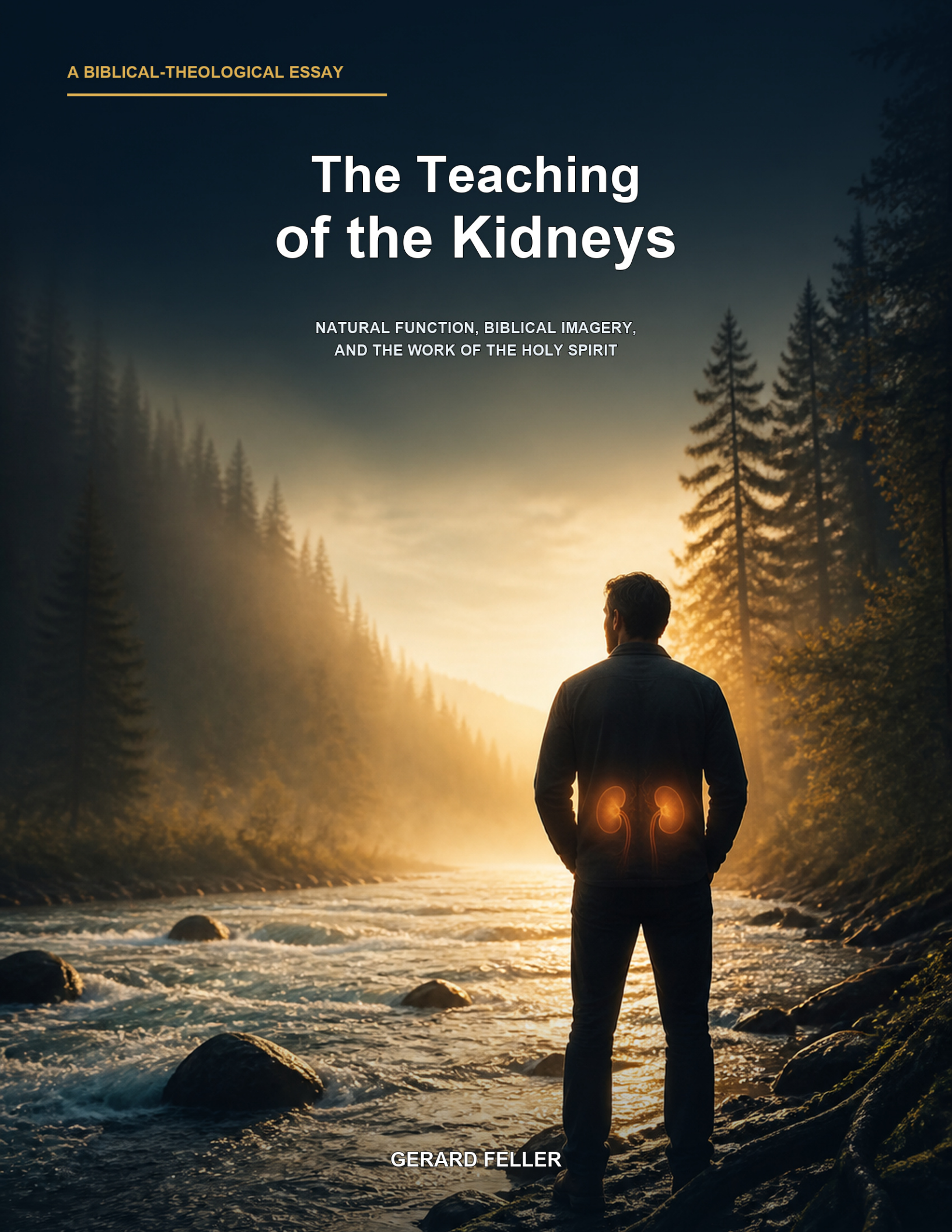


A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL ESSAY

The Teaching of the Kidneys

NATURAL FUNCTION, BIBLICAL IMAGERY,
AND THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

GERARD FELLER



The Teaching of the Kidneys

Natural Function, Biblical Imagery, and the Work of the Holy Spirit

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The Teaching of the Kidneys

Creation, the inner life, and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit

The kidneys are among the quiet organs of the body. They do not announce their work, yet minute by minute they maintain the internal environment in which nerves, muscles, heart, and brain can function. They remove waste, preserve what the body needs, regulate water, salts, and acidity, help control blood pressure, stimulate red blood cell production, and activate vitamin D. This combination of cleansing, discernment, preservation, and restoration makes the kidney a rich starting point for spiritual reflection.

Scripture itself also uses the kidneys as language for the hidden inner person. The Hebrew *kilyah* and the Greek *nephros* first mean the physical organ, but can figuratively refer to the deepest feelings, moral motives, and inward reflections. When God searches “heart and kidneys,” He examines the whole inner person. This essay brings the natural and spiritual meanings together without confusing them. The kidney is not the anatomical location of the conscience, and its physiology is not independent proof of a doctrine. The analogy is a comparison: it helps us see, wonder, and obey.

The central conviction is that creation proclaims God’s wisdom and that the Holy Spirit teaches believers to receive that wisdom in the light of Christ. The same Spirit who gives life, convicts, sanctifies, and guides teaches us to discern what must be released and what must be preserved.

CENTRAL THOUGHT: As the kidney guards the body’s internal environment, so the Holy Spirit forms the inner life by allowing truth to penetrate, bringing sin to light, and strengthening what is good. The comparison is illustrative; the Spirit is a divine Person, never a biological process.

1. The Natural Meaning: Guardians of the Internal Environment

Structure: small in size, vast in organization

The two kidneys lie toward the back of the upper abdomen, on either side of the spine. Each kidney consists of cortex, medulla, calyces, and renal pelvis. Blood enters through the renal artery and leaves through the renal vein. Urine travels through the ureter to the bladder. According to the U.S. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, each kidney contains about one million nephrons: microscopic working units in which filtration, reabsorption, and secretion take place.[1]

A nephron begins with a glomerulus, a tuft of capillaries surrounded by Bowman’s capsule. Water and small dissolved substances are forced out of the blood; blood cells and most large proteins normally remain in the circulation. The filtrate then passes through an intricate tubular system. There the body

deliberately reclaims water, glucose, amino acids, and electrolytes, while other substances are added to the filtrate. In the end, only a relatively small quantity of urine remains.

The original document mentions approximately 1,500 liters of blood passing through the kidneys each day. Modern patient information usually expresses the achievement differently: healthy kidneys produce about 150 liters of filtrate daily, most of which is recovered; only about one to two liters leave the body as urine.[1] Distinguishing renal blood flow from the volume of filtrate prevents confusion. The main point remains remarkable: an enormous internal flow is continuously processed to produce a small and precisely composed excretion.

Five interconnected tasks

1. Filtration and excretion

Urea, creatinine, medication breakdown products, and excess water or minerals are removed from the blood. Filtration alone, however, would be disastrous: many useful substances initially enter the filtrate as well. Selective reabsorption must therefore follow. The kidney continually distinguishes between what must be discarded and what must be retained.

2. Balancing water and electrolytes

Sodium, potassium, calcium, phosphate, and other substances must remain within narrow limits. Too much or too little can disrupt nerve conduction, muscle function, and heart rhythm. The kidney responds to hormones and to the composition of the blood and filtrate. It is not a simple sieve, but a dynamic regulatory organ.

3. Guarding acid-base balance

Metabolism produces acids. The kidneys excrete hydrogen ions and retain or produce bicarbonate. Together with the lungs and buffering systems, they help maintain a stable pH. Homeostasis is not stillness, but continuously corrected balance.

4. Helping regulate blood pressure and volume

Through the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system, the kidneys influence vascular tone, salt retention, and fluid volume. This system can be lifesaving when circulating volume is low, but when dysregulated it may contribute to high blood pressure.[2]

5. Supporting blood formation and bone health

The kidneys produce erythropoietin, which stimulates the bone marrow to form red blood cells. They also convert vitamin D into its active form, calcitriol, which is important for calcium and phosphate

balance and therefore for healthy bones.[2] Kidney disease reveals how closely these tasks are linked: anemia, mineral disorders, fluid retention, and acidosis may occur together.

The kidney guards the internal environment

Five natural functions within one integrated organ

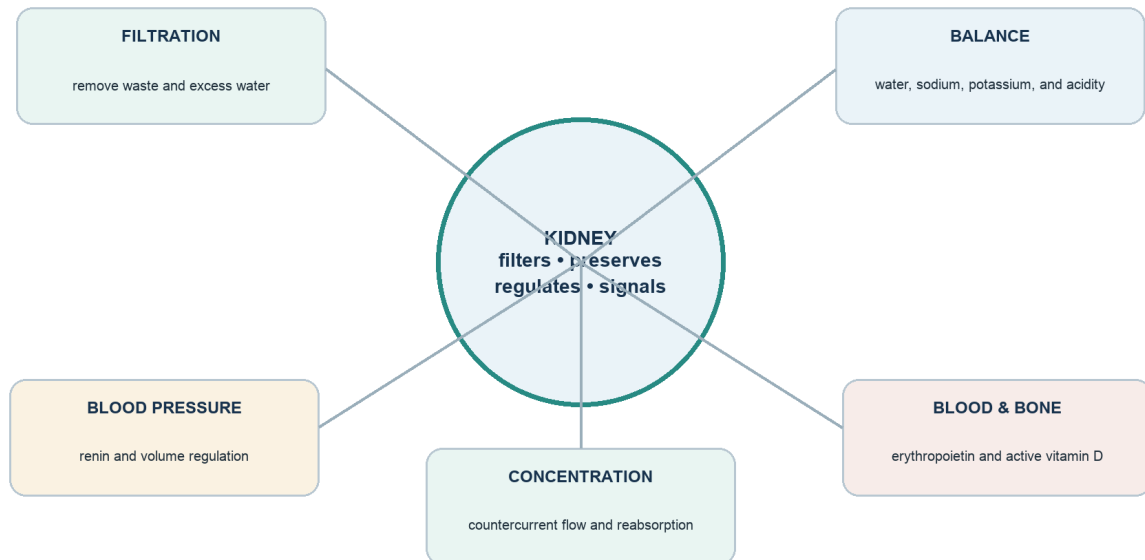


Figure 1 - Five interconnected natural functions of the kidney.

Countercurrent flow and concentration

In the loop of Henle, fluid streams travel in opposite directions. Differences in permeability and active salt transport create a concentration gradient in the renal medulla. The collecting duct can, partly under the influence of antidiuretic hormone, reclaim more or less water. This countercurrent mechanism makes concentrated urine and water conservation possible.

This must be stated carefully. The entire process is not passive: active transport requires energy, especially in parts of the renal tubule. Other movements follow diffusion and osmosis. The cooperation of active and passive processes demonstrates the organ's subtle ordering.

Creative power and dependence

The kidney is not an isolated machine but a junction within a body. It receives signals from hormones, the nervous system, and the circulation, and in turn influences heart, vessels, bones, and blood. Psalm 139 celebrates that God formed the deepest parts of the human person. This confession is not an

anatomy textbook, but it invites reverence: our existence depends on a coherence we did not design and only partly understand.

In Christian theology of creation, wonder is not an appeal to gaps in knowledge. God is not involved only in what science has not yet explained. He is Creator and Sustainer of the whole, including processes that can be described with precision. Medical knowledge does not diminish wonder; it gives wonder greater detail.

2. Word Study: Kidneys in Hebrew and Greek

Hebrew: כְּלִיָּה (*kilyah*) and כְּלָיוֹת (*kelayot*)

The Hebrew noun כְּלִיָּה (*kilyah*, Strong H3629) means “kidney.” In the Hebrew Bible it is almost always found in the plural: כְּלָיוֹת (*kelayot*), “kidneys.” The concordance counts 31 word occurrences; because one verse may contain the word more than once, the number of individual verses is lower.[3]

Brown-Driver-Briggs distinguishes three principal lines of meaning.[4]

1. Literal: the kidneys of sacrificial animals, together with the surrounding fat.
2. Poetic and bodily: the kidneys as deep, vital parts that can be formed, long, or be pierced.
3. Figurative: the hidden interior of the person, including feelings, desires, conscience, and moral motives.

It is too simple to equate *kilyah* with one modern psychological category in every passage. “Conscience,” “emotion,” “inward thoughts,” and “deepest being” may all be appropriate, depending on the context. The combination with “heart” often forms a comprehensive expression for the whole inner person. Nor does the biblical “heart” refer only to emotion; it can think, will, and decide. “Heart and kidneys” therefore does not divide reason and emotion into two organs. It is intensified language: God knows both what is visible and what is concealed.

Greek: νεφρός (*nephros*)

The Greek νεφρός (*nephros*, Strong G3510) literally means “kidney.” In the New Testament it occurs only in Revelation 2:23, in the plural accusative form νεφρούς (*nephrous*): Christ searches “kidneys and hearts.”[5] The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, used *nephroi* for Hebrew *kelayot*. The expression in Revelation therefore carries the Old Testament word field with it.

Many modern translations render Revelation 2:23 as “minds and hearts,” “thoughts and hearts,” or “heart and inner being.” Such renderings make the intended meaning accessible, but conceal the bodily

metaphor. A word study restores that layer: the exalted Christ sees the most hidden motives and judges works in truth.

From organ to metaphor

Scripture uses "kidneys" on three distinct levels



"Heart and kidneys" does not name two modern brain functions, but the whole inner person before God.

Figure 2 - Three uses of "kidneys" in Scripture.

3. Commentary on the Biblical Passages

A. Sacrificial texts: what is hidden and precious belongs to God

Exodus 29:13 and 29:22; Leviticus 3:4, 10, and 15; 4:9; 7:4; 8:16 and 25; 9:10 and 19. In the instructions for peace offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, and priestly ordination, the two kidneys and their surrounding fat are set apart and placed on the altar. The primary meaning is ritual and physical. The text does not explicitly state that the kidneys symbolize “the conscience.” Yet the offering teaches that the precious and hidden part is not retained for human possession but consecrated to God.

Deuteronomy 32:14. The expression “kidney-fat of wheat” is Hebrew imagery for the richest and finest grain. The kidney region and its fat become proverbial language for supreme quality. The verse does not support a physiological theory, but it does demonstrate how a concrete organ can become an image of excellence.

Isaiah 34:6. In the oracle of judgment against Edom, Isaiah uses sacrificial and slaughter imagery, including the fat of rams’ kidneys. The language is intentionally shocking and concerns divine judgment. It must not be separated from its prophetic genre or turned into a general doctrine about organs.

B. Poetic texts: wounded in the deepest existence

Job 16:13. Job says that God’s arrows split his kidneys. He is not giving a clinical description but expressing total inward devastation. Bodily language conveys what abstract terms cannot bear: suffering that strikes the center of his person.

Job 19:27. Job’s kidneys “fail” or “yearn” within him as he longs to see God. Interpretation varies between physical exhaustion and intense desire. Both fit the unity of body and inner life in Hebrew poetry: hope and pain are not disembodied.

Lamentations 3:13. The poet laments that arrows penetrate his kidneys. As in Job 16:13, the image denotes pain reaching the hidden center. The context permits honest lament; faith need not deny suffering in order to seek God.

Psalms 139:13. “You formed my kidneys” literally says that God created the deepest bodily parts; many translations use “inmost being.” In the context of God’s comprehensive knowledge, bodily formation and being personally known belong together. The verse confesses God’s creative nearness before birth.

C. Instructed, delighted, and embittered within

Psalms 16:7. The poet praises the LORD who gives counsel; at night his kidneys instruct him. The NET Bible notes that the kidneys here represent the moral inner self.[6] Nocturnal quiet becomes the place

where received counsel penetrates deeply. Christians may connect this with the Holy Spirit bringing the Word to remembrance and renewing the mind, although the psalm itself first speaks of the LORD's counsel being inwardly processed.

Psalms 73:21. When Asaph becomes bitter, his kidneys are “pierced” or “pricked.” The image portrays wounded, embittered feelings that distort perception. The turning point comes when he enters God's sanctuary and his perspective is restored. Spiritual discernment does not deny emotion; it brings emotion before God to be reordered.

Proverbs 23:16. A father's kidneys rejoice when his son's lips speak what is right. Inward joy responds to truthful words. Wisdom does not remain external; it reaches the deepest affection.

D. God searches heart and kidneys

Psalms 7:9-10. God tests hearts and kidneys and brings the evil of the wicked to an end. The examination serves justice. God's knowledge is not detached curiosity but morally pure judgment.

Psalms 26:2. David prays, “Test me; examine my kidneys and my heart.” This is courageous surrender, not a claim of sinlessness. He asks God to inspect hidden motives. From a Christian perspective, this resonates with the Spirit's work of conviction, bringing sin to light and leading into truth.

Jeremiah 11:20; 17:10; 20:12. In these passages the LORD is the righteous Judge who tests kidneys and heart. Jeremiah entrusts his cause to God because human judgment cannot fully know hidden reality. Jeremiah 17 directly connects the deceitful heart with God's ability truly to search and to give each person according to his ways. Grace does not abolish God's truth; it brings the person honestly before Him.

Jeremiah 12:2-3. The wicked have God in their mouths, but He is far from their kidneys. In contrast, Jeremiah says that God knows him, sees him, and tests his heart. Spoken confession can therefore be separated from deepest desire. The passage calls for integrity, although Jeremiah's severe judgment on his opponents must be read within his prophetic distress and not as permission for personal vengeance.

Revelation 2:23. Christ tells the church in Thyatira that all the churches will know that He searches kidneys and hearts and gives to each according to his works. The wording echoes Jeremiah and other Old Testament texts.[7] The context concerns deception, sexual immorality, idolatry, and refused repentance. Christ judges not only outward religious appearance but the motives beneath it. Yet the preceding verse speaks of time given for repentance: examination and judgment are not detached from His call to turn back.

A careful spiritual analogy

Natural function raises a question; Scripture and the Spirit give direction

FILTRATION	What must be released?	The Spirit convicts concerning sin and truth.
REABSORPTION	What is good and must be preserved?	Test everything; hold fast to what is good.
BALANCE	What has become distorted?	The fruit of the Spirit forms wholeness.
COUNTERCURRENT	How do we remain faithful under pressure?	The Spirit forms perseverance and hope.
NEW CAPACITY	What does God desire to grow?	The Spirit gives life and empowers service.
Boundary: the Holy Spirit is a divine Person, not a biological mechanism.		

Figure 3 - Kidney functions as a bounded analogy for spiritual formation.

4. Analogical Connections: From Kidney Function to Spiritual Reflection

Filtration and discernment

The kidney allows much to pass through the glomerulus, then determines within the tubules what must be reclaimed and what must be excreted. Spiritual maturity likewise requires more than receiving much information; it requires discernment. Paul prays that love may abound in knowledge and depth of insight so that believers can discern what matters (Philippians 1:9-10). The Holy Spirit glorifies Christ, leads into truth, and forms the mind through the Word.

The analogy has limits. The Spirit does not work blindly or automatically like a membrane. He is Lord and Giver of life; He speaks, convicts, comforts, and guides. The human person is not disabled in the process. “Work out your salvation,” Paul writes, “for it is God who works in you both to will and to work” (Philippians 2:12-13). Divine action and human obedience are not competitors.

Reabsorption and preservation

Not everything filtered is waste. Glucose, water, and necessary ions are largely reclaimed. Spiritual discernment is therefore not suspicious rejection of everything. Believers are called to test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22). Significantly, the passage begins, “Do not quench the Spirit.” Where the Spirit is welcomed, the result is not gullibility but holy testing.

Excretion and confession

Waste that is not removed harms the body. Sin that is concealed hardens the inner person. Confession, however, is more than spiritual waste disposal: it is a response to God’s light and rests on Christ’s atonement. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin and directs the eye toward Christ. What is relinquished is not cast into a moral vacuum; forgiveness and renewal take the place of guilt and bondage.

Acid-base balance and spiritual truth

The body tolerates only a narrow pH range. A community can likewise become spiritually distorted through one-sidedness: truth without love becomes harsh, love without truth sentimental, activity without prayer empty, and receptivity without testing vulnerable. The analogy does not suggest a mathematical midpoint between good and evil. It reminds us that biblical virtues grow together through the fruit of the Spirit.

Countercurrent flow and perseverance

Opposing flows within the kidney make concentration possible. In faith, resistance can likewise become a place of deepening. Suffering is never automatically sanctifying, and evil does not become good merely because God can use it. Yet in trial the Spirit can form endurance, proven character, and hope (Romans 5:3-5). He does not always remove life from the countercurrent, but preserves life within it.

Erythropoietin and new capacity

Through erythropoietin, the kidney supports the production of oxygen-carrying red blood cells. Analogically, this reminds us that spiritual renewal not only removes something but grants new capacity. The Spirit gives life, distributes gifts, and empowers witness and service. Sanctification is not merely less sin; it is more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Vitamin D, bone, and steadfastness

By activating vitamin D, the kidneys contribute to mineral balance and bone health. As an analogy, this points to spiritual stability: truth must not only be heard but “activated” and embodied. The Holy Spirit joins knowledge of Christ with obedience, fellowship, and perseverance.

5. The Distinctive Work of the Holy Spirit

The Spirit reveals Christ

The Spirit does not draw attention to Himself as an isolated spiritual phenomenon but glorifies Christ (John 16:13-14). A spiritual reading of the body must therefore be tested christologically. An analogy is fruitful when it leads to worship of the Creator, dependence on Christ, and obedience to His Word.

The Spirit searches and knows

Paul says that the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God (1 Corinthians 2:10-12). This does not mean that the Spirit must discover information; He knows because He is God. The Spirit makes believers receptive to what God freely gives. When Scripture speaks of God searching heart and kidneys, the human person stands before the living God from whom nothing is hidden.

The Spirit convicts and cleanses

John 16 connects the Spirit's work with conviction concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. Titus 3 speaks of the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Cleansing is therefore not self-improvement through introspection. It rests on God's grace and bears fruit in renewed life.

The Spirit writes God's will within

The prophets promise a new heart and a new spirit. In the new covenant God's law is not only imposed from outside but written on the heart. The language of "heart and kidneys" helps us understand the depth of this renewal: it reaches motives, desires, memories, and choices. The Spirit makes obedience personal and heartfelt.

The Spirit preserves the community

A kidney never functions for itself; it serves the whole body. In the same way, gifts and spiritual insight are intended for the building up of Christ's body. Personal "inner guidance" must therefore be tested by Scripture, the character of Christ, wise community, and the fruit it produces. The Spirit of truth is also the Spirit of love and unity.

6. Pastoral and Ethical Applications

Reverence without medical simplification

Anyone speaking about creation must deal carefully with people who have kidney disease. Failing kidneys are not an image of failing faith, and illness is not a reliable measure of hidden sin. Jesus resists simplistic links between personal suffering and individual guilt. Good pastoral care prays, listens, supports treatment, and avoids spiritual accusation.

Organ donation and love of neighbor

Because a person can live with one healthy kidney, living donation is sometimes possible. Organ donation requires free, informed consent and careful medical evaluation. Christians may understand it as an extraordinary expression of love for one's neighbor, never as a moral demand. The body is God's gift; both donor and recipient therefore deserve protection and respect.

An exercise for personal prayer

The biblical language of heart and kidneys invites honest prayer:

4. **Search me.** Which motives do I hide from others and from myself?
5. **Teach me.** Which truth from God's Word must penetrate more deeply?
6. **Cleanse me.** What must I confess and release?
7. **Preserve what is good.** Which gift, relationship, or act of obedience needs protection?
8. **Restore balance.** Where have truth and love, rest and effort, receiving and giving become separated?
9. **Fill me with Your Spirit.** Which fruit of Christ do You desire to make visible?

Conclusion

The natural kidney is a masterpiece of coherence: it filters without discarding everything, preserves without holding everything, responds to change, and serves the life of the entire body. The biblical kidney is also language for the hidden person: the realm of deep desire, pain, joy, conscience, and motive. In the sacrifices the kidneys are consecrated to God; in the Psalms they instruct and rejoice; in Job and Lamentations they are struck by suffering; in Jeremiah and Revelation they are searched by God.

The strongest analogy is therefore not that the Holy Spirit “works like a kidney.” The strongest analogy is that God knows and renews the inner person with a wisdom surpassing our self-knowledge. The Spirit brings God’s Word to the heart, convicts of sin, preserves what is good, reshapes desire, and makes Christ visible. Creation awakens wonder; Scripture gives direction; the Spirit gives life.

Whoever receives the teaching of the kidneys learns to pray with open hands: Creator, You formed my inmost being. Search me. Cleanse what is impure, preserve what comes from You, and teach me by Your Spirit to live for the glory of Christ.

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