

The Role of Physical Activity in the Christian Life

**A White Paper by Julie A.P. Walton for the Christian Society of Kinesiology & Leisure Studies
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Introduction and Brief History

‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ Acts 17:28a

In the beginning humans were tasked with being God’s caretakers designed to be fruitful, to tend the garden in Eden, and to delight in God by serving him and walking with him. It follows that we were designed to live an active life in body, mind, soul and spirit. Here, Paul emphasizes that all our earthly life is meant to be lived out in the fully-human and fully-God person of Jesus Christ. And so in every generation Christians are to move forward through life in grateful and delighted response to the saving grace of Jesus, energized to act out of that grace to live with active obedience to Christ’s call to arise, walk in a worthy manner, train, go, serve, follow, stand firm, press on, take hold, and carry each other’s burdens.

Philosopher James A.K. Smith writes that we are shaped by our many habits into a unique identity, and that these habits, also viewed as practices, are formative even in ways that escape our notice. (Smith, 2009) When Christians consider identity, they begin with the concept of being made in God’s image. Smith argues that Christians are called out and constituted by God to be and look different, and “to take up the vocation of being fully and authentically human.” (Smith, 2009, pp. 162-163) In other words, the original design and call on our personhood entailed both “task and mission...We are commissioned as God’s image bearers.” (Smith, 2009, p. 163) This is not a calling or vocation we have lost, but one Smith argues we have, like Adam and Eve, failed to carry out, making everything we do or fail to do subject to the corrosive impact of a world steeped in sin. It stands to reason, then, that physical inactivity is contrary to our created design and nature, and that a lifetime of sedentary habits is insidiously formative in ways we dimly recognize but often fail to acknowledge or act upon as relevant to our ability to carry out God’s call.

In truth, Christians have historically battled with embodiment and the mystery of the union of mind, body, soul and spirit. The good news for us is that it is precisely because we fail(ed) in taking up our created vocation, “the task of properly being God’s image bearer is taken up and performed by the Son, who is “the image of the invisible God”” (Col 1:15). (Smith, 2009, p. 164). We are embodied creatures in relationship with Christ in a way that weds our fully created human personhood with His fully uncreated divinity. (Brown, 2014) We are men and women whom our Creator calls very good, yet we are also unconditionally mortal. Although we are vulnerable to sin and the brokenness of all Creation, we are also imitators of Jesus, “quite literally the prime example of what humanity is meant to be in His sinless, faithful, loving, just, and perfect life.” (Brown, 2014).

And so physical activity and movement is a fundamental part of how Christians fulfill and sustain the mandate to be fruitful caretakers of ourselves, the earth, and one another. This is

nicely demonstrated by the fact that God gave us incredible capacity, through both potential and kinetic energy systems for undertaking our work and our play. Regrettably, we are also prone to hoarding that energy while succumbing to Isaac Newton's Law of Inertia: a body at rest tends to stay at rest. And the evidence is undeniable that humans are prone, in this day and culture especially, to "stay at rest"-to be akinetic or hypokinetic. Across our population and throughout the Church a physically active life is a rare phenomenon while a sedentary lifestyle is both widespread and unhealthy.

Major Concepts/Biblical Principles

An important question is, "What happens when we are created for something particular, but choose to ignore that created purpose or willfully go against it?" Adam and Eve picked the forbidden fruit. Jonah ran from Nineveh rather than toward it. Israel turned from God to a golden calf. The rich young ruler shrank from Christ's call to yield his possessions. The Pharisees rejected Christ's invitation to come and see the kingdom of God. These are all examples of people who chose to ignore God and his will for their lives. When we are determined to take an ill-advised path (which always leads away from God's presence), the one God in whom we live, and move, and have our very existence, we go against the very reason we were created-to delight in God and serve him forever.

We must not deny that "we are physical beings. We have handedness and footedness. Movement is intrinsic to our existence," and "we have within our power the will to engage or refuse" the creative energy God makes available to us. (Saint Sing, 2012, p. 18) What happens when we are created to move and be physically active, but choose instead to remain sedentary? When we fail to use any gift God gives us... in this case, the gift of physical movement, what then? The gift withers. And the withering effects of physical inactivity are insidious. Physical and mental well-being quickly atrophy when unstimulated. We deliberately open ourselves up to the ravages of chronic behavioral-based diseases which lead to premature invalidism and death. We develop obesity and diabetes, kidney disease, high blood pressure, and stiff, aching joints. Our heart, lungs, muscles, strength, endurance, and vigor weaken, we can no longer stand erect or carry our own body weight without pain and difficulty. Such neglect- this refusal to move and have our being- dissolves our physical ability to come and go, to give and serve. In a word, we severely impair our ability to be fully fruitful in meeting God's call and claim on our time, our work, our gifts, and our lives.

In essence, our inability to take care of ourselves, to live, and move and have our being, is an abdication of responsibility for both ourselves and others.

"We forget, ignore, or treat as irrelevant [our bodies'] surroundings, from which we draw life. We discount the idea that they might have purposes beyond those we individually will for them, purposed, for example, that are based on relations to [other] bodies. Because of this discounting, we find ourselves immersed in a kind of ongoing and increasingly unrestricted war against limits of all kinds. Because of our ignorance of the interdependences that are fundamental to our lives as creatures, that war expands into a war against each other, against the earth, and, ultimately, against ourselves and our health... But, because our perception of

what constitutes our health is partial and distorted, we fail to attend properly to the ways in which we are increasingly unhealthy members of an increasingly unhealthy creation.” (Shuman, 2009).

And it is true that our health and our bodies, our entire ability to live and move and have our being are all distorted by sin and the brokenness of this world. In our self-assured certainty in a medical system also infected by sin, it is easy to forget that life is very fragile indeed. And so Christians are called to resist carelessness. To embrace a wholesome delight in the physical aspect of what God created and called good, to acknowledge the need for self-care, and ultimately, to maximize our potential to carry out the work God has gifted and called each one of us to do; most simply, we move so that we can keep on moving- with resilience, endurance, patience, and fortitude- in ways that are ever fruitful. This is how we do our daily work out of gratitude and in humility as God gifts and calls us to do as our individual and collective contribution to the cultivation of shalom.

Of course, humans have known for millennia that physical activity is an imperative partner in good health. The Chinese were applying formal exercises for health promotion as early as 2500 B.C. (Dishman, 2004). In the United States alone, 80% of people are physically inactive, which, along with chronic overeating causes 300,000 premature deaths each year and represents a \$75 billion burden on a fragile healthcare system and economy. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Moreover, the benefits of being physically active have long been well-understood. They include lower incidence of “cardiovascular disease, thromboembolic stroke, hypertension, type II diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity, colon cancer, breast cancer, anxiety, and depression.” (Haskell, 2007).

But, like Paul, people do what they know they should not do, and fail to do what they know they should do. (Romans 7:15). And so, despite the long-known and multiple benefits of being physically active, most of us choose to be sedentary, a willful akinesis, an unconscious hypokinesis that forms our habits and desires un-rightly. We too easily become bystanders and fans rather than participants, watchers rather than doers, sitters rather than movers. And while our society happily provides the workplace architecture and technological infrastructure to support our inactive habits, it is clear that this choice to be lifeless (unmoving) both makes us sick and slowly kills us.

We can still appreciate and participate in God’s grace and beauty, but the missing form and function of our physical self creates a disharmony we intuitively know is unhealthy. Why be physically active? Why put our bodies through the paces of moving every day? “[T]o see what we are made of-meaning to see if there is anything *more*, anything other than flesh and sweat and blood. We do it to see if there is a soul looking at us in the ...fumes of exhaustion...to explore the depths of ourselves... Like a pilgrimage, a cleansing, a retreat, we emerge more human, more alive, more aware.” (Saint Sing, 2004)

We must not despair that despite all we know we make perverse and unsupportable choices. There is yet hope that Christians can undertake a new direction, to seek a breakthrough kinesis

in which we learn to embrace our physical nature and its needs to be consistently stimulated through movement. (Saint Sing, 2004). Steven Blair and colleagues found that when the fitness levels of subjects were divided into quintiles of VO₂max, those in the lowest quintile had the highest incidence of all-cause mortality. (SN Blair, 1995) Most interesting was the finding that simply improving ones' VO₂max classification to the next lowest quintile cut mortality risk in half. This is one kind of breakthrough kinesis- convincing people to get up and move- today, tomorrow, and for a lifetime, because there is no more compelling data to prove to us that not moving is deadly, and that being physical- even in small doses- helps. And, the more the better. Recently, Katzmarzyk et. al. proved that the longer one sits each day without moving, the higher the all-cause mortality. (PT Katzmarzyk, 2009) Making the move to be more physically active is formative and transformative. For Christians, life shouldn't be static, but always moving forward, pressing on toward its goal of taking hold of that for which Christ died. Our habits form us, and though it is difficult, bad ones can be unlearned. It is a beautiful picture of breaking out of the slavery of our physical sloth and breaking through into a life of balance, well-being, and energy.

There is a beautiful irony here too. A major symptom of a sedentary lifestyle is lack of energy, both physical and mental; we feel sapped from our commitments, our work, our worries, and our lack of physical fitness, so much so that the thought of getting up and moving (breaking through) is itself wearisome. But in God's unusual energy economy, our perceived energy levels *rise* when we *spend* more energy. Instead of stuffing our "metabolic barn" with food energy to overflowing such that energy consumed (as calories) is always greater than energy spent, we can create a "breakthrough kinesis" that reverses this trend. As we move we are moved-to eat less and move more, and we begin to feel the "life" and vigor return to our atrophied, neglected bodies. We are enlivened. Invigorated. Energized. Where before we couldn't play, we now have the strength and energy to join in. Where we couldn't walk far or long enough to enjoy a museum or national park, we ambulate with endurance and joy. We can move, and our movement brings joy.

Questions and Issues for Further Study

There is little question that humans were created to be physically active, and choosing to shun a physically-active lifestyle has lasting deleterious consequences. There is also no denial that each of us is broken in different ways, yet still of unspeakable value to our Savior. No matter our inabilities, we can still always praise and glorify God.

So what do people of faith have to say about disabilities in which movement is impaired or missing altogether, when someone is tragically paralyzed, unable to move? Disability is itself something that goes against the grain of the created order. It is not "natural." It is filled with suffering and dependency and challenge, because it amputates one leg of the three-legged stool upon which man sits: so we live and have our being in God, but we can no longer move. When things go wrong in life, it means that something is out of order. And we find ourselves victims of a fallen world and shake our heads and fists that such tragedies are a part of sin's common disordering of life. But, is it odd that we universally view an accident of birth or life

(e.g. polio, cerebral palsy, and traumatic brain or spinal cord injury) which steals one's physical movement a tragedy, yet are unable to appreciate that the deliberate choice to not move has the potential to produce disease and disability in our own lives? Why is it that the potential loss of our own mobility makes us inwardly shiver? The very thing we so carelessly avoid (physical activity) is also the very thing we shudder to think of having to live without.

So, how is it any different when the gift of health and human frame is willfully neglected, when our ability to move is increasingly circumscribed by the inevitable pain and atrophy associated with chronic physical inactivity? Yes, atrophy. Things that are unused tend to lose strength and power and capacity. This is true of the mind. Of the faith life. And of the physical. If we fail to live, and move, and have our being in God, we shrink our potential to be "able". In harsher words, we intentionally risk "disabling" ourselves.

And there's the simplest answer for why Christians need to be physically active. We move on a daily basis because it is part of what it means to carry the blueprint of God's image. We weave and leave a "kinetic footprint" (Saint Sing, 2012) because it entails the fulfillment of what we were created for-to be with and in the constant presence of our Creator with the all the fullness of mind, body, soul and spirit we are capable of devoting to the task of co-creation. We move so that we can continue to love and serve God and neighbor with as much vigor as we can humanly muster.

Of course, we must take care to confront the reality of our fitness for such work. In our own power, or by our own determination, we can never be fit for serving God, or for salvation to eternal life. Our fitness rests wholly on Christ's atoning death, resurrection, and ascension. Yet we commonly observe Christians adopting strange doctrines of "health" in desperate attempts to save themselves from aging and death in ways that deny Christ's work on the cross. In a sense, we become our own god when we compulsively work to control our personal health in an attempt to guarantee our success in the world and to never get sick. This is a confidence in the flesh that Paul warns us about in Philippians 3. Marva Dawn, in *Keeping Sabbath Wholly* speaks to this notion of self-focused work and our need,

“...to cease not only from work itself, but also from the need to accomplish and be productive, from the worry and tension that accompany our modern criterion of efficiency, from our efforts to be in control of our lives as if we were God, from our possessiveness and our enculturation, and, finally, from the humdrum and meaninglessness that result when life is pursued without the Lord at the center of it all.”
(Dawn, 1989)

Thus, approaches to personal fitness (and often by association physical activity) have two extremes. One is filled with narcissistic, hedonistic, self-serving obsessive and compulsive idolatry focused on being the best we can be physically for our own glory and security. In contrast, we can also choose the path of slothful ignorance that assumes modern medicine will simply fix what we neglect- an approach marked by physical laziness and gluttony where society at large must pay for another's indolence, addictions, and lifelong inactivity.

Conclusion

All of this is to say that the Church universal needs to become an active voice which encourages its people to be better stewards of their physical well-being. While some congregations offer exercise classes or hawk programs for weight loss, and while most Christians will nod in agreement that we need to be good stewards, the notion that no practice is neutral, but each points to some ultimate thing or desire (Smith, 2009) is one with which most of us are unwilling to mentally and physically grapple. Thus, exercise and weight loss programming that is not supported by a strong foundation in *why we move in the first place* is bound to fail. This means that the Church and Christian kinesiology academics must continue to support people in understanding that our love of sitting is genuinely misdirected and goes against what we were created for in the first place. It is a disordered desire with an ultimate end that results in pain, and loss, and human suffering.

The good news is that if we move people to move more often and with increasing intensity, we can reap a host of individual and communal rewards, and make far fewer excuses. “God invites us to the banquet, and we ...make excuses. Those who hear may realize that the kingdom is not “out there” but among us and that a person can only be fed by coming to the banquet.” (Ward, 1990, p. 7) And so we gather in our weakness. We confess we have been physically lazy, “that we lack the wisdom, discernment, and will to carry out the task. Thus God calls us to himself to find renewal, restoration, and reordering.” (Smith, 2009, p. 165)

And so, together, the people of God- in church families and residential communities, in Christian schools and on Christian campuses- can and should become more physically active, yielding ever more human capital to serve the needs of a broken world. We can and should act- and call on all Christians to act- to be *people of action, who move, and live according to the pattern*, not as enemies of Christ with minds set on earthly things, and whose god is their fleshly dissipation. Instead, we must work together to forget what we’ve done and failed to do, and instead strain forward-*together and in God’s presence*- toward our heavenly prize in Christ. (Phi 3:17)

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