recovered. Is it when the heart no longer beats, or when the circulation of the blood ceases Not so. For the heart may beat anew; and the circulation of the blood, after it is quite interrupted, may begin again. Is the soul separated from the body, when the whole body is stiff and cold as a piece of ice But there have been several instances lately, of persons who were thus cold and stiff, and had no symptoms of life remaining, who, nevertheless, upon proper application, recovered both life and health. Therefore we can say no more, than that death is the separation of the soul and body; but in many cases God only can tell the moment of that separation.

13. But what we are much concerned to know, and deeply to consider, is, the end of life. For what end is life bestowed upon the children of me Why were we sent into the world For one sole end, and for no other, to prepare for eternity. For this alone we live. For this, and no other purpose, is our life either given or continued. It pleased the all-wise God, at the season which he saw best, to arise in the greatness of his strength, and create the heavens and the earth, and all things that are therein. having prepared all things for him, He "created man in his own image, after his own likeness." And what was the end of his creation It was one, and no other, -- that he might know, and love, and enjoy, and serve his great Creator to all eternity.

14. But "man, being in honour, continued not," but became lower than even the beasts that perish. He wilfully and openly rebelled against God, and cast off his allegiance to the Majesty of heaven. Hereby he instantly lost both the favour of God, and the image of God wherein lie was created. As he was then incapable of obtaining happiness by the old, God established a new covenant with man; the terms of

which were no longer, "Do this and live," but, "Believe, and thou shalt be saved.' But still the end of man is one and the same; only it stands on another foundation. For the plain tenor of it is, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, whom God hath given to be the propitiation for thy sins, and thou shalt be saved;" first, from the guilt of sin, having redemption through his blood; then from the power, which shall have no more dominion over thee; and then from the root of it, into the whole image of God. And being restored both to the favour and image of God, thou shalt know, love, and serve him to all eternity. So that still the end of his life, the life of every man born into the world is to know, love, and serve his great Creator.

15. And let it be observed, as thus is the end, so it is the whole and sole end, for which every man upon the face of the earth, for which every one of you, were brought into the world, and endued with a living soul. Remember! You were born for nothing else. You live for nothing else. Your life is continued to you upon earth, for no other purpose than this, that you may know, love, and serve God on earth, and enjoy him to all eternity. Consider! You were not created to please your senses, to gratify your imagination, to gain money, or the praise of men; to seek happiness in any created good, in anything under the sun. All this is "walking in a vain shadow;" it is leading a restless, miserable life, in order to a miserable eternity. On the contrary, you were created for this, and for no other purpose, by seeking and finding happiness in God on earth, to secure the glory of God in heaven. Therefore, let your heart continually say, "This one thing I do," -- having one thing in view, remembering why I was born, and why I am continued in life, -- "I press on to the mark." I aim at the one end of my being, God; even at "God in Christ reconciling the world to himself." He shall be my God for ever and ever, and my guide even unto death!

Bradford, May 2, 1788.

Edited by George Lyons with corrections by Ryan Danker for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology at Northwest Nazarene University (Nampa, ID).

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