



**HAVE
WE LOST
OUR MINDS?**

Stan W. Wallace

Foreword by J. P. Moreland

Neuroscience,
Neurotheology,
the Soul, *and*
Human Flourishing

“Stan Wallace has written an important—indeed, critical—book that clears away serious misunderstandings as well as misrepresentations regarding spiritual formation and neuroscience. Wallace uses his impressive philosophical skills and insights to cut through the fog and expose neurotheology’s faulty conclusions. However, he also offers a constructive, biblical alternative to point us in the proper direction.”

—**PAUL COPAN**, chair of philosophy and ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University

“I heartily recommend Stan Wallace’s timely book—a fraternal but forceful critique of ‘neurotheology,’ the attempt by some evangelical Christians to redefine the human soul, mind, and spirit entirely as generated and animated by the brain. Wallace clearly explains why this implicitly materialistic perspective conflicts with Scripture, Christian doctrine, sound philosophy, proper science, and healthy spirituality. Instead, he encourages appropriation of sound neuroscience within the historic Christian perspective that affirms the basic distinctness and holistic integration of both body and soul.”

—**JOHN W. COOPER**, professor emeritus of philosophical theology, Calvin Theological Seminary

“For many years, I felt settled in my understanding of the body-soul relationship. But now, to avoid substantial error, we must integrate new findings from neuroscience with our concept of the human person. Using Scripture, theology, philosophy, and working examples, Stan Wallace’s book thoughtfully probes the body-soul-brain dynamic. From reading his thoughtful commentary, I have a deeper, richer understanding of what it means to ‘belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.’ So can you.”

—**SHIRLEY J. ROELS**, executive director, International Network for Christian Higher Education

“Good philosophy must exist,’ C. S. Lewis wrote, ‘if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.’ Because so much bad philosophy, both formal and popular, exists around the questions of what it means to be human, it must be answered. That’s exactly what Stan Wallace gives us in *Have We Lost Our Minds*, along with a clear, articulate description of the beautiful, robust reality of the *imago Dei*, which is to say, who we truly are.”

—**JOHN STONESTREET**, president, Colson Center

“*Have We Lost Our Minds?* is a game changer! Sometimes we walk down an unsettled road for a considerable distance before a loving corrective voice sets us on the proper path. Stan Wallace does just that. Wallace brings a kind, gracious, scholarly perspective to move us in the direction of genuine human flourishing by confronting the errors of well-intentioned authors promoting neurotheology. I highly recommend this book.”

—**JIMMY DODD**, founder and president, PastorServe

Have We Lost Our Minds?

*Neuroscience, Neurotheology, the Soul,
and Human Flourishing*

STAN W. WALLACE

Foreword by J. P. Moreland

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HAVE WE LOST OUR MINDS?

Neuroscience, Neurotheology, the Soul, and Human Flourishing

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To Roger Hershey, who first modeled for me how
to be a lifelong learner and follow truth wherever
it leads, even if doing so is unpopular.

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Foreword

IN SUMMER 1974, I attended a week-long campus ministry conference in Seoul, South Korea. My roommate was a Filipino layman sent by his church to attend the conference. After a restless night's sleep following our arrival, I awoke on the first morning of the conference. On my way to the shower, I noticed that my roommate was reading. I glanced curiously to see what the book was. To my horror, he was reading Rudolf Bultmann's *Kerygma and Myth*.

Bultmann was a German scholar known for his “de-mythologizing” approach to Scripture. He believed that although we could know that a man named Jesus existed, that was about all we could know. For him, the Gospels were largely myth and fabricated legend. Accordingly, Bultmann's book (which I had read myself) could be categorized as spiritual poison. My roommate's pastor, it turned out, was a secular liberal trained in a radical leftist European seminary, and he was teaching his congregation to follow a deconstructed New Testament in which all the supernatural elements were regarded as prescientific nonsense that should no longer be believed.

I knew I had to warn my brother about the spiritual impact of what he was reading, even though in doing so I would be casting aspersions on his pastor and other congregants who had bought into this non-Christian worldview. I was uncomfortable about doing so, but truth matters, and he was absorbing grotesque falsehoods that would lead him away from Christ. Therefore, I took the time to explain Bultmann's worldview and

errors to him, urging him to see the flaws in these ideas and recommending works written by solid, Bible-believing thinkers.

In this situation, I was confronting ideas that were clearly contrary to biblical teaching. In other instances, the task of distinguishing truth from error is more delicate. Sometimes, in the interest of truth and biblical fidelity, we must confront the ideas of brothers and sisters in the Lord, especially when those ideas are fundamentally contrary to a Christian worldview. Over the years, I have felt compelled to do this many times. As uncomfortable as these corrective occasions have been, I had a moral and spiritual duty to correct what seemed to me to be important errors that at the core of historic Christianity.

For example, one year I attended the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, and the plenary address was delivered by someone who defended open theism. Briefly, open theism contends that God is not omniscient and does not know the future actions of human persons endowed with free will. I believe this position is contrary to the biblical understanding of God. But I was even more aghast when the speaker appealed to the authority of the widely esteemed Christian writer Dallas Willard to bolster his case, claiming to the two thousand people in attendance that Willard was an open theist. I was deeply offended by the speaker's egregious misrepresentation of Willard's beliefs. After the session, I talked with this brother and graciously but firmly admonished him to correct the record and never again make such a claim about Willard. Taking this step was uncomfortable, but it had to be done.

Today, we find ourselves in a similar situation. As you will discover in the pages that follow, false and harmful (albeit well-intentioned) ideas about our fundamental nature as human persons are being adopted by pastors, Christian counselors, and laypersons in our churches. These ideas, purportedly based on recent advances in neuroscience, describe humans as fundamentally physical beings without an enduring soul—a view commonly referred to as physicalism. Dr. Stan Wallace has done a masterful, gracious, yet firm job of carefully and accurately exposing these harmful ideas as presented by two influential brothers with large Christian followings: James Wilder and Curt Thompson. Stan provides a penetrating critique of their ideas. But he doesn't stop there. He also presents a compelling biblical alternative, supported by some of the most important thinkers in the history of Christianity, that explains all the relevant facts of neuroscience, aligns with our spiritual experience, and has far-reaching practical applications.

Neither Stan nor I claim that Wilder and Thompson's writings are of no value. Among other positive things, they remind us that training and developing our body is an important component of growth in Christ-likeness. They also provide useful justification for medication as a tool in dealing with various kinds of mental illness.

However, with these exceptions, everything of value in their books has to do with their discussion of distinctively spiritual, not neurological, aspects of growth. The information Wilder and Thompson have collected from neuroscience plays virtually no role in helping the reader in his or her spiritual pilgrimage. To discover this for yourself, read Wilder or Thompson, and whenever you encounter a section that identifies and describes the areas of the brain that are activated by various spiritual disciplines and practices, ask yourself this question: Exactly how is this technical scientific material helping me understand sanctification and grow in Christ? Other than the defense of appropriate medications and highlighting the importance of the body (which orthodox Christian thinkers have affirmed for centuries!), this material is not only unhelpful but even a distraction from the real issues involved in spiritual formation.

Moreover, although it pains me to say this, Wilder has committed the same error as the open theist I cited above: he has seriously misrepresented Dallas Willard. Wilder, in his book *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard, and the Church That Transforms*, depicts Dallas as a supporter of "neurotheology." Some personal background should help to explain why I am in a good position to understand what Dallas really believed. I completed my PhD studies under Dallas at the University of Southern California from 1982 to 1985. I took several courses with him, and he was my dissertation supervisor. From 1985 until his passing, Dallas and his wife, Jane, were very close friends; in fact, it sometimes felt as if they had adopted my wife and me as part of their family. We met frequently through those years, and I would call him every few months to catch up and talk philosophy. In short, I knew Dallas and his philosophical and theological thinking very, very well. I think it is safe to say that I am among the handful of people most intimately acquainted with him and his body of work.

Based on that knowledge, it is beyond my comprehension how anyone could portray Dallas as anything close to being a physicalist, a view he detested. Yet Wilder (perhaps unintentionally) egregiously misrepresents Dallas on this fundamental topic! Just as the brother in Christ who claimed Dallas was an open theist needed to be graciously admonished, in the interest of truth and respect for Dallas's insights, Stan does the

same thing in this book. The church should be grateful for Stan's gracious but clear-thinking response to neurotheology and its misleading interpretation of human nature.

Publishing a critique of the popular ideas of fellow Christians is always a serious matter. I think all Christians would recognize that some disagreements are more important than others. Differences of opinion about God's existence, the deity of Christ, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ's death on the cross are serious matters; disagreements about the nature of church government, modes of baptism, and so on are important but less central to our faith. I would place Wilder and Thompson's ideas, because they concern our basic human nature and how we relate to God, closer to the former category (issues of central importance) than the latter category. That is why the body of Christ needs this book and why it should be widely read. Stan was uncomfortable writing it, because he does not wish to be divisive. But he knew he had to do it, to help believers remain faithful to very important ideas that are at the core of a Christian worldview and our understanding of humanity.

Some of the most fundamental debates taking place in universities and in popular culture today concern the nature of human beings. Now is not the time for Christians to be uninformed about this question, or to reinterpret Scripture to make us acceptable to our secular friends who embrace scientism. Stan's book is an articulate, rigorous, informative yet readable work for such a time as this. Theological drift is widespread in the Western church today, and Wilder and Thompson's neurotheology, though well-intentioned, is inadvertently contributing to that drift. Please understand that neither Stan nor I have any disrespect toward them as persons or brothers in the Lord. They love Jesus and sincerely desire to serve him. It is their ideas that we stand against.

I have carefully read and wholeheartedly endorse Stan's work. This is an important book. Because of the deep nature of some of the questions addressed, it is not always easy reading, although Stan has worked diligently to make complex ideas from philosophy accessible to general readers. Do not be dissuaded. Read it, give it to your pastoral staff and Christian counselors you know, and tell others about it every chance you get.

—J. P. Moreland, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University and co-author (with Brandon Rickabaugh) of *The Substance of Consciousness: A Comprehensive Defense of Contemporary Substance Dualism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2024)

Introduction

Bodies, Souls, and Human Flourishing

[Dallas Willard] had two main concerns. The first concern was that the spiritual formation movement be established on more intellectually rigorous philosophical and theological underpinnings.

—J. P. MORELAND¹

Extraordinary care must be taken to formulate correctly our understanding of humanity. What humans are understood to be will color our perception of what needed to be done for them, how it was done and their ultimate destiny.

—MILLARD ERICKSON²

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This introduction begins by explaining the historic understanding of persons as both a body and soul (or “mind,” which is often used synonymously with “soul”).

According to this view, we have both a material and an immaterial dimension, yet we are ultimately a soul that can live after our body dies. Yet some Christians believe that recent findings of neuroscience indicate we

1. “Dallas Willard Memorial Service, J. P. Moreland.” Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzSEeIUoksU&ab_channel=DallasWillardMinistries (from 4:00 to 4:36); accessed November 12, 2023.

2. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 481.

are only, or at least fundamentally, physical beings. As a result, their books advocate rethinking the nature of spiritual formation and human flourishing. Through the popularity of their writings, these ideas are increasingly prominent among Christians. Although I appreciate the pastoral intent of their books, these ideas must be evaluated in a way that takes seriously both the findings of neuroscience *and* what we know about our nature from Scripture, philosophy, and daily observation. I seek to carry out this evaluation in a simple but not simplistic way, making the conversation accessible to everyone interested in this topic. My ultimate goal is to provide a credible answer to the important questions “What am I?” and therefore “how do I grow in Christ and flourish?” and to show where the idea of us as fundamentally physical falls short and must be corrected.

IN 2021 I VISITED a very prominent Bible-believing church in my area. The pastor spoke on Romans 12:2: “Do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” I was glad he was teaching on this text, as the idea of loving God with the mind has fallen out of favor in many churches these days. But as he began, he immediately substituted “brain” for “mind” and spent the rest of his sermon talking about how our brains work in the process of spiritual renewal. To support this substitution, he repeatedly quoted Curt Thompson, a Christian psychiatrist and author of *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships*.

As I listened, I became increasingly uncomfortable, for in this passage Paul is speaking of renewing our *mind* (part of our immaterial dimension), rather than our *brain* (part of our material dimension). After the service, I shared my concern with the pastor. To help me understand the connection of neuroscience to spiritual formation, he suggested that I read a book by another influential Christian leader—Jim Wilder’s

Renovated: God, Dallas Willard and the Church That Transforms. Reading it raised more questions than it answered.

Just a week later, I was meeting with a longtime friend who ministers to business professionals. “Mark” said he was working on a book to help businesspeople serve Christ in their professional lives. He is usually very thoughtful in all he says and writes, so when he asked me to review a draft of the book, I was happy to do so. I was quite surprised to find that he too focused on understanding how the brain functions in order to best understand being faithful as a Christian in business. My concerns continued to grow.

Soon after this, I was asked to review the curriculum being used by a church planting ministry. It included a section on spiritual formation for church planters in training. Again, I discovered that the curriculum focused on our brain activity. It was based heavily on the writings of Jim Wilder.

Finally, I was invited to participate in a webinar hosted by a prominent ministry. The featured speaker was the previously mentioned Curt Thompson, who discussed how to help others grow in Christ. Once more the conversation revolved around understanding how our brains are the key to spiritual formation. The many people attending the webinar were eager to understand and apply these ideas in their ministry contexts. By this time I was very troubled, because it seemed that everywhere I turned, the idea being promoted was that we are ultimately a body, and most importantly a brain.

You may have been exposed to these ideas as well. Perhaps you heard them mentioned in a sermon at church, or discussed in a podcast. A friend may have brought these ideas up over a cup of coffee, or you may have run across them in a bookstore as you looked for something to read on spiritual growth.

Ideas like these matter. They can powerfully shape how we think, act, and live. This is why, in the passage cited above, the apostle Paul instructs us to “renew our minds.” We must work constantly to understand what is really real, and then to live accordingly. Paul contrasts this honest approach to reality with the common human tendency to understand reality as the people around us—“this world”—say it is.

If we can resist the strong pull of the patterns of this world and truly live according to what is real, we will flourish. As Paul adds in Romans 12:2, if we renew our minds with true beliefs, we will “prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The question at the core of the interactions cited above is what we are at the most fundamental level. We say we are many things: a husband or wife, a father or mother, an employee, a homeowner. But none of these are essentially what we are. I was me before I married, had children, got a job or bought a home. Similarly, I could lose all these things tomorrow and I would still be me. Therefore, those things are not essential to what I am. Rather, I am something more fundamental that *has* these other things. But what is that something? What am *I*? Am I ultimately a body—a physical thing? Or am I ultimately a soul—an immaterial thing? Or am I ultimately some combination of the two?

A proper understanding of what we are is necessary for us to flourish, because what a thing is determines what it needs to thrive. Take the tree in my backyard. It is currently flourishing because it is planted in the right type of soil, with the right amount of moisture, nutrients, and sunlight. But if I dug a hole and planted my dog in the backyard with exactly the same conditions, my dog would not flourish! In fact, she would promptly die. This is because the nature of a dog calls for a very different environment than the nature of a tree.

In the same way, I will flourish only if I have a proper understanding of what I am. Important implications of the idea that we are ultimately material beings will be discussed in chapters 9 and 10. For now, I'll briefly touch on a few ramifications to illustrate the critical importance of properly understanding what we are.

As illustrated above, if we are ultimately a body, and most importantly a brain, spiritual formation is actually neural formation. Growth in Christ must be refocused on gaining a better understanding of how the brain is shaped. The training and success of pastors, spiritual mentors, and Christian counselors must also give greater attention to understanding neuroscience and the brain rather than understanding the soul and how it is formed.

If we are ultimately a body, evangelism and missions are not about the salvation of souls. They must be redefined in terms of enhancing other's physical lives. Concepts such as sin, Christ's incarnation, and his atonement must be understood as related to our bodies, not our souls. Even the idea of an immaterial realm existing at all—including such things as objective moral values—is less plausible if everything we encounter day in and day out, including other persons, are ultimately physical in nature.

Our professional lives will, in large measure, be determined by our understanding of what we are. If people are assumed to be ultimately physical, the emphasis will be on meeting physical needs alone. Take, for instance, the medical professions. If we are ultimately material beings, it follows that all ailments must ultimately be physical, and therefore the interventions prescribed should also be physical.

Our understanding of people as ultimately physical also has wide-ranging implications for our cultural values—how we believe society functions best. If we are ultimately material, the highest cultural value is the freedom to meet our physical needs, as we define them. In our consideration of biomedical issues such as abortion, if we are ultimately physical we must define life in terms of specific bodily functions such as brain activity or responsiveness to stimuli, with significant implications for when we understand life to begin and end. Finally, if we are ultimately physical beings, there can be no such thing as intrinsic value, fundamental equality, justice for all, or inalienable human rights, for there is literally nothing we all share in common that could ground these values. Taken to its extreme, this reductionistic view of what we are undergirded the Holocaust, for instance.

As these examples illustrate, for us to thrive—to live as we hope to live, and as God has called us to live—we must understand *what* we are. Ultimately, this understanding will help us grow in our walk with Christ (love of God) and love our neighbors as ourselves (love of others).

The first eight chapters of this book will explore what we are from both a biblical and philosophical perspective, leading to a more detailed discussion of these points of application in chapters 9 and 10. I realize that diving into theology and philosophy can be challenging. Yet, as is often true, error is simple but truth is more nuanced. Therefore, it is important to explore a bit of the nuances of our souls and bodies in order to have the robust understanding of human nature necessary to better understand our growth in Christ.³ If you are more of a “show me the money” type of person, you may want to jump directly to chapters 9 and 10 first, to read more about the implications of a proper understanding of what we are. Then you can come back and work through chapters 1 to 8 in order to “backfill” these implications with more of the biblical and philosophical framework.

3. Deepening our theological and philosophical understanding of reality helps us discern truth from error in all other areas of our lives as well. Therefore, this book is a case study in how to “think Christianly” about all of life.

THE HISTORIC CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT WE ARE

Throughout the ages, most Christians have understood Scripture as teaching that we are a unity of two dimensions: a body (a material dimension) and a soul (an immaterial dimension). More specifically, Christians have viewed human beings, in this life, as embodied souls—immaterial beings that in some way are united with physical bodies. I will briefly summarize the biblical teaching here. Chapter 2 will then examine this in more detail.

The idea that we are both body and soul is grounded in biblical passages such as Jesus' warning, "And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul" (Matt 10:28).⁴ The debate over the relation between body and soul is quite complex; we will return to this topic in greater depth in chapter 6.

Furthermore, most believers have understood Scripture as affirming not only that we have two dimensions, but that *both* our material and immaterial dimensions are important aspects of what we are. The reality and value of the material realm, including our bodies, has been upheld against contrary views such as Gnosticism, the early distortion of the Christian faith that treated the body as irrelevant or even evil, because the Gnostics believed that all matter was evil and that only spiritual things are good.⁵ From this, they inferred our bodies are of no value. Furthermore, they argued that Jesus could not have had a physical body at all, because a material body would forever taint him and therefore he would not be God.⁶ The opening words of 1 John respond to this Gnostic idea: "What was from the beginning, what we have *heard*, what we have *seen* with our eyes, what we have looked at and *touched* with our hands, concerning the Word of Life."⁷ John argues that contrary to the false teaching of the Gnostics, Jesus indeed had a material dimension, and that this was an important aspect of his existence in the world. Since Jesus was like us

4. For a detailed evaluation of this passage see Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting*, 117–19.

5. Gnosticism as a fully developed system of thought did not appear until the second century. In 1 John and elsewhere biblical writers were responding to an early, incipient form of "proto-Gnosticism."

6. For a discussion of how Gnostic philosophy influenced the early church and gave rise to 1 John, see Stott, *The Letters of John*, 48–51.

7. First John 1:1 (emphasis added).

in every way (Heb 2:17), it follows that our bodies are also an important aspect of what we are and how we flourish.

Yet the traditional understanding of biblical teaching is that our immaterial dimension—our soul—is even more foundational to what we are, because this dimension continues to live after our bodies die. As Paul expresses it, “While we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord, . . . but we . . . prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:6, 8).⁸ Therefore, since we can exist without the body but not without the soul, the soul is ultimately what we are. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “A soul is that which I can say I am.”⁹ It follows that caring for the soul is essential to our flourishing.

As illustrated earlier, a growing number of Christian pastors, counselors, psychiatrists, and authors are implicitly or explicitly challenging this traditional understanding of what we are. They are stating or implying an alternative understanding of our nature.

AN ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT WE ARE¹⁰

Due to recent findings in neuroscience, a number of influential believers are suggesting that our material dimension—the body—is ultimately¹¹ what we are. I will draw on the two prominent books I mentioned above—*Anatomy of the Soul* and *Renovated*—to illustrate how this alternative is often implicitly assumed, and sometimes explicitly stated, in the context of discussing human flourishing.¹²

Thompson and Wilder argue that until recently, we had only a fragmentary understanding of what we are. But now, due to the advances of

8. See Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 141–48. Chapter 2 will discuss the historic biblical understanding of the soul and body in more detail.

9. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy*, 10. For more developed arguments for the soul as the self, see Duvall, “From Soul to Self and Back Again,” 6–15; Moreland, “Restoring the Substance to the Soul of Psychology,” 29–43.

10. Chapters 3 and 4 will explore this alternative understand in much more detail.

11. I use “ultimately” or “fundamentally” here and throughout to allow for the possibility that they may also believe we have a non-physical dimension (including mental states such as thoughts and beliefs). This variant will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. Yet even if so, as will be discussed in chapter 1, it is clear that they believe this immaterial dimension emerges out of the more fundamental thing that we are—a brain.

12. Wilder and Thompson have both written a number of other books, which echo similar themes.

neuroscience, we can much more fully answer this question. As Wilder summarizes, he seeks to “examine whether current brain science would change the understanding of human nature that has dominated Christian theology since the Middle Ages.”¹³ Thompson adds, “The fields of psychiatry, genetics, developmental and behavioral psychology, psychoanalysis, neurology and neuropsychology, developmental neurobiology, and functional neuroimaging . . . add to our understanding of how we have come to be who we are.”¹⁴ Yet until recently, “knowledge from the many scientific fields has not been integrated into a single coherent body of knowledge.”¹⁵ Thompson rejoices that now scientists are beginning to offer us this integration, in such forms as Daniel Siegel’s “interpersonal neurobiology.”¹⁶

This approach to integrating the findings of neuroscience and the theology of spiritual formation has become known as “neurotheology.” Wilder defines this pursuit as “the science of spiritual maturity.”¹⁷

Given the growing prominence of neurotheology, we must be careful to follow the Lord’s admonition in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: “Examine everything; hold firmly to that which is good.” I serve with Global Scholars, a ministry that equips Christian professors to be the “aroma of Christ” (2 Cor 2:15) in higher education globally. In my role, I regularly encourage Christian professors to consider how they may serve Christ by engaging the ideas in their fields of study from a biblical worldview. In what follows, I will attempt to practice what I preach, examining the ideas of neurotheology from my areas of expertise so as to determine what is true and therefore what is right and good to believe.

UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING NEUROTHEOLOGY

Some may be tempted to write off neurotheology without much thought, since the Scriptures seem to teach clearly that we are souls that possess bodies (including brains). But Christians must also affirm science as a means of discovering what is real, for God surely reveals truth in his

13. Wilder, *Renovated*, 2–3. Wilder offers no support for his claim that the traditional understanding of human nature dates back only to the Middle Ages. I will argue in chapter 2 that the traditional view of humans as body *and* soul has dominated Christian understanding from the time of the biblical authors.

14. Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 5.

15. Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 6.

16. Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 6.

17. Wilder, *Renovated*, 127.

creation (his *general revelation*). “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge” (Ps 19:1–2 NIV). God has given us science to help us understand things as they are through the study of his creation. Therefore, we must always be open to what new discoveries tell us. Perhaps Christians have misunderstood for centuries what we really are. If so, neurotheology may be giving us a clearer understanding of our nature and therefore how we flourish. Anything we can discover about this topic, from any field of study, should be of great interest to us.

Accordingly, I deeply appreciate Thompson and Wilder’s desire to help believers integrate all we know about what we are, including what we can learn through neuroscience, to aid us in our spiritual formation. As Wilder asks, “Would knowing how the brain learns character revise how we teach ourselves to be Christian?”¹⁸ Thompson concurs, stating that by understanding neuroscience we can better understand “why we do what we do over time.”¹⁹ Therefore, in his book he introduces “several neuroscientific concepts that have great significance to the community of faith.”²⁰ Wilder states similarly, “Reconciling the church’s practices of transformation to how the brain works will be our topic for this book.”²¹ This pastoral concern is evident throughout their books. As Thompson puts it in his epilogue:

My work involves helping people pay attention to the elements of their [brains] . . . and then integrating these disparate parts so that we can live a life of mercy and justice in every realm and dimension of life together. I believe God’s Kingdom advances when this integration occurs in the community as well as in the individual.²²

These are most admirable goals! So, as Thompson and Wilder are dear brothers in Christ, discussing a very important topic with good intentions

18. Wilder, *Renovated*, 3

19. Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 5.

20. Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 6.

21. Wilder, *Renovated*, 7.

22. Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 257. I put “brains” in brackets because here he uses the term “minds,” but it is clear that he is referring to the brain. He uses these terms synonymously throughout the book, as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, on page 9 he states that “the terms brain and mind . . . are . . . closely enough related to seem interchangeable.”

and motives, we must give their perspective an unbiased evaluation by clarifying precisely what they are claiming and then fairly evaluating their ideas.

On the other hand, some may be tempted to embrace the ideas of neurotheologians without much thought, assuming that these ideas are based on science and therefore *must* be true. However, this reaction is as problematic as ignoring neuroscience and neurotheology altogether. Science is certainly one way to know truth. But it is not the only way.²³ We know that God also reveals truth through his Word (his *special revelation*). Biblical scholars and theologians therefore have much to offer on issues such as this which are addressed in Scripture. We dare not discount the knowledge gained from their studies. Furthermore, philosophy also discovers truth by studying God's general revelation. After centuries of exploration, philosophers have also gained much knowledge about what we are and how we flourish. Their knowledge must not be discarded either.

Therefore, since "all truth is God's truth,"²⁴ I wish to find the middle way between the two extremes of fully embracing or fully rejecting contemporary understandings of neuroscience. Our study must certainly consider what we know from neuroscience, but it must also include what we know from theology and philosophy. Only as we integrate *all* we know about what we are from these three domains of knowledge will we be able to develop a true and full understanding of what we are and how we flourish.

I am also seeking a middle way in a second sense. On one hand, this topic is of great importance, and so I hope my discussion is not so superficial as to be of no help in discerning the truth of the matter. I am haunted by words that were spoken at Dallas Willard's memorial service: "[Dallas] had two main concerns. The first concern was that the spiritual formation movement be established on more intellectually rigorous philosophical and theological underpinnings."²⁵ I want, insofar as I am able, to contribute to the depth of understanding Willard had and others continue

23. The limits of science will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7.

24. This phrase is a common summary of Augustine's argument, "Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master." *On Christian Doctrine*, II.18, available online at https://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.xix_1.html, accessed July 21, 2023.

25. These comments were made at Willard's memorial service by his long-time friend and protégé Dr. J. P. Moreland. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzSEeIUoksU&ab_channel=DallasWillardMinistries (from 4:00 to 4:36), accessed November 12, 2023.

to develop, which is so necessary to develop an increasingly robust understanding of spiritual formation and, more broadly, human flourishing.

Yet on the other hand, the fields of theology and philosophy have developed very technical terminology over millennia of discussing this issue. And more recently, as neuroscience has become its own field of study, it too has developed a rich vocabulary. As much as possible, I will avoid these technical terms and nuances so as to make the discussion accessible to the non-specialist. When such terms are important, I'll offer a definition the first time they are used, and I will include these terms in the glossary. For those who want to go deeper, at various points I'll provide footnotes with additional terms, issues, nuances, and suggested books that may be helpful for further study, as well as a list of useful sources in the Appendix.

MAPPING THE JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING

Chapter 1 begins this exploration with a brief summary of recent discoveries in neuroscience that Thompson and Wilder use as their foundation. As my point is not to challenge the findings of neuroscience (in fact, I applaud these scientific advances), the majority of chapter 1 then outlines the contours of neurotheology, due to their interpretation of the scientific data of neuroscience. My focus is on the neurotheologians' understanding of us as ultimately physical beings, which becomes the foundation of everything else they promote. As is true of anything we build, neurotheology either stands or falls on the basis of this foundation.

Chapter 2 surveys what the Bible has to say about what we are. Indeed, both the Old and New Testaments offer a lot of information on this topic. The Bible portrays us as everlasting souls that are deeply united with our bodies. This results in a deep functional unity of the two. Though we will be separated from our bodies at death, our body and soul will be reunited at the final resurrection and we will then live as embodied persons forevermore. This understanding is then shown to be consistent with the interpretation of Scripture on this topic throughout the centuries.

Chapter 3 considers why the understanding of what we are offered by neurotheologians differs so drastically from the picture that emerges from Scripture. The neurotheologian's error is traced to their fundamental assumption that when a neural event and a mental event

occur together, the two must be identical. This assumption is evaluated and shown to be unfounded, based on three counter-examples: our first-person subjectivity, our free will, and our reason. Finally, an alternative form of physicalism, which Thompson and Wilder may embrace, is identified. After evaluation this alternative form of physicalism it is found to be of no more help in defending the anthropology of neurotheologians.

Chapter 4 shows how the wrong assumption discussed in chapter 3 leads neurotheologians to the erroneous conclusion that we are fundamentally a physical thing—ultimately a brain. This understanding of our fundamental nature is shown to be inconsistent with two features of ourselves that we know to be true: our unity at a time and our unity through time. Finally, based on the neurotheologian's wrong conclusion of what we are, I show how this leads to their inaccurate application to questions of human flourishing.

Chapter 5 explores in more detail the true nature of the soul, drawing on what we can know from philosophy. An answer emerges that echoes the biblical text: we are an individuated human nature, or a “spiritual substance.” Philosophical insights also help us make connections to what we learn from neuroscience and theology, as discussed in chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 6 discusses how the soul relates to the body and outlines how this view is consistent with what we know from theology, philosophy, and neuroscience. The various terms used for this view are discussed, including my preferred title, “holistic dualism.”²⁶

Chapter 7 considers three defenses neurotheologians may offer in support of their view in response to my criticisms, as outlined in chapters 2 through 6: (1) science must be our guide, (2) Dallas Willard endorses neurotheology, and (3) neurotheology helps many people. After finding these three defenses inadequate, I conclude that although there is certainly some truth in what neurotheologians say, and although they have helped many people in spite of (*not* because of) their neurotheology, ultimately their understanding of what we are, and its implications, are quite harmful.

Chapter 8 evaluates three arguments neurotheologians may offer against holistic dualism: (1) neurotheology offers the simpler answer to the question of what we are, (2) souls and bodies are so different they cannot interact, and (3) holistic dualism seems pantheistic in promoting

26. Here and elsewhere when the term “dualism” is used, it refers to *anthropological* dualism: views that understand the human person as having a body and a soul. This is not to be confused with the many other ways the term is used in other contexts.

the idea that animals also have souls. These three arguments are evaluated and also found to be inadequate.

Chapter 9 moves to application, discussing how we can best love God in light of what we have learned. I consider how what we know about the soul and its relation to the body helps us develop a better understanding of the nature and process of spiritual formation in relation to our soul's capacities, faculties, and teleology (its natural end or goal).

Chapter 10 applies what we have learned about the soul and body to loving others in two contexts. First, I discuss how holistic dualism helps us love others as Christ's ambassadors as we seek to share the gospel and promote the common good. This is illustrated both in relation to biomedical ethics (using abortion as a case study) and social ethics (using the idea of "justice for all" as a case study). Second, I apply this understanding of what we are to how we can best love others through our professions, using eight occupations as examples: education, medicine, business, architecture, law and politics, science, computer science, and vocational ministry.

Finally, in a brief conclusion I suggest how we should think and speak of our human nature so as to value the findings of neuroscience but not reduce us to fundamentally a brain. I end with an invitation to use the approach offered in this book as a model for other areas in which we must integrate all we know to answer the important questions of our day.

If you are especially interested in the ideas of neurotheologians such as Thompson and Wilder, as well as critiques of what they are endorsing, chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8 will likely be of greatest interest to you. If you most want to understand what we are and how we flourish, you will find chapters 2, 5, 6, 9 and 10 more helpful.

May God give us, in the words of the illustrious German astronomer Johannes Kepler, the ability to "think God's thoughts after him" as we explore more fully what we are and how we can "put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Col 3:10). This is one of the most important journeys we can take, and it will have far-reaching benefits!