Dust and Breath: Faith, Health and Why the Church Should Care about Both
Kendra G. Hotz and Matthew T. Mathews
128 pages, paperback, $14.00

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Dust and Breath encourages churches to take up the cause of meeting healthcare needs in their community for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Utilizing patient care stories from the 25-year history of Memphis, Tennessee’s Church Health Center, theologians Kendra Hotz and Matt Mathews illustrate biblical truth and apply it to the healthcare crisis of our day. Much like Raymond J. Bakke in A Theology as Big as the City (1997) and Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert in When Helping Hurts (2012), Hotz and Mathews lay the biblical and theological foundations for why we must care about what is happening in our cities and communities, especially the health disparities found there. With real-world patient experiences lifted from the journal of the Center’s founder Scott Moats, MD, they show how present realities can be viewed in light of what we are taught in scripture.

The creator God made our bodies from the dust of the earth and breathed into us life, and it is in Him that we live and breathe and have our being (Acts 17:28). We are body and soul together, whole persons who have been given agency by God to make choices and shape the direction of our lives. A good God created our personhood and intended for us companionship, a healthy environment, meaningful work, and the enjoyment of Sabbath. We were created as finite beings where life has a beginning and an end. When sin entered the world, everything changed.

Dust and Breath reminds us that disease is the result of sin and that health is far more than the absence of disease. Pain and suffering are real, and we are free to lament them, but God has not left us to walk through this fallen world alone. The storyline of the Bible teaches us to trust that God’s goodness will ultimately prevail and that we can find peace in the midst of every valley.
Hotz and Mathews offer a particularly helpful warning against self-righteousness when thinking about the relationship between sin and health. Sinful behaviors can lead to health problems, but disease is a manifestation of the brokenness that is part of the human condition affecting us all. We “judge not” in the church nor in the clinic. The hearts of all men and women are prone to wander, and the consequences of sin impact not just health but also families, work and witness.

At the heart of Dust and Breath is the profound message that poverty is also a result of sin. We live in a time of crisis. A history of racially-biased social and institutional structures has led to educational, economic, and health disparities; in the case of Memphis these disparities are primarily among African Americans. Access and resources are strong social determinates of health. Poverty works in multiple and interlocking ways to compromise health and leave its victims vulnerable to disease.

The story of Church Health Center is one physician’s call to do something about it. Serving as both associate pastor of an urban church and director of the Church Health Center located across the street, Dr. Scott Moats has given his life and career to treating disease and caring deeply about the whole person in his care. And he has been joined by hundreds of volunteers, Christians who have undone the reductionist models that have the church attending to souls, but not bodies and healthcare to bodies, but not souls. With a commitment to personhood, Church Health Center’s theme is “discover wholeness in body and spirit.”

The Church Health model is comprehensive, going beyond disease treatment to create environmental, nutritional and educational structures that foster health. Further, the model fosters community, sometimes referred to as social capital or collective efficacy, a model rightly reflecting what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the beloved community.” Most significantly, the Church Health model is replicable in a nation searching for workable solutions to its healthcare crisis. The early church continued to bear the good news of Jesus AND heal the sick, support widows and orphans, and renew communities of faith.
Church Health Center is a reminder that the model of the early church is replicable, too.

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