This book explores the implications of recent insights in modern neuroscience for the church’s view of spiritual formation. Science suggests that functions of the brain and body in collaboration with social experience, rather than a disembodied soul, provide the physical basis for the mental capacities, interpersonal relations, and religious experiences of human beings. The realization that human beings are wholly physical, but with unique mental, relational, and spiritual capacities, challenges traditional views of Christian life as defined by the care of souls, a view that leads to inwardness and individuality. Psychology and neuroscience suggest the importance of developmental openness, attachment, imitation, and stories as tools in spiritual formation. Accordingly, the idea that care of embodied persons should be fundamentally social and communal sets new priorities for encouraging spiritual growth and building congregations.

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The Physical Nature of Christian Life

*Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church*

WARREN S. BROWN
BRAD D. STRAWN
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Acknowledgments

Books, and ideas that go into books, do not occur in a vacuum and are seldom completely novel. Books emerge from the interplay of the ideas of the authors interacting with those in other books and in the minds of other persons. What the reader will find in The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church emanates from more than a decade of thinking, reading, and talking with other thinkers about the nature of persons and the life of the church. The roots of this work can also be found in articles and book projects that we have been involved in – separately and together – that explored the implications of new scholarship in neuroscience, social science, and Biblical studies. Thus, our book has a conceptual history that we wish to acknowledge.

One of the origins of this project was Warren’s sabbatical year (1986) spent with Donald MacKay in the Department of Communication and Neuroscience at Keele University, UK. MacKay was an early participant in conversations about the relationship between neuroscience and Christian faith. This experience helped push Warren out of a comfortable nest formed by what MacKay called “conceptual apartheid,” in which science (neuropsychology, in this case) and Christian faith are not allowed to intermingle. MacKay was also a proponent of an embodied view of human nature. Through MacKay, Warren also met Malcolm Jeeves, who was then head of the Department of Psychology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Within the context of a friendship of more than twenty years, Warren and Malcolm collaborated on both scientific papers and science and theology books (most recently Jeeves and Brown, Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion: Illusions, Delusions, and Realities about Human Nature, Templeton Press, 2009). Thus, both
Donald MacKay and Malcolm Jeeves have had a significant influence on our thinking about the embodied and embedded nature of humankind.

A pivotal event in the journey toward this book was Warren joining philosopher and Fuller Seminary professor Nancey Murphy, Malcolm Jeeves, and other scholars in an edited volume entitled Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature (Fortress Press, 1998). Warren’s chapter in that book was his first foray into writing about cognitive neuropsychology in the context of a theological and philosophical view of persons as bodies, not bodies inhabited by souls. That book project also brought into the conversation New Testament scholar Joel Green (now also at Fuller), who has influenced our perspectives regarding what the Bible has to say about human nature.

Warren and Nancey Murphy extended this earlier project into another book in which they developed a case for human freedom and moral responsibility within the context of this embodied view of personhood. They aimed to defend free will against the assertion that, because we are physical creatures, it must be the case that our behavior and choices are determined by physical laws (Murphy and Brown, Did My Neurons Make Me Do It? Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will, Oxford University Press, 2007). In the context of these projects, Nancey played a significant role in clarifying for us the philosophical context surrounding ideas of human embodiment and the physical basis of mind. In addition, it was during this coauthored book project that Nancey and Warren discovered Alicia Juarrero’s important book in philosophy of mind, Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behavior as a Complex System (MIT Press, 1999), in which she used the theory of complex dynamical systems (described later in this book) to account for how mind can originate from the processes of the human brain and to suggest important tools for defending the reality of human choice.

Brad and Warren first began collaborating on questions of human nature, psychology, and the church as doctoral student (Brad) and mentor (Warren) in the School of Psychology at Fuller Seminary (while also being members of the same extended family). Besides being mentored by Warren, Brad was also formed as a psychologist through relationships with other Fuller professors, most particularly Winston
Gooden and Hendrika VandeKemp, as well as a core group of his classmates at Fuller. The influence of the late Randall Sorenson was also significant for Brad, as Randy pushed him to pursue analytic training and to develop his thinking about the integration of psychology and Christian faith.


Because this is a book about the church (as well as about human nature), Brad and Warren have been influenced by their experiences of life in their churches. For the past seven years, Warren has been involved in planting a new church (Mountainside Communion, Monrovia, CA). This process has included many hours over breakfast or coffee with his pastor, Joshua Robert Smith, talking about the nature of Christian life and the church. In addition to the valuable perspective offered in these conversations, Josh has read and given valuable feedback on early drafts of some of the chapters of this book, providing a more grounded and less idealistic perspective. Also, a number of intelligent and thoughtful members of Warren’s congregation read through this book with him and
provided important feedback: Eric Bridges, Beth Reisler, Justin Little, Rebecca Pratt, Daniel Lundgren, Brittany Michado, Armen Rashidyan, and Michael Mierzejewski, with occasional help from a few others. In addition, Sonia Luginbuhl graciously allowed us to re-narrate the story she told at a Mountainside worship committee meeting (in Chapter 8). Fly fishing and backpacking are a stimulating part of Warren’s life, partly because of the really smart and insightful people he goes fishing with. In the context of these trips, perspectives that have influenced this book have come from Dennis Vogt, Kevin Reimer, Rick Miller, and Warren Brown III (Ren).

Brad has been involved in and nourished by Oklahoma City First Church of the Nazarene. This church clearly exhibits the meaning of embodied Christian life, including caring for whole persons and loving your neighbor as yourself. Brad and his pastor/soul-friend, Jon Middendorf, have also engaged in frequent conversations around the church and “life together.” These conversations have provided valuable perspectives for this book. Chris Yates, Brad’s friend and church book club leader, gave valuable feedback on an early draft of the manuscript.

A significant contribution to Warren’s perspective on Christian life and the church is offered continually by his wife, Janet. However, Janet’s most important contribution to the quality of this book was editing every page for correct punctuation, awkward wording, and incomprehensible sentences. We are deeply indebted to her for this incredibly important contribution. We also thank Brad’s wife Suzanne for patiently and skeptically listening to, and reflecting on, these “heretical” ideas over the years.

For the sake of the extended family that we share – most particularly Linda, Loren, Suzanne, Evan, Keaton, Janet, Ren, Jenny, Natalie, Caden, Charise, Josh, and Leah – we both pray we will somehow get it right as embodied Christian persons who are deeply embedded in the lives of our family and our church communities.