**Preface: In Which I Clear My Throat**

This is not the book I always wanted to write. It is, in an important sense, nothing like it.

Unlike most books, this is not an exposition of a topic by an expert in the field. I am neither scientist nor theologian, sociologist or philosopher, psychologist or literary expert. I am an amateur thinker who has belligerently refused to be held captive to one discipline, and whose training reflects those diversity of interests. The book has a method for which I will not apologize, even though the reader may disagree: my thoughts have been shaped by Shakespeare as much as Scripture, because it turns out they both point—albeit in different ways and with different levels of authority—at the same unified, coherent reality. If I do not quote the Bible enough for my reader’s liking, I do not apologize. Sometimes, it is just as good to be Biblical as it is to quote the Bible directly.

If it is rare to read a book by someone who is unashamed by his lack of professional credentials, it is only because such books are rarely written. Brian McLaren, the emergent church thinker who replaced his regrettably obscure theology with an even more regrettably clear liberalism, has sometimes turned his lack of a theological education into a virtue. It is almost the strongest argument I know against the existence of this book. This book may prove him wrong yet.

But at the risk of frustrating my more conservative readers, allow me to point out one commonality with McLaren: our lack of professional theological training requires that the emphasis be restored to their proper place, namely the arguments themselves. There is a temptation as a reader to sometimes give experts the benefit of the doubt. After all, they are experts, and we are not. More often than not, this is the appropriate response to people who have mastered the literature of a particular discipline. But sometimes, we fail to realize that credentials allow people to move into areas where they are no longer experts, yet we fail to notice the subtle transition and continue to treat them as such, to our own peril. In reading this book, there is no such danger. I am not an expert at anything, which means I have the freedom to say anything and the reader the responsibility to weigh everything.

Which is to say, both McLaren and I want the arguments to stand for themselves. If McLaren’s theology is wrong, he is wrong because the arguments are against him—not because he did not get advanced degrees.

This is, then, not the book I wanted to write. In a real sense, I wanted to offer the definitive guide to evangelical engagement with the body, but upon approaching the topic discovered that I was wholly incapable of such a monumental and awe-inspiring effort. *That* is the sort of book that one write’s at the end of a career, not at the beginning.

That is not to say that what you are about to read has no value. In fact, quite the opposite. My hope is that this is the sort of book that the next generation of evangelical thinkers *needs*, that it will force us to reflect a bit more deeply and carefully about an area that is woefully underdeveloped in both our theology and our practice. My point is to raise questions, to point our attention to certain unique features of Christianity in America that *may be* incommensurate with Christian theology as it is found in Scripture and expounded upon in the broader Christian tradition.

My goal is to arouse curiosity rather than satisfy, to provoke questions rather than provide definitive answers. It is still a work in progress. And not only in the sense that the manuscript is only half written as I type this (though that is true). Rather, my ideas and my reflections will doubtlessly grow. I leave the door open to reject what I have written here at any point. Let the argument stand on its merits and its fault, the latter which the critics will doubtlessly inform me of.

Through a series of personal events, I became persuaded nearly a decade ago that the body—yes, those eyes that are scanning these words and that foot that won’t quit fidgeting (what? That’s *my* foot?) and those ears that are attempting to block out the irritatingly loud barista—are ineradicably important to understanding the radical reality that is the Christian faith. It was an observation that first hit me on a particularly sunny afternoon while I was seated on the grass reading Dallas Willard’s *The Spirit of the Disciplines,* a devotional book that unpacks the role of the physical body in Paul’s theology. But it did not stop there. In some ways, every thought project I pursued from that point on touched, if only peripherally, on the question of the body and its place in Christian theology.

Jesus had one, you know. It’s fashionable to talk about being *incarnational* these days, which more often than not means having the freedom to spend time in coffee-shops chatting up the locals. (That’s not quite a spiritual discipline, of course, but it should be. I meet Jesus there. I met my wife there.) But the adverb depends upon the proper noun. There is no “incarnational” without The Incarnation, but it is easy and tempting to turn the unique reality of Jesus’s bodily life into a heuristic device designed to help us win converts. Jesus had a body and the whole world changed.

I grew up in a small church where my father was the pastor. I inherited this peculiar, maddening tradition we call “evangelicalism.” My Catholic and Orthodox friends just scoffed, of course, at my use of the “t” word (relax, folks, I didn’t capitalize it!). But tradition it is, and it has shaped me into the peculiar person that I am. I have derided its hollowness, mocked its kitchiness, and scoffed at its endless attempts to reform itself. Of the self-examination there is no end. I think I understand the vague, yet undeniable sense that evangelicalism is a rotting core, and that it lacks the resources to ever recover.

And yet.

Don’t tell me you didn’t know it was coming. We writers always set you up like that. It’s an old trick, but one of our favorites. Or maybe just one of my favorites. You’ll see it again. I promise.

But the “and yet” matters. It’s easy to tell ourselves tales of evangelicalism’s malaise, of the faith that is broken and in desperate need of repairing. We like to solve problems, and where there aren’t problems around, we create them so they can be fixed. What else would writers do? If everyone in evangelicalism buys and reads this book, I’d be rich. Which would be great. But that’s beside the point. I’d have to find another line of work, another schtick, more problems to solve. Or I’d have to become an artist, but then I’d starve. I know. I met one once.

But I can’t get past the “and yet.” Evangelicalism is a “broken faith,” and the reports you hear about young people feeling disenchanted with its hollowness are real. And yet, beneath the fragmentation and the frustration lies a real vitality that is simply in need of being pointed in the right direction. The narrative of decline is a simplification, but all simplifications are over-simplifications, and over-simplifications are a lie. I know. This book is full of them. The reality is always more complex. Always.

So allow me to make a narrow claim: I needed new life poured into my broken, empty faith, and I found that new life by looking toward the remarkable fact that the God of the universe decided to dignify the physical order by assuming a human body, dying, and rising again on the third day. Facts are as hard as iron, as immovable as an immovable object (let the reader understand). Our relationship with Jesus depends upon something more than facts, but never *less* than fact. And when we belligerently orient ourselves around the fact of the man Jesus, the reality that he loved, died for, and restored human bodies, we will open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, a power that transforms and reshapes the patterns and the habits of our human body in such a way that we can experience joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control, and love.

I suspect that there are others who, in an unsteady moment of personal reflection, might admit a sense of shallowness to their lives and faith. It is an admission that is not easy to make, as it requires just enough silence to become acquainted with the depths—or lack thereof—of one’s own soul, and in our media saturated age, it is far easier to turn to Facebook. It was a book that woke me up, a book by C.S. Lewis. I confronted depth, and the only response was to turn away or to learn to swim. I’ve always been afraid of the water.

I don’t pretend that the pages of this book are particularly deep. They aren’t, but it is my hope that they will point those who feel the shallowness of the age in the right direction, toward the true giants of our age. Or rather, the true giants of the past. We’re all dwarves now (not that there’s anything wrong with that), and we have refused to stand on history’s shoulders.

One confession is in order. Throughout, I use language about evangelicalism that is overly loose and will doubtlessly make professional sociologists and ethnographists—a word that should never show up in a book that costs less than $20—scoff. I am comfortable being scoffed at, as I try to scoff at myself as often as I can. And I try to use “scoff” as frequently as I can in my writing, because no other word quite captures the behavior. (Like ‘kerfuffle,’ it is a word that needs preserving.) Saying anything about evangelicalism at all these days seems particularly impossible, as no one can quite say precisely what an evangelical is. I have my own definitions, but I won’t bore you with them here. My friend Matthew Milliner’s is better: “anyone who perpetually defines what an evangelical is.”

But I will happily acknowledge that my reflections and generalizations on the generational differences in evangelicalism are largely constrained by my own experience, and as such they tend to focus on the white, college-educated, middle-income evangelical experience. I have read the works of the sociologists and ethnographists (you have now gotten your $12.99 worth), but did not want to replicate them. It is a particularly unsavory feature of the media’s obsession with younger evangelicals that they have not yet realized that there are anything other than white evangelicals among us. This is an inherent shortcoming, but it is not one—white, college-educated, male evangelical that I am—that I am particularly equipped at the moment to overcome. We are all God’s children, though, and perhaps others outside our narrow demographic will benefit from the work all the same.

Such are the self-conscious limitations of the work before you. It is a decidedly personal project, and so a self-consciously egotistical project. That is a different thing, I hope, from being a prideful project—though I have no doubt the deconstructionists will find much fodder for their playing on those and other fields. And to return to the beginning, the place where we started from, it is a book that must still be in progress. It is not the first word, nor the last, but it is *my* word, and I offer it with all the grace and humility and courage I can muster.

Lord, in your mercy, *hear my prayer.*

**Chapter One: Earthen Vessels**

Put the book down now, step outside, and start running.

(This is the point where I say, “I’ll wait,” but you keep on reading. Nod your head and smile. You know our writer tricks.)

Don’t mind the crazy lady who lives next door, or the kids who are playing outside. They may make fun of you, and you may not be able to outrun them. But who cares if you can’t outrun an eight year old? It would be worse if you couldn’t outrun an eighty year old. And that’s not the point anyway. We prefer to run in a gym watching weight-loss commercials that are sprinkled in-between cooking shows. *That,* my friends, is living.

So go on, go for a run. And don’t try to find some sort of spiritual justification for it. Eric Liddel felt God’s pleasure when he ran, but he was an Olympic gold medalist. We’re still chasing down the eight-year olds. Most of us don’t need to feel God’s pleasure as much as we need to sweat. God doesn’t want to have to be the cosmic justification for having any fun in the world. He gave us the world to enjoy, and sometimes the deepest delights parents have is when we are so lost in delight and wonder at their gifts that we lose sight—if only for a moment—of our surroundings.

Go for a run, then, because you have two legs. What more justification do you need? Feel the sun on your face, swing branches like their baseball bats or golf clubs, and jump in puddles. All kids like the weather, except when they discover the internet.

Not all of us have two legs, of course. Some of us are missing limbs, or other parts. Some are incapable of exploration, held captive by fears and traumas. Some bodies are marked by scars of rejection, others by scars of self-loathing. Others have been distorted by anxiety, or wrecked by stress. Still others have been stretched by a manic obsession to maintain appearances, while others have simply quit trying. We are none of us in heaven, appearances sometimes to the contrary.

This is the reality of our embodied human lives. We can run, jump, play music, and walk. We sing songs, and paint paintings, build buildings and read books. And yet are *hearts* are hardened, we are a people with *stiff-necks,* we age, we die, we suffer.

The body is a temple. The body is in ruins. The temple has been torn down and rebuilt in three days. “Do you not know,” Paul asks, “that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?” *Do you not know?* There is a persistent temptation to forget the body, to set it aside in our pursuit of the higher things.

“We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that this surpassing power is from God and not from us.” The treasure is the earthen vessels, the broken and ruined bodies which carry about the dying Jesus, that the life of Jesus may be manifested in them. The temple is sanctified by the one who dwells within, and the body is made holy when God himself reshapes it by his indwelling presence. You cannot deny the body. The temple shall be raised up in the last day.

(This is the point where you should seriously go outside and at least take a walk. You’ll be much better off for it. Promise.)

***The Kingdom and the Body***

Our age has a particularly and peculiarly neurotic relationship to the body. We craft and mold our bodies with a level of precision and care that is unparalleled in the history of the world, remaking ourselves in our own self-image. I’m a small-c conservative who loves himself some limited government and is optimistic about capitalism, so listen to this in that context: the economic boom of the second half of the twentieth century has raised the standard of living to such a point where people can get enormously wealthy simply for making mediocre looking people look like Helen of Troy.

But it drives the rest of the world insane trying to keep up. In one poor ladies’ case, she was convinced her boyfriend would leave her because he was infatuated with Kim Kardashian. Where other generations might have recommended prayer, we immediately turn to therapy. And she turned to plastic surgery, intimating that she was going to put her whole body under the knife so she could look just like the, ahem, *Kim.* (We’re on a first-name basis, you know. I’ve seen her show once, and wasn’t masochist enough to watch it again. I’ve just exhausted my knowledge of television shows on E!)

This is where self-expression, combined with an astonishing dose of technological proficiency and an extra measure of social dislocation and fragmentation, has led us. The one thing we know is that our bodies are our own, and we will do with them as we please—provided, of course, that no one else is hurt. It’s a mantra that we hear over, and over, and over again. In one open forum hosted by my church on body modification, my lovely wife grew so tired of hearing the refrain that she started pushing the logic further. If a well-adjusted person chops off their arm for aesthetic reasons, what’s wrong with that? No one had any idea.

We mold, we craft, we sculpt the body. We will build the temple, but we have no blueprint other than that which is handed to us by pop culture and Madison Avenue. Our options are to conform or self-consciously reject the project in pursuit of our own authentic individuality. The body is our personal project, our own piece of art. Our culture has no need for Picasso or Paganini. We have Paris Hilton.

Such is a world where bodies are shaped by the logic of consumerism, of competition, of celebrityism, and health. It is a world consumed by the body’s pleasures—the more the better, and as soon as we can get ‘em, thanks. And it has the freedom to be so consumed, for we have—on the whole—very little pain or discomfort. Is it any wonder why we struggle so when we are met with bodily suffering, as my wife’s uncle has been in for nearly five years? Nearly all talk about the body begins and ends with the goodness of its pleasures, with experiencing the delights of Babette’s Feast and having wild, electric sex in beds made of exotic woods, in houses with luxuries most medieval castles never knew. It is pleasure that is easy, because it is nearly all we know.

Or at least where “we” stands for people in developed nations of the world with enough money to spend on books like this one (a fact, again, I am grateful for. You’re putting food on my wife’s table, which she appreciates immensely).

But for most humans in most places in most times, the experience of the body was a much more painful, difficult one. It was marked by suffering and pain, and above all by death. The world that Jesus took a body in was precisely such a world, a world saturated not with pleasure and plenty, but with need and mortality, where the gap between the rich and the poor was wider than it is today.

At the heart of Jesus’s teaching on the body stands the Sermon on the Mount, where after he commends the life of prayer to us points out, “Is life not more than food, and is the body not more than clothing?” The double admonition happens in the context of Jesus’s repudiation of our anxiety and stress that the needs of the body will not be met. Life is more than *food.* Man does not live by bread *alone*. Our lives are *more* than food, but not *less* than food. They require a particular sort of food, food from a particular person in a particular sort of way.

And is not the body more than clothing? Jesus changes mood here from the necessary to the pleasurable, from that which is required for the body’s health to an outright affirmation of the beauty of the body. But it is a beauty that is given, a beauty that not even Solomon, the builder of the temple, could match. The lilies of the field neither toil nor spin—they simply live before God for their allotted time, and make no attempts to be roses.

The same exhortation applies to both anxieties, for both anxieties are grounded in an attempt to grasp what is not ours, to see the health and maintanence of our bodies as our own responsibility to be pursued in our own manner according to our own authority: “Seek first the Kingdom, and all these things shall be added unto you.” *All these things*. The health of the body, the beauty of the body, the glory of the body—all these things shall be added unto you. The promises of God are *yes* and *amen* to the glory of God, even those that are not met until the end of all things, the resurrection of the body. He shall rebuild the temple.

This is no repudiation of food or drink. It is a glorious affirmation of them. But in one of the *only* times Saint Paul mentions the Kingdom in his theology, he stands as a friend of Jesus, affirming the heart of the message of the gospels: “For the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.” It is righteousness, peace, and joy that establishes our eating and drinking, not the other way around. Seek *first* the Kingdom, and all these things.

The Kingdom is the sphere of the King’s authority and rule over us, and it is precisely that rule and authority which we need to submit to in order to escape the anxieties and pathologies of our contemporary age and experience embodied lives that are shaped by grace and not competition, freedom and not servitude. The reality is that Christ’s body was given for us on the cross, and given back to us on Easter Sunday. It is a reality that frees us to give our own bodies away to him, and to others, when we submit and surrender to his authority. I know of no more elegant, empathetic, or *true* way of putting the matter than the opening question of the shorter Heidelberg Catechism:

**Question:** What is thy only comfort in life and death?

**Answer:** That I **with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own,** but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

*I am not my own.* The Kingdom is not eating and drinking, but *righteousness, peace, and joy*. The body is for love, and for God, not for my own pleasure and not ultimately for my own pain. It is not my own body, but another owns it.

I can think of no principle, no idea, no *reality* that is more counter-cultural and counter-intuitive than this one. If we think anything about our bodies, it is that they are *ours* to do with as we will, provided that we do not harm anyone else. They are ours to mold, ours to give away, ours to keep, and ours to control however we want. We are masters of our domain, and our domain happens to be the bodies that have been given to us.

The reality of the Christian proclamation is that Jesus is Lord, and his Lordship extends to the very members of our physical bodies. Rather than shaping them according to the expectations of our friends, our parents, or our sports coaches, we are called to shape our bodies according to the reality of his love and his Lordship over us. *For thine is the Kingdom.*

***A Gospel-Shaped Embodied Life***

The past few years in evangelicalism have seen an explosion in chatter about the shape and extent of the gospel, the good news of the reality of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection on behalf of our sin. Of course, nearly every term in that description needs unpacking to satisfy anyone, particularly “reality,” “Jesus Christ,” “on behalf of,” “our” and “sin.” We’re teetering on the edge of plunging into deep water, but before we get there, let me offer this:

We need to see how the grace of Jesus Christ shapes our physical bodies if we are to live out the flourishing human lives that God desires for us. Which is to say, we need gospel-shaped bodies, bodies that are molded by grace.

The savvy reader might detect a hint of expansion of the gospel to include ethics, or how we live in the world, in that sentence. And they would be right. The Gospel is more than a negation, the freeing of from our sin. It is new *life,* life which is lived according to the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit who enables us to conform to the reality of who we are in Jesus Christ. As Lutheran theologian Gilbert Meilander puts it:

Certainly the church is constituted and continually reconstituted only by the word of the gospel announcing that God has vindicated Jesus as his Son. The faith that, in turn, acknowledges Jesus likewise vindicates us before God. To such faith no conditions may be added, as if something more were needed to enter the kingdom that Jesus establishes. *Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to suppose that the Scriptures exist only to bear witness to Christ, as if they were the norm for the church’s faith but not also for her life.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Many of the lay conversations about *how* Christians should live in the world too often reduce to accusations of legalism and appeals to conscience. But the rejection of the obligation to follow the law in order to earn our salvation does not mean that the salvation which was purchased doesn’t impose any obligations upon me. We are not our own, and if we are to live in the Kingdom, in response to the working of God, we live under his authority and his dominion in and through his empowering presence. As Oliver O’Donovan has put it, “the [Holy] Spirit makes the reality of redemption, distant from us in time, both *present* and *authoritative”* to us.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I’ll go one tentative step further. A Gospel that includes obligations, the life of which is *discernable,* is the only way that evangelicals can escape the empty moralism that undermines their witness in the world. Reducing ethics to conscience, to the internal experience of the Spirit, or to some other system of decision making denies the transformative power of the Gospel for our whole lives, and denies that the Gospel provides the *pattern* and the *power* for our lives. O’Donovan again: “A belief in Christian ethics is a belief that certain ethical and moral judgments belong to the gospel itself; a belief, in other words, that the church can be committed to ethics without moderating the tone of its voice as the bearer of glad tidings.”

This is the task, then, of Christian ethics—to discern the way in which the authoritative news of Christ’s redemption of the created order shapes and informs our individual and social lives. How we live in the world isn’t a *second* question to the Gospel, but a question that goes to its very heart, for the adoption we have in Christ brings us into union with Him in such a way that he becomes “our wisdom.”

What does this have to do with the body? Much. For one, it means that “conscience” is an inadequate guide for determining how *grace* shapes the body. While conscience is a real thing, and there are moments where it is necessary, it needs to be shaped and brought into alignment with the renewed created order. There is an inescapable subjectivity to conscience that is not an adequate *foundation* for Christian ethics, even if the obligations in some decisions (like one’s particular vocation) may be known only to an individual alone.

Additionally, it means that when we talk about the body we cannot let our experiences govern our understanding of it or how we live in it. The gospel is the good news of the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world which Scripture bears witness to, and if our ethics are subordinated to the gospel, then we must turn there for our ethical guidance. This doesn’t mean that we cannot, or should not, listen to our experiences. On the contrary, understanding our experiences is *critical* for discerning the ways in which the gospel needs to transform us. But that is a movement away from the text of Scripture, a secondary movement where we evaluate our own circumstances and experiences in light of the authoritative word of God.

Finally, it’s worth underlining that as O’Donovan says above, the redemption accomplished in the historical person of Jesus is made *present* and *authoritative* to us through the Holy Spirit. But because the Christ who lived, died, and rose again is our wisdom, we must base our ethical deliberations *not* on the practices of the church, like baptism, communion, and fasting, but on the Apostolic witness to those events. Which is to say, the church, its practices, and our own ethical reflection must be subordinated to Scripture, not the other way around. This is not a repudiation of practices as part of our moral formation as Christians. Rather, it simply means that they are insufficient as an objective norm, as a guide to our decision making in the world.

***The Body and Emphatic Evangelicalism***

The explosion of evangelical attention on the Gospel and its shape can’t be separated by the pervasive sense among Reformers of all types that at some point, evangelicals became captive to a view of Christian theology and spirituality that resembled Christian Smith’s “moralistic therapeutic deism” more closely than the reality of the life of Jesus Christ as presented in and through the Scriptures. What starts as a reform movement has led to an outright rejection, as “evangelical” has become so controversial that folks from Michael Horton to Michael Spencer rejected it as useful any longer.

I have no interest in weighing in on these developments, except to highlight the thoughts of a former professor of mine, Fred Sanders. In his extraordinarily important book *The Deep Things of God,* Sanders suggests that our decadent age has taken what used to be an emphatic evangelicalism and turned it into a reductionist evangelicalism. In his argument, evangelicals have historically been people who have emphasized Bible, cross, conversion, and heaven. But these can only be *emphasized* when they are not the whole of our proclamation, when they are situated against the broader backdrop of a robust Trinitarian Christian theology. For Sanders, when we lose that backdrop, our evangelicalism simply shouts those four over and over. While we may think that’s helpful, that sort of shouting leads to a reductionist account of the gospel. In Sanders’ words, ” What is needed is not a change of emphasis but a restoration of the background, of the big picture from which the emphasized elements have been selected.”

Sanders’s explanation is of the pervasive sense that evangelicalism is *shallow* is as good as any I have yet read. And that sense of shallowness is real. When Robert Webber wrote that young evangelicals were on the Canterbury trail a decade ago, he was right. And among many of evangelicals brightest college students, the trail to Canterbury has been interrupted by a detour to Rome or Constantinople. There is a pervasive longing for authenticity, for depth, for a substance that evangelicalism has frequently failed to deliver on—which is why those youth groups that, uh, *read the Bible* grow and those that play video games generally don’t.

Sanders’s solution to the problem of evangelical shallowness is one I wholeheartedly endorse: the recovery of the Trinity as the heartbeat of Christian theology and spirituality. That must always be the first movement in Christian theology, and Sanders’s book is indispensible in helping normal Christians understand how the Trinity relates to the Gospel.

But let me add one more component to the broad background of Christian theology that evangelicals need to recover in order to return to a more robust evangelicalism. In the opening of John Calvin’s magesterial *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* he points out that while the knowledge of God *precedes* the knowledge of ourselves, it cannot be had without broadening our understanding of what it means to be human. The God of the universe, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a God with *us*, *Immanuel.* He is God for himself and with himself prior to this, but he is also known to us as with *us.* Which is to say, Calvin is right: our knowledge of God is inextricable from knowing what it means that he is with *us,* from knowing *what it means to be human.*

Our faith is broken. Sanders is right that evangelical points of emphasis have become fragments that people hold onto without understanding how they are all supposed to work together. But part of recovering the coherent unity that is an evangelical theology and Christian life is rediscovering the body as an intrinsic part of what it means to be human, and as at the center of our spiritual, ecclesial, and social lives.

The body is not the center of Christian theology, nor should all of Christian theology be read through that lens. The reality of the Gospel begins before human bodies existed, in the inner life of God. Before God is “God with us” he is God in Himself. But the body should not be on the margins either, for God is the God of the gospel, and the good news of salvation is good news for human bodies as much as it is good news for human souls.

***Treasure in Earthen Vessels***

“We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” The body is a temple. The body is in ruins. The paradox of Christianity is the paradox of the Incarnation. God himself takes a body, dignifying it by his presence and demonstrating his faithfulness to his promises and his people by offering himself as a sacrifice on their behalf. In every step of the drama of redemption, God in Jesus Christ accommodates the reality of his deity to the reality of his human body, restoring the ruins by virtue of his presence as the Lord of the cosmos, the second person of the Trinity.

The fact of the Incarnation turns the universe upside-down, for the very ruins that we might wish to escape are the ruins that we must wait in hope for Jesus to restore. As a former professor told me, I should learn to like my nose, because I will never escape it. Just as our Lord surrendered himself to the reality of his Father’s will by giving up his body on our behalf, so we are exhorted to “offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices.” In one of the most important verses in the Bible, Paul writes, “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.” The same Spirit who raises Jesus from the dead offers our bodies the same power of the Resurrection here and now.

The reality of human bodies is that they are the place where God demonstrates his power and his mercy to us by raising us from the dead, and uniting us with himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The body cannot be extricated from our experience of pleasure (which I will address later on). But it also grows old, breaks down, dies, and occasionally does weird things.

But despite that, God demonstrates his faithfulness to us and offers out the promise of his power, the power to reshape bodies and the physical universe they exist within. I know of no better expression of the relationship between God and our bodies than the verse from Robert Grant’s masterful hymn, *O Worship the King:*

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| --- | --- |
| Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail, |  |
| In thee do we trust, nor find thee to fail. |  |
| Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end! |  |
| Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend. |  |

It is precisely a God who can overcome death and rearrange bodies that we need to trust. And it is precisely in the frailty and weakness of human flesh that he determined to reveal himself to us. Or as Paul closes out his thought, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the surpassing power might be from God, and not from us.”

The only one who can breathe new life into our broken faith is the one who breathes new life into dead bodies, the Spirit of the same Jesus Christ who speaks in and through his Scriptures.

***Bodies on Parade***In the rest of this book, I want to examine the role the physical body plays in our spiritual, social, and ecclesial lives by exploring the shape that our bodies should take in response to the love which God demonstrates to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Grace has a shape, and that shape is Jesus. My question is how that grace shapes our arms and legs, our skin and our organs.

I will reiterate from the preface that my goal is exploration, to raise questions and provoke the reader, and to offer suggestions about new ways of living in the body in our late modern world. The question I am pursuing is a question that cannot be answered without a careful and critical examination not of the social forces at work in our world, but of the way that those forces are at work in every local context. Ethics is universal, but the universal takes shape in and through the particular, local circumstances where we find ourselves. And only with careful scrutiny of those circumstances will we be able to finally determine the shape that the Gospel should take in our lives.

Qualifications aside, in the next chapter I’ll examine evangelicalism’s understanding of the physical body in relationship to the world around it. It is popular to dismiss most of mainstream evangelicalism as “gnostic,” or as subtly despising the body. I think the reality is somewhat more complex than that.

In chapter three, I want to examine what the body is. That might be an odd focus, given our proximity to our own bodies. It seems, on the surface, obvious what the body is. But think about the body for too long, and it quickly becomes far more complex than we initially think.

In the fourth chapter, I approach the body from a very different perspective, namely as our link to the created world. How we care for bodies says a lot about how we care for creation. Understanding the body as our link to the created world can enable us to develop an appropriate level of care for the environment.

In chapter five, I want to highlight one dimension of the body that I think signifies a real generational difference in evangelicalism: tattoos. Their enormous popularity among younger people is significant, and my goal is to unpack precisely what makes tattoos in our contemporary world an interesting development.

Next, I turn to what is probably the most difficult and will doubtlessly prove to be the most controversial sections of the book. In chapter six, I examine the role of sexual pleasure within evangelicalism. It is impossible to talk about the body without talking about one of the main areas where our bodies matter—our romantic relationships with others. My goal is to explore pleasure, and to see how we can and should incorporate it into our Christian lives. In chapter seven, I raise the difficult and sensitive question of homosexuality within the church. I say no more about this here, other than to beg your patience with me.

In chapter eight, I turn to the body as the locus for our submission to the reality of Christ’s Lordship, and try to examine what Paul means when he exhorts us to offer our bodies as “living sacrifices.” I unpack spiritual disciplines not as a means of earning our salvation, but as a means of shaping our bodies in such a way that they are under grace and freedom.

But the individual spiritual disciplines are not sufficient to discover the reality of our life in God, so in chapter nine I offer a prolegomena for a more intense focus on the body within evangelical corporate worship practices.

In the final chapter, I turn to our experience of physical suffering and death to attempt to discern the shape the Gospel should take at the end of our lives.

The central omission is, of course, the question of race and racial identity. It is an intentional omission. While I recognize the limitations that making such a decision entails, and the problems therein, every author cannot write about every topic in one book, and race is an issue that I did not have time to adequately explore. It is an omission that I regret.

Twenty years ago, Robert Brunge concluded that “All the major issues agitating the Church today revolve around the meaning of our bodiedness.” It is a diagnosis that he offered in the context of bioethics, but its truth extends far beyond that sometimes narrow-realm to the reality of our normal existence as humans. As T.S. Eliot put it, “You cannot deny the body.” *Do you not know,* St. Paul asked, *that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?* We have forgotten, and stand in need of a reminder.

**Chapter Two: Evangelicals and The Body**

In his enormously popular and cleverly provocative book *Blue Like Jazz,* Donald Miller writes about a college ministry that set up confession booth on a college campus. Spicy stuff, that, except they added a twist: rather than listening to college students purge the wrongs done in frat parties and dorms, the ministry confessed the wrongs that Christians had done to others.

Miller says they apologized for the Crusades and for Columbus. If he had really wanted to get real, though, he would have apologized for perhaps the most pernicious way that Christians have presented the gospel: Precious Moments.

Yes, Precious Moments, those saccharine figures of angels that were ubiquitous in Hallmarks and Christian bookstores for several years. They were, at least initially, explicitly Christian in their imagery and postures. But it is a sanitized Christianity, a Christianity that is more angelic than it is human. And as anyone who has met a Christian knows, we are hardly angels. We are far too messy to be angels.

Precious Moments, like Thomas Kinkade paintings, are the perfect cultural artifacts for a Christianity that has become utterly domesticated, a Christianity that is all sugar and spice, and everything *nice.* And it is a Christianity that is deeply invested in preserving an environment where the less desirable features of our bodies are kept in the shadows as much as possible so that we can preserve an environment where we can have a *spiritual* experience. We would rather be angels.

During my process of writing, I would routinely have conversations with people in various evangelical churches that went something like this:

Them: “So what’s your book about?”

Me: “The body.”

Them: “You mean, like the *physical* body?”

The line was often delivered with a slight raise of the eyebrows that hinted at incredulity. The immediate response to my topic among evangelicals was to turn their attention to the “body of Christ,” or the church. The pattern transformed from amusing to fascinating. What’s to say about the physical body? Apparently, more than people realize.

When evangelicals hear “the body,” our minds apparently meander over to Paul’s great metaphor and the countless sermons we have heard exhorting us to take up our janitorial crosses and assume our place as the pinky-toe of Christ’s church.[[3]](#footnote-3) But that flesh and blood that you carry around, or that is carrying you around, or simply is you—move along, folks, nothing to see here.

Not to say that this is a particularly evangelical phenomenon. The ambivalence about the physical body is a cultural phenomenon. And therein lies a tale.

***Evangelicals and their Critics***

Over the past twenty years, evangelicals have balkanized into several different schools of thought, each of which have distinct theological, cultural, and ecclesial distinctive. Despite the disagreements, though, almost everyone agrees on this point: traditional evangelicalism has inextricably gnostic tendencies.

Gnosticism was a second-century movement that has persisted in various forms and places throughout church history that limited knowledge (gnosis) to only a select few, and was often associated with an attempt to flee the body for the realm of the “spiritual.” And when I say everyone, I mean *everyone*. Theologian Michael Horton, who is Presbyterian, puts the critique this way:

“It would seem that the critics of modern American religion are basically on target in describing the entire religious landscape, from New Age or liberal, to evangelical and Pentecostal, as essentially Gnostic. Regardless of the denomination, the American Religion is inward, deeply distrustful of institutions, mediated grace, the intellect, theology, creeds, and the demand to look outside of oneself for salvation…. If one is to be saved, one must accept the death of individualism, inwardness, emotional and experiential ladders of ecstasy, merit and speculation.

By contrast, Christianity is a “crude, earthy religion.” Though Horton doesn’t expound upon evangelicalism’s distaste for the body here, he’ll elsewhere suggest that certain strands that talk about the “salvation of the soul” are “quasi-Gnostic.”

And then there’s Gregg Allison, a professor of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In a recent paper, he accuses evangelicals of treating the body as (at best) a hindrance to our spiritual lives. He puts the critique this way:

*It is my contention that evangelicals at best express an ambivalence toward the human body, and at worst manifest a disregard or contempt for it. Many people, often due to tragic experiences with the body (e.g., physical/sexual abuse), abhor their body, and many Christians, due to either poor or non-existent teaching on human embodiment, consider their body to be, at best, a hindrance to spiritual maturity and, at worst, inherently evil or the ultimate source of sin.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Then you have N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope,* an excellent book that is justly popular within younger evangelical circles, details the problems with the disembodied notion of “heaven” that he contends most evangelicals subscribe to. According to Wright, the affirmation of the creed’s insistence that “we believe in the resurrection of the body” is at best confused, and at worst nonexistent among the evangelical church.

Finally, Brian McLaren, the emerging church advocate who has proved enormously controversial, aligns himself with this critique as well. In *A New Kind of Christian,* he writes, “Remember, modernity only wants abstract principles, universal concepts, and disembodied absolutes.  So we take an expression like 'the kingdom of God' and try to give it meaning without any context.  **Postmodern theology has to reincarnate; we have to get back into the flesh and blood and sweat and dirt of the setting, because as I said, all truth is contextual. “**

By my count, that’s a Presbyterian, a Baptist, a high-church Anglican, and a member of the emerging church movement who have all offered some variation on the critique that evangelicals have gone wrong in their understanding of the body and its relationship to theology. They disagree about the particulars of their case, of course, and their preferred solutions to it. Horton, for instance, sympathizes with McLaren’s critique, but suggests he hasn’t escaped the problems.

At a minimum, the diversity of the critiques against evangelical understandings of the body ought give us pause. It’s not easy to take a contrarian line against that many voices, especially when they are from as diverse communities as our four critics above.

***A More Complex Engagement with the Body***

While such critiques abound, the reality of evangelical engagement with the body (not to mention the evangelical view of ‘heaven’) is more complex than it is sometimes presented. Given the strength of the critiques, outright denunciations of the body are far less frequent than we might expect (to the point of being non-existent), and while there are scathing remarks about alcohol and prostitution, there is little in the way of an outright rejection of sexuality *per se.*

If we can find any evangelical willing to disavow the body, it’s probably D.L. Moody, the revivalist preacher whose influence over evangelicalism is impossible to understate. He is representative of one of evangelicalism’s major strands, the revivalist tradition which emphasized a theology of inwardness and a piety that is wrapped up in spiritual experiences. It is perhaps the strand of evangelicalism that has been most critiqued for its anti-body attitudes.

Moody, however, has a more nuanced view of the body than we might expect. For instance, in his sermon on the Fall, he expresses perplexity about how God could say to Adam that he would “die this day” if he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, while Adam continues living after doing precisely that. His way out of the dilemma is unsurprising to those who grew up attending evangelical sunday schools: "I didn't understand then,” he writes, “as I do now that the life of the body is not anything in comparison with the death of the soul…Death is just being banished from God’s sight; for God is the author of life, and the moment the communication was cut between Adam and God, that was the end of life.”

It’s easy for us to hear the hierarchy here, and to think that Moody is suggesting the body is unimportant. But the contrast is more subtle than that—the *life* of the body is nothing if the soul is *dead,* or no longer in its proper relationship to God.This isn’t an anti-material claim *per se,* but rather a point about the *nature* of our material lives. The life of the body is not anything, but *only* in comparison to the death of the soul. There’s an echo, dare I say, of Jesus here: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”

When it comes to the afterlife, Moody’s views are (I think) representative of the themes and motifs that evangelicals have exemplified. But while the central focus is on “heaven,” Moody doesn’t reject the resurrection of the body after that period. In his sermon on the Resurrection of Jesus, he suggests that it and the Cross are the “chief cornerstones of the religion of Jesus Christ.” When it comes to our own resurrection, Moody is unambiguous about his position:

“We shall come up from the grave, by and by, with a shout. "He is the first fruits;" he has gone into the vale, and will call us by and by. The voice of the Son of God shall wake up the slumbering dead! Jacob will leave his lameness, and Paul will leave his thorn in the flesh; and we shall come up resurrected bodies, and be forever with the Lord. I pity those people who know nothing about the resurrection of Christ, and think Christ does not live, and was merely a man, and perished in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea. What hope have they got?”

This is a full-throated affirmation of the “resurrection of the body,” and while it may not be emphasized to the degree that we would prefer, he was capable of speaking of the body in ways that are right in line with traditional Christian orthodoxy.

And yet, what about heaven? Again, Moody is a decent representation of common evangelical themes. He thinks that heaven is “up there,” and that it is a place where we will someday “go.” But while he takes the “streets of gold” rather literally, he is adamant that it is not those that make heaven a glorious place, but rather the *presence* of the Triune God. As in his understanding of the fall, Moody has an intense focus on the center—God—which leads him to relegate other aspects of Christian theology to edges. But the center holds everything together, and keeps his points of emphasis from totally overwhelming the other features of Christian theology.

But immediately after suggesting that it is God who makes “heaven” worth going to, Moody turns toward the presence of angels and other believers in that realm. There is a strong emphasis on the social aspect of our time there, an emphasis which Moody doesn’t explicitly link with the body, but that is clearly extrapolated from our time here and now. In his final move in the sermon, Moody devotes a number of pages to children and their ability to enter heaven, a focus that would have resonated with the cultural push to remove children from the workforce.

These features of Moody’s thought—a strong emphasis on *the presence of God* as the center to everything else, the belief in the resurrection of the dead, the emphasis on the social aspect of “heaven”—these have continued throughout evangelicalism, even down to its elder statesmen, Billy Graham.

In an essay for the Washington Post, Graham perfectly articulated a classic evangelical understanding of the afterlife. After confessing that Scripture is relatively silent about its specific features, Graham moves in to the center: “But the most essential truth about Heaven is this: We will be in God's presence forever. And because we will be with God, no harm or evil can ever touch us again.” Graham expands this in the usual directions, namely the absence of war, suffering, and pain and the presence of family and friends who have trusted in Christ.

These views are hardly sacrosanct. Moody has a strong emphasis on withdrawal from the world, even though he is only targeting the sins and abuses present that he sees within it. And though he is orthodox in his beliefs, his description of “heaven” as a location that we go to is a problematic expansion of the Biblical teaching on the afterlife. But the reaction against these sorts of presentations has sometimes distorted them in unfair and uncharitable ways, and found in their writings a disdain for the body that doesn’t hold up under careful scrutiny.

Additionally, we must be careful about what we locate at the *edges* of our imagination about the afterlife. For Moody, though the center of heaven was God, the periphery was consumed by social relations and children. Graham keeps the emphasis on the presence of God at the center, but shifts his language toward a “new social order” that is marked by the absence of pain, suffering, and war. But the center of this order are “loved ones” whose presence we will be in. Though he speaks of having work and worship to do there, the emphasis lies elsewhere.

Contrast those visions with N.T. Wright’s in *Surprised by Joy* or Andy Crouch’s in *Culture Making.* Both those works place the emphasis not on the *presence* of God, or even the presence of loved ones, but rather our participation in cultivating the “new heavens and the new earth.” It is a much more active picture, to be sure. But it is also a picture that resonates more with a younger generation that is increasingly dislocated and isolated from their neighbors, and who lack the sentimentality around “loved ones” and the family that previous generations of evangelicals had.

I raise the point only to say that we must be wary of projecting on to our theological anthropology those values which we already care most about, and so seeing confirmations in Scripture of what we already affirm. There are subtle hints that Moody fits the Biblical text into cultural trends and concerns, just as there are subtle hints that contemporary expositors have continued that tradition. The shift in emphasis away from “family values” to “building for the kingdom” is not surprising given the decay of the natural family my generation has experienced firsthand. We should be doubly wary that we have plucked the log from our own eye before picking the dust out of our historical predecessor’s eyes.

We can say this, though, about Dwight Moody and (I think) the subsequent evangelical tradition—where they have directly engaged with the body, they have done so in primarily medical terms and categories. John Wesley, who is largely credited with starting the movement, wrote a book on the methods of healing the body, a work that opens with a full-throated endorsement of the body’s original goodness. The question and possibility of physical healing has been at the center of charismatic movements in the 20th century, movements which altered even now non-charismatic evangelical communities like the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the denomination in which I was raised.

What’s more, in the early 1900s social gospel proponents were focused on building healthy bodies and on reforming society along those lines. There was significant overlap between social gospel proponents and those who advocated for a “muscular Christianity,” or a Christianity that emphasized manliness and sport as part of building Christian virtue. It’s a surprising relationship given the layout of contemporary evangelicalism, where those who have emphasized a muscular Christianity the most (namely, the young Reformed) have been most vocal against the social gospel movement and its roots.

Clearly this doesn’t a robust argument make. But from what I can tell, there has been very little scholarly treatment of historical evangelicalism and its understanding of the human body. In addition, there has been very little actual ethnographic or sociological analysis done on contemporary evangelicalism, either, which means we are left in a position of stacking anecdotes and observations against each other—a position no one benefits from.

My hypothesis, and it is only that, is limited: if evangelicals are ambivalent about the body, they are so tacitly. We haven’t consciously decided to view our bodies in a negative light, and if you ask us, we’ll almost certainly affirm that the body is good and that we value it highly. But those subterranean beliefs shape the dimensions of our normal lives. Evangelicals have emphasized the presence of God, which is the right thing to emphasize. But beyond the focus on health and healing, we have not devoted many resources to the role our bodies play in the course of our normal lives. Our legacy is more one of inattention than rejection.

**Contemporary Developments in Evangelicalism**

Motivated in part by this perception that evangelicals have neglected the body, evangelicals have seen a resurgent interest in recent years in how to appropriately incorporate the body into our spiritual lives.

The best example of this has been the spiritual disciplines movement, a movement that Richard Foster has played a key role in. From Biola’s *Institute for Spiritual Formation* to *Renovare,* organizations and training programs devoted to educating about spiritual disciplines have blossomed. The most influential voice in this movement, though, belongs to Dallas Willard, who articulates in both *Spirit of the Disciplines* and *Renovation of the Heart* a robust and well-reasoned view of the human body and its relationship to our identity as human persons. Though he approaches it from a different perspective, Rodney Clapp’s beautiful and poignant *Tortured Wonders* has a similar aim—to explore the body’s role in Christian spirituality.

Making generalizations about the emerging church is like driving a steamroller through a minefield, but from my standpoint, even though it has been less discussed, one of their central features has been an attempt to recover the body and its role within Christian theology and the church. In addition to McLaren, whom I quoted earlier, the most consistent advocate for this might be Doug Pagitt, a pastor at Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis. He writes, “At Solomon's Porch, the physical nature of the incarnation and resurrection spurs us to create practices in which our bodies help us to follow Jesus." For Pagitt, the life of faith is tied up with the body and its role in our lives, a fact that he has implemented consistently in his writings.

There are similar lines of thought among other emergent church thinkers. Near the heart of their rediscovery of the body is their argument that right *belief* is an extension of having right *practices*, or a shift away from focusing on *orthodoxy* toward focusing on *orthopraxy.* “Christianity,” in this conception, becomes not a normative dogmatic system of beliefs that are centered upon a historical person, communicated in the Bible, and mediated and made effective by the Holy Spirit, but a system of practices that Christians do that bear witness to the historical person as communicated in the Bible. There’s a structural reason why the theology of the emerging church movement has remained nebulous. Practices are ambiguous, and a theology that takes its cues from them (rather than inform and guides them) will be similarly ambiguous.

At the same time, the emerging church movement and the spiritual disciplines movement are right to try to reincorporate the body into our Christian practices. While the emerging church has moved the center of evangelicalism in its direction, the focus on the body has yet to penetrate most of mainstream evangelical theological and pastoral circles. Over the past twenty years, the closest evangelical theologians have come to any such sustained discourse is the debate over whether humans have souls or not.

But why the inattentivity to the body? I suspect the reason we have been slow to offer a rich, distinctly evangelical perspective on the body is largely because we associate the topic with certain ideologies that make us nervous. Over the last twenty years, evangelicals have been embroiled in debates with three very different groups, and our broad rejection of each has impaired our ability to see the legitimacy of some of the questions they have raised. Understanding these groups and their approaches to the body will help shed light on some of the questions that I will address in later chapters.

**Post modernism**

For the past twenty years or so, evangelicals have been embroiled in a debate over what has come to be broadly described as ‘postmodernism.’ The debate has centered on questions of what truth is, and how we know it. But swim up the post-modern stream a few miles and you’ll quickly discover that the body is a central point of reflection. From Heidegger on, there is a strong rejection of the body/soul dualism which was prevalent throughout the modern period. Jean Paul Sartre eventually turned Descartes’s famous, “I think, therefore I am” on its head, writing: “The body is what I immediately am…I am my body to the extent that I *am.*”

Of course, to describe any movement in such monolithic terms is inherently over-simplifying. We might as well speak of “modernisms” and postmodernisms,” as there are disagreements and disputes that go on within those schools. The most famous description of post-modernism, though, by a post-modern is that it is a “rejection of meta-narratives.” In this rubric, our understanding is conditioned by our limitations. We have no “gods-eye view.”

The “post-modern” body, then, is destabilized. Rather than having unmediated access to the body, or even being able to speak of *the* body, we must speak of *bodies*, for in the post-modern world, there is no unifying narrative of embodied experience to which we can appeal. The gay body has one perspective, the female body another, and the white male a third. And those perspectives have been ineradicably shaped by the world around us. If post-modernism rejects the possibility of an “objective” truth, it also rejects the possibility of an “objective” body.

My only point in this overly brief and generalized description is to point out that in our resistance to post-modernism, evangelicals have focused almost entirely on the nature of truth and the possibility of discovering meaning, but have ignored the challenge that it poses to our understanding of the body. This has had the double effect of causing us to miss out on potential insights into the nature of the body (and by virtue of that, our own faith), and making us ill-equipped to offer a compelling alternative.

**Feminism**

Perhaps no group of Christians has had such a productive focus on the meaning of embodiment as those who are engaging in what is broadly described as “feminist theology”—that is, those who are exploring the way our understanding of God both informs and is informed by the experience of women. There is much to be wary of in feminist theology and in the assumptions that they sometimes start from. But they have also opened up interesting lines of thought that focus on embodiment and its relationship to our understanding of the Gospel.

Meanwhile, evangelical treatments of feminism have largely focused on questions of ‘headship,’ church polity, and questions of translation. Those questions are vitally important. But one unfortunate byproduct of the debate over feminism within evangelicalism is that the questions of the body have been obscured, again leaving evangelicals deprived of the possibility of fruitful dialogue about human embodiment.

**Philosophical Naturalism**

The twentieth century was an era dominated by philosophical naturalism, or the idea that only physical things exist. This philosophical system has had an enormous impact, and evangelicals have been engaged in attempting to articulate its problems and offer a viable and attractive alternative to it. On these fronts, they have been enormously successful.

Yet because evangelicals were rightly critiquing philosophical naturalism, we found it helpful and necessary to offer vigorous defenses of the existence of the soul—over and against the notion that humans are *only* their bodies. This emphasis has, in less careful hands than those philosophers who are making the arguments, obscured the central role the body plays in human existence. As with post-modernism and feminism, this is one more front where evangelicals have moved away from thinking about the body because their opponents have so strongly emphasized it.

**Catholicism**

Between 1979 and 1984, Pope John Paul II spent his weekly radio addresses developing a theology of the body. The *Theology of the Body* is a remarkable work that has a surprising amount of overlap with the distinctive of evangelical theology, not least his unremitting focus on explicating the words of Scripture. *Theology of the Body* is a work designed to counter the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and so is self-consciously limited to sex, marriage, and family issues. But in some ways, it also can be read as a rebuttal to the post-modern destabilizing of the body, a point to which we shall return later.

But here again, evangelical disagreements with Catholicism has meant muted its impact in the evangelical community. While I have noticed an uptick in engagement with it among younger evangelicals, the resistance to learn from those outside our tradition continues to prevent engagement with it at a broader level.

I want to be perfectly clear: I am not a post-modernist, nor a feminist, a philosophical naturalist, or a Catholic. But it’s worth pointing out that their respective distinctive have raised valuable questions and produced valuable insights that evangelicals should not neglect. If evangelicals want to offer substantive, gospel-centered responses to these various “isms,” then we must begin to think more deeply about the role of the body in human experience. It is not enough to show how they think about human bodies is wrong. We must show them a way of thinking about human bodies—and of living in human bodies—that is better.

**Evangelical Inattentivity and the Problem of Secularism**

In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul uses rather divisive language—that of warfare—to describe the conflict that Christians have with the world around them. Yet Christians do not fight with the “weapons of the world,” but have the power of God to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.” It’s a popular verse in circles devoted to thinking worldviewishhy, and for good reason: Paul is pretty clear that arguments, or something much like them, actually can enslave minds that are not attuned to them.

In the past few years, evangelicals have warmed to the idea that ideas do not come to them in the abstract, but are mediated to them by the institutions and structures of society. Movies, universities, the media, and other knowledge and practice-forming institutions channel particular ways of looking at the world, such that if we do not “take every thought captive,” we can end up projecting on to Scripture ideas and emphases that are foreign to it.

To put a sharper edge on the point, evangelical inattentivity about the body is not a virtue. Quite the opposite. Our inattentivity to the way the body affects how we learn, how we behave, how we know, how we relate to each other, may be at the heart of our lack of witness to the world, as if we do not cultivate robustly evangelical understandings of the body, and practices that reinforce them and integrate them into every aspect of our existence, then we will doubtlessly end up incorporating ideas and beliefs into our systems that are contrary to what we would consciously affirm. I suspect every dogmatic system does this to some degree, and one man’s syncretism is another man’s baptism. While we have an obligation to take those self-conscious statements seriously, and to moderate our critiques in light of them (something critics of historical evangelical theology sometimes fail to do), evangelicals have a responsibility to dig through our own normative structures to ensure that our beliefs are actually in accordance with the teachings of Scripture.

Evangelical appropriations of the body also need to do more, though, than simply channel contemporary thinkers who wish to affirm bodies and embodiment as the lens through which we examine Christianity. That is the way toward correcting one imbalance with another. The body is important, but it is not the center. At the center is the Triune God whose inner relations are characterized by love, and which are the grounds for his creation and his mission toward the world. At the heart of Christian theology is the safeguarding of the proclamation of that God as Scripture bears witness to him. The temptation to focus on the body need not lead to a wholesale subordination of theology to church practices. Those should come downstream, after we have unpacked what Scripture says about bodies and the shape they are to take.

The rest of this book will take a different course, only because this is not the audience for such a robustly theological project. It is my hope, though, that evangelical theologians will begin work on that task, and soon.

**Chapter Three: What is the Body?**

I am reminded by my sister via Facebook that my grandfather would have been 90 yesterday.

He died just over five years ago, a few weeks before I married my wife. It was a painful loss for my family—we had moved an hour south of him when I was in the third grade, and stayed there ever since. He was the only extended family close enough for me to know well growing up.

When he died, my brother and I both wrote eulogies on our respective blogs. My brother’s was better—so good, in fact, that they read it at his funeral. It was gorgeous, and I occasionally go read through it when I think about him.

My grandfather had polio, a disease that has been all but eradicated from the United States because of the vaccines that were developed. He contracted it as a kid, and though it did not kill him, it left him with the use of only one arm for the rest of his life. He was one of the most capable men I have ever met. He worked in a Ford shop and did much of his own woodworking and carpentry. He was married as a young man, but spent the last twenty years of his life alone, after my grandmother—whom I never knew—passed away. As my brother put it in his eulogy, “More important, he was a survivor.”

My favorite moment with my grandfather happened when I was in high school. We lived in western Washington, and had suffered a particularly nasty bit of weather. We had a rare heavy dose of snow, followed by some light rain, followed by a spell of sub-freezing temperatures that left the trees loaded with ice. A number of the branches came down at my grandpa’s house. The electricity company came through and felled a number of the trees so as to prevent future damage to the lines, cut them into 18 inch segments, and left them on my grandfather’s lawn.

My job was to cut the 18-inch segments into firewood, a job that I decided to take on over my spring break. The cedar and fir proved more difficult to split than I imagined. I was using a 9 pound maul to split the logs, and was pretty spent after a few hours.

My grandfather, ever the observant one, watched me for a little while one morning and then stepped in to offer a few tips. When I didn’t quite get it, he grabbed the maul from me with his good arm, raised it above his head, and split the wood perfectly. Then he did it again, and again, and again. I’m pretty sure if I hadn’t grabbed the maul back out to preserve my own sense of self-dignity, he would have kept right on going until he simply couldn’t anymore.

Naturally, when he went back into the house, I had to try it. So I grabbed the maul in my right hand, and attempted to split a piece of wood with it that way. I failed. Miserably. I could barely get the maul up, much less bring it down with the force and precision necessary to split wood. It weakly glanced off the top, while I glanced around to see if anyone and seen my effort before quickly returning to using both hands.

***The Body Beneath***

On the one hand, the question of what the body is seems so obvious that it’s barely worth considering directly. After all, our bodies are constantly with us, and we constantly interact with other people’s bodies throughout the course of our normal lives. Most of us have a working knowledge of the body’s structure and functions, and are familiar enough with the health and fitness literature to know that a steady diet of ice cream isn’t conducive to healthy bodies.

Within evangelical theological circles, the central focus over the past 20 years has been whether we are anything more than bodies or not. As our understanding of the brain and its processes has improved, evangelicals have been consumed by the argument over how to harmonize Biblical anthropology with the claims of science.

In that debate, though, what has *not* been questioned is that the scientific and medical approaches to the body should be viewed as normative and exhaustive. And the conception at work in those communities is largely that the body is a machine which operates by specific causal laws. The question of the debate over the soul has been whether those causal laws can ever be interrupted or directed by some higher-order level of organization, either the soul or some sort of emergent properties like “the mind.” In that sense, the discussion has been severely limited, for it has ignored the possibility that the best way to discuss and integrate the body into Christian theology and ethics is *not* through the medical and scientific categories of causality, but through more robust and phenomenologically oriented categories.

How we talk about the body matters, though, for how we live in the body. Ethics depends upon our conception of the nature of reality. The descriptive work of a situation should always precede the determination of our course through it, for we must first identify the obligations upon us and the possibilities before us, both of which will be determined by the sort of things we are interacting with.

Consider a few historical examples of descriptions of the body, some more philosophically precise than others.

*The Prison of the Body*. The metaphor has been enough to doom Plato to the wastebin for most contemporary evangelicals, regardless of whether they have read him or not. Plato said a lot more about the body, so to reduce his view to a single statement is probably unfair. But the notion of the body as a prison has proved enormously durable throughout Western history (including, we should note, our hero John Calvin, whose language is at points astonishingly close to Plato’s on this point). It has also proved enormously destructive. If the body doesn’t simply *house* the soul, but is a *prison* of the soul, then “freedom” takes the shape of being free of the limitations, the dependencies, and the irritations of our bodies.

*Brother Ass*. St. Francis was a joyous fellow, and in this phrase almost perfectly encapsulated the dynamic of the physical body under the domain of sin. There’s a distance between him and his body that might make contemporary philosophers and theologians uneasy, but it’s certainly a distance that most of us have *felt* at one point or another when we experience the body not as *ourselves,* but as distinct from ourselves. Additionally, the phrase highlights the *stubbornness* of the body against the will, a stubbornness that moved Francis to pursue spiritual disciplines to the extent that we rarely see today. When St. Francis felt the lusts of the flesh rising up, he ran out into the snow to discipline himself. It may be extreme, but there’s a joviality about the whole episode that is hard to miss.

*The machine.* Perhaps the most enduring image for the body is a variation on Descartes, the standard whipping boy for all popular writers about evangelical views of theology and the body. For Descartes, the body is treated almost completely as *extension,* or dispersed through time and space. The mind is not distended throughout the body, but rather is tied to the body at a particular gland in the brain. The description of the body as a ‘machine,’ though, isn’t Descartes’. Rather, it was a 20th century philosopher’s who accused Descartes’ theory of amounting to having a “ghost in the machine.”

In a sense, that is the view of the body that exists throughout all of modernity. Noam Chomsky, the radical leftist politician who has fascinating thoughts on the structure of human language, points out that Galileo established a *mechanical* principle of intelligibility, such that the only time a thing can be said to be understood if it can be explained as a machine can be—as a system of interlocking parts that relate to each other through specified laws.

However, there is a question as to whether the body can ultimately explained through mechanical categories. As Chomsky points out, Newton—who adopted Galileo’s model—was accused of introducing occult practices into science because he recognized the problem of finding a mechanical (i.e. scientific) explanation for every aspect of human existence. As Chomsky puts it, ”Newton exorcised the machine; he left the ghost intact.”

In that sense, modernity—which might be characterized by finding a mechanistic explanation of the world—was doomed before it began. And the view of the body intrinsic to it is deeply insufficient for Christians. While the body may share points of similarity with machines, it is not—in the final analysis—a biblical model for human bodies.

***The Body as Created***

“The Lord God formed the man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” It’s an evocative line, and one that has led to endless speculation about the nature and meaning of the “spirit” that was breathed into the human person in his original creation.

Yet for our purposes, the line points toward a singular reality about the body, namely that the matter itself is in need of both *organization* and *life* for it to be *this human body.* The dust of the ground isn’t self-organizing within the creation narrative, but rather is *formed* into a particular shape. Adam really was the clay, and God really was the potter. Questions about the literal nature of the creation narrative aside, its force with respect to the body is that human bodies, like the rest of creation, have their order and their shape as a result of the providential care of God.

But we should underscore that the human body in its original goodness still seems to be animated by a principle of life that isn’t reducible to the dust and its inner workings alone. It is a *living* body, which means that it has a principle of action within it that makes it something very different than a machine. This principle of animation has sometimes been called the “soul” and attributed a substantial existence independent of the body, a position that there are still good theological and exegetical reasons to endorse.

We should highlight, though, that this notion of the body as *organized* continues into Paul’s great metaphor of the Body of Christ. Paul is comfortable speaking of the “members” of our bodies, a concept that points to the irreducible individuality of each aspect of the body. The foot is not the eye, or vice-versa. And the body needs both for its proper functioning. But what makes the member a *member,* and not an abstract entity, is precisely that it stands in a particular relationship to the whole body and is so *organized* in the body and *animated* by the Holy Spirit who animates the church.

It’s a metaphor that has weight precisely because how similar it is to the understanding of the human body in Genesis. When God creates the earth, he takes matter that is “formless and void” and establishes a form and unity on it, directing it toward particular ends that are appropriate to the sort of things created beings are. The same is true of his creation of Adam (and Eve).

The body is a *human* body precisely because it is matter that is organized in a particular way, and is animated by the presence of ‘spirit,’ which allows it be self-directed in a way that a machine will never be. When and where the contemporary medical and scientific body loses sight of the ‘spirit’ in man and treats his body simply as a machine that can be controlled technologically, it rests on an anthropology averse to that which the Bible points toward.

***The Body As the Seat of our Personal Presence***

The practical motivations behind the debate over the existence of the soul are numerous, but Nancy Murphey lays them out well, arguing that the language of the soul within Christianity turned Christianity into an inwardly-focused religion, rather than a religion concerned with social and political transformation.

The critique against evangelical understandings of “salvation,” in fact, is frequently a critique that their emphasis on “saving souls” led to a repudiation of the world and an unremittingly individualistic spirituality that was focused on attaining ecstatic experiences between “me and Jesus.”

Whatever else we might say of the critiques, the *downside* of presenting the dualist view as necessarily leading to a focus on our inward experience that ignores the real concerns of the world is that they almost always end up thinning down our experience of *inwardness* to our *consciousness,* which frequently has been stripped down to our mental awareness that we are perceiving something in the world.

In fact, while we (Christians and everyone else) have attempted to excise Descartes’ divorce between the body and the soul from our public life and consciousness, we have replaced it with a body-consciousness dualism that is proving just as difficult to overcome as Rene’s was. And it is just as focused on the mind as the seat of the human person (by virtue of reducing us to our mental awareness) as Descartes’ was. As John Orderberg puts the critique:

Is it not a pretty exotic if not irrelevant claim that there is a problem of consciousness for psychology as much as for sensory experience?  Yet it is important for present purposes, since it highlights the error involved in trying to understand the human essence by corralling consciousness into a corner of the mind, particularly that corner associated with the mind's lowest function, namely perception.  It is no more than a perpetuation of the Cartesian error of identifying the soul with awareness.  It positively invites a dichotomizing of the human being into a conscious self plus the physical add-ons.

Orderberg’s critique should be heard by Christians who think that rejecting the dualism of the soul entails an escape from the problems that have been classically associated with it.

For all its merits (and there are many), the attempt at refocusing Christianity away from our inwardness neglects language in Scripture that points to two *dimensions* of the same human person, even if we ultimately determine that there are not two *substances* in that human person. Nancy Murphy might be right that the language of Scripture is ambiguous about whether we have substantial souls or not that exist independently of our bodies, but Paul’s language about the human person seems to make it clear that we can identify both an internal dimension, and an external dimension, to the human person.

In 2 Corinthians 4, where the title of this book comes from, Paul highlights the bodily persecutions and suffering that he and his compatriots have endured on behalf of the Gospel. They “carry about in their body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in the body.” Yet at the close of the chapter, Paul writes, “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” It is a theme that he continues in various ways and in various places. Regardless of what perspective Paul is writing from, he clearly demonstrates himself comfortable with an inner/outer division in Romans 7: “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.” Or as he continues later in Romans 8, “But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness.”

While it might be tempting to overload the concepts of the “inner man” and “outer man” with psychological freight, my point is much more limited: Paul *is* able to distinguish between different aspects of the human person, and seems to associate the *outer* aspect with the human body.

In that sense, we really are our bodies, a fact that carries significant ethical and political weight. What I do to my friend’s body, I do to my friend—and vice versa. There is no distinction in that regard. But for Paul, the body is associated with me *in a particular realm*. It is me, but me in my *external dimension,* me facing the world and acting in the world. In that sense, sanctification is partly a process of bringing my body in alignment with the reality of what Christ has done *in* me, subordinating the members of my body to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul will say in 1 Corinthians 9 that he disciplines his body into submission, but does so not to attain an ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit, but so that his *public* ministry will not be harmed by his failure to bring his whole person under the authority of God.

In that sense, the body is (in Gilbert Meilander’s phrase) our “place of personal presence in the world.” It is that by which we act, interact, and move in the world. In that sense, the body is not an *instrument* by which I communicate with the world, in the sense my iPhone is an instrument by which I communicate with my wife (though not as often as she’d prefer). Rather, my body is me, and so in subordinating our bodies to the reality of God’s authority, we are submitting ourselves as whole human persons to that authority.

There is a unique *presence* that I have, in other words, when my body is in a place that I do not have when my body is not. It is a presence that cannot be replicated through any other means, but it is precisely a presence that is *necessary* for our full humanity. As Paul argues in 2 Corinthians 5, we do not seek to shed the body, but rather be reclothed with bodies that are not given over to decay and degeneration.

Yet as the place of my personal presence in the world, my body shapes my interior life inasmuch as my interior life shapes it. While it is not what goes into a man that defiles him, it’s not clear that what goes into a man leaves him utterly unchanged. Rather, what goes into a man—and *how* it goes in—reveals the nature of the heart to himself. To the pure all things are pure.

Additionally, my body establishes the boundaries of the limits and possibilities on my life that, if I am to live an embodied life well, I need to respect. To give a perfectly sensible example, it became clear to me as a high schooler that while I had middling ability athletically, I was not given enough talents to play basketball (a sport I loved) at the collegiate level. While I could have maintained delusional aspirations about my potential to be an NBA superstar, in my process of becoming a man I realized that at the heart of manhood is recognizing the limitations that our bodies impose upon us.

Of course, the language of limits is almost always treated negatively. And sometimes, they can be, when they are imposed such a way that they exclude people from achieving their basic human rights. At the same time, the negative connotations we associate with limits (bodily and otherwise) are at the heart of many of the problems of our late modern world. The movement to eradicate all the bodily limits of age, death, place, and time are at the heart of many of the misguided ideologies in our late-modern world.

It is, in fact, bodily limits that are at the heart of establishing the range of *appropriate* human action, or actions that are conducive to human flourishing. I should point out that it doesn’t matter whether all events are, in fact, bodily events. The thoughts we have in our minds have moral significance in the same way our actions do. Yet the range of bodily actions that we can and should perform will inevitably be set by the structure of our human bodies. Just as my grandfather’s life was shaped by the fact that he only had one arm to use, so my life is shaped in ways that may never be perceptible to me by my bodily structure.

One final dimension of our embodied lives bears mentioning. Our bodies are born, grow, and eventually die. They are, in that sense, wrapped up with both time and history. They tie us to particular places, places that are of a particular sort because of the history of the people and the people groups that have lived there. As a current resident of St. Louis, Missouri, this has never been more clear to me. There is a funny habit in this city of asking people which school they went to (let the St. Louisian understand). Of course, they don’t want to know which college you were at, but which high school you attended. It’s one of the odd facts of living in a place where people have not (yet) forgotten their history, and where the community is so small that they feel they can sterotype (read: know how much money your parents made) by virtue of the fact that you went to a particular high school.

It is precisely these limitations that emergent church advocates are intimating at when they argue that our theology needs to be ‘embodied,’ to take into account the local circumstances of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ which have to contextualize our understanding of him. And insofar as they stop there, they are right. But the reality of Christian theology is that while the revelation of God is “contextual,” the reality that is revealed in the particular circumstances of Palestine is a reality that makes demands on all people. “One died for all, therefore all died.”

In that sense, the universal is contained *in* the particular, and the more we explore the particular revelation of Jesus Christ as Scripture bears witness to it, the more we will see that it is a word not only for those particular people, but for all people in all places in all times. It is the *deity* of Jesus that is different and unique, that establishes the cross and resurrection as an unrepeatable event in human history. But it is his human nature which stands as representative of the whole human race. Contrary to McLaren, inasmuch as an embodied theology is actually a *theology* centered upon the man Jesus Christ, its truths must be universal.

***The Body under Sin***

The body in its original goodness is marked by a particular organization and an animating principle that is intrinsic to it. Yet as we know, humans did not remain in their original state for long. As the story goes, Adam and Eve’s disobedience alters every aspect of their existence. The command of God was that if they ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would “surely die.” It’s an exhortation that proved true.

The original goodness of the human person, his integrity and his unity before God, were at the center of the effects of sin. Saint Paul may not be a dualist with respect to the human person in that he believes we have two substances that compose us. But he is an unremitting dualist in that he draws a sharp line between the possibilities that we can live in. Near the center of that existence is the physical body. In one of his most important passages, he writes:

“You, however, are not controlled by the flesh but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.”

Paul is clear about the dualism at work. There is the life of the flesh, and the life of the Spirit. But that is not a dualism of the body versus the soul. In fact, the body can exist in both realms. It is two different *types* of existence that Paul is pointing toward, one which is characterized by death, sin, and the law, and the other which is characterized by the indwelling Holy Spirit who empowers us to put to death the sinful deeds of the body.

Paul hints that even though our ‘spirit,’ or the innermost part of the human person (“His Spirit testifies to our spirits that we are children of God”) is alive to righteousness, our bodies may still be “dead” because of sin. Which is to say that the effects of sin reside *in* the body, even after the regenerative working of the Holy Spirit. Part of the goal of sanctification is retraining the habits and the members of the body *itself* so that they are brought over into submission to the reality of the life of the Holy Spirit in us. As Paul says elsewhere, “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore *do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the members of your body to sin, as instruments of unrighteousness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and offer the members of your body as instruments of righteousness.”*

At the heart of Paul’s anthropology is the reality that our current bodies decay and die—which is to say, the original animating and organizing principle is no longer sufficient to direct the bodies toward their proper ends. They are *mortal*, and they are only given *life* by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who “raised Jesus from the dead.” The life of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a life that does not avoid death, but comes after death, is precisely the life that we have by virtue of the Spirit’s indwelling presence.

In that sense, sin divides man from himself by establishing a split between the body and the soul that only the power of the resurrection can heal. In sin, man is not even properly the subject of his own actions. The stiff neck and shoulders that come from stress may start out with a conscious, sinful rejection of the Lord’s promise to provide for us that constitutes “sin.” But spend twenty years stiffening your neck and shoulders at signs of worry, and you may not even realize that you have refused to let God provide for you anymore. The habits and patterns of the body are shaped by sin, and long after our regeneration, those habits and patterns remain. The resurrection of the body isn’t simply a resurrection to new life. It is the restoring of the body’s proper habits and practices according to the reality of Christ’s inner work in us.

***The Resurrected Body***

“For there are different kinds of bodies,” Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15. The central difference in our bodies in the resurrection from the dead, and our bodies here and now, will be one of *incorruptibility.* It is a fascinating word, as it captures the reality of our bodies in their intrinsic goodness and under sin: the corruptibility of the body was a possibility of human existence that will be eradicated in the resurrection.

At the heart of Christian theology is the person of Jesus Christ, who restores and renews the original creation and its goodness. The continuity of Christian theology is that the new creation is a new *creation,* the second Adam is *really* Adam. All that is fully human will be restored, which is why it is necessary for Jesus to take on a body in the incarnation: the body is essential to being *human* persons.

Which is precisely what Saint Paul affirms in 1 Corinthians 15. The body is sowed a natural body, but raised a *spiritual* body—which is a body that is governed and moved not on its own power, but by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Rodney Clapp likens the difference to having an internal combustion engine, a metaphor that seems apt. The reality of our natural, human life is that it was in principle corruptible. All it took was for Christians to turn away from believing in the reality of the God whose authority they were under. But when the resurrection from the dead occurs, it is precisely that power which will be ours.

In that sense, the most effective argument for the existence of the soul is the theological one: it gets us from the time that we die to the point where our bodies are raised up and we are “reclothed.” And contrary to some less careful claims about the Platonic influences on early Christianity, it was precisely that motivation that led the church fathers to co-opt Plato’s language about the soul. It was not because Augustine thought badly of the body that he believed in the soul. He goes to pains to point out as much, both in *Confessions* and *City of God.*

The divorce between our *subjectivity,* or our conscious, mental life, is a feature of living between the times, awaiting the resurrection fo the body. The divorced subjectivity that we have is overcome through the Holy Spirit’s work, who in Oliver O’Donovan’s phrase makes us the “subject of our own actions.” Keeping a distinction between our “inner man” and ourselves in our external dimension doesn’t necessarily entail a minimization of either one, provided that we realize part of the heart of our sanctification is shaping our bodies so that they are submitted to the authority of the Holy Spirit, who imparts to us *eternal life,* the knowledge of God.

Luther talked about sin as *incurvatus in se,* or being curved in ourselves and away from God. Preserving a place for a rich inner life of the Spirit, though, as a means of reshaping our bodies so that the life goes outward through our habits and patterns of life is not necessarily to fall prey to Augustine’s critique. Our inner life is brought into proper alignment not by looking inside to attempt to discern the spirit, but rather by looking to the reality of the life of Jesus Christ, whose spirit he is. Word and Spirit go together, and it is precisely when we examine the life of Jesus as it is presented to us in the Word that the Spirit can make the word *powerful* in our lives.

***The Shape of Grace***

“From dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”

It’s my favorite line in the whole church calendar, and maybe the whole Bible, for it reminds me of the frailty of my own existence. It’s a reminder that we are confronted with as we grow older, and when we involve ourselves in the world in ways that make the weaknesses of the body apparent to us. It is a reminder of the body’s intrinsic goodness, and of its mortality because of sin. From dust to dust.

The reality of the gospel is that we are saved by grace, through faith. And yet, the faith that saves is not an abstract faith that God will be good to us in an unspecified and general way. Rather, it is faith that the historical figure of Jesus Christ was both God and man, that he died for our sins, and that he rose again after three days to give us new life. The gospel is about God, and it is about God’s faithfulness to his own promises, faithfulness that involves the reshaping of the material world.

It is precisely that aspect of Abraham’s faith that Paul singles out in Romans 4. The promise to Abraham is a promise at the heart of the gospel: he would be the “heir to the world” and the “father of many nations.” In Romans 4, though, Paul highlights the fact that the promise of God must overcome the weakness and frailty of Abraham’s body. In fact, Paul points out that Abraham’s body is “as good as dead,” and that Sarah’s womb is utterly barren.

Yet Abraham did not weaken in faith, but trusted that God was able to do precisely as he promised, on grounds that God is a God who “brings being out of non-being,” a God who ordered the physical universe through a word. As Paul writes, “He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead…or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb…but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do as he had promised.”

The same God who orders the universe with his word defeats the dissolution and decay of death in and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “How much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”

We were born in dust, and to dust we shall return. But Christ shall come again, and at the resurrection from the dead, the dust will be transformed to gold, and we shall be transformed finally from glory into glory.

Chapter Four: The Body and the World

When you give up eating, it is not only the body that changes. It’s the world.

I wasn’t terribly experienced in fasting at the time. I was a sophomore in college, and had just discovered the discipline as a way of opening my life, my heart, and my body to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Skipping the occasional meal quickly turned into taking a day or two off from food entirely.

This, however, was *very* different. While I’m not particularly charismatic, I had sensed the Lord prompting me to fast for a week, a challenge that daunted me as much as it excited me. My discernment was strengthened when a friend mentioned independently of me that he felt the Lord was prompting him to do the same. I was excited by the prospect of how I would meet the Lord in and through taking his word seriously: man really does not live by bread *alone.*

This isn’t the sort of story that I tell lightly. In many ways, it exhausts and undermines the spiritual benefits to relay it. Our fasting is to be done in secret, an exhortation I have always tried to take seriously. I have my reward in full—the price, I suppose, of attempting to relay our experiences for the benefit of others.

Not eating for a week made me radically aware of the ways in which my whole life is wrapped up in the structures and systems of the world. The tongue is the part of our body that provides enormous pleasures, yet we rarely notice it. Start thinking about your tongue for a moment—it feels weird just sitting in your mouth, with nothing to do. But when you remove the ongoing and regular stimulation of food, it comes into our conscious experience in ways we could never imagine or anticipate otherwise. The jaw *wanted* to chew (there’s almost no other word for it) because there had never been a day when it hadn’t.

But the body wasn’t the only thing that I attended to. The food I refused is at the heart of human society. It was grown on a farm, shipped to where I lived, purchased with money, and altered by human creation. Countless people use considerable resources to feed a single human body. In that sense, fasting reaches out beyond myself alone into the economy that is our human society. There is a reason food is nearly always present when humans gather. It goes straight to the heart of how we are tied together in this world.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the body is the seat of our personal presence in the world. The notion has two sides, though. In the last chapter, I emphasized the object of the sentence—the body is the seat of *our personal presence.* It is, in that sense, inseparable from who we are. But it is also *in the world.* And in that sense, it represents the possibility of our action in the world and affects *what* we make of the world and *how* we make the world.

Our freedom, however, in the world is not a freedom that is unconstrained. Rather, when we eat, drink, or be merry (remembering always that tomorrow we die) we entangle ourselves in relationships with the world around us, relationships that impose both responsibilities toward those whom we are wrapped up with and opportunities for care and for love.

***The Body as Necessity***

I have never been so relieved to hear running water.

My wife and I are both willful people who particularly like their sleep. And on this day, we were paying the consequences. It was early July, and we had decided to hike into the Grand Canyon. Rather than leaving, as most sane people do, at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. to avoid the heat, we had decided to sleep in and leave at 10:00 a.m., which meant we were still making our 8-mile hike (with packs on) during the hottest part of the day.

We weren’t running particularly low on water, but we were starting to get a little nervous (especially my wife, whose constitution is somewhat more oriented toward anxiety in such situations). When we turned the corner and heard a stream, all the Biblical metaphors of God being a spring in a desert land became clear. Putting our head in that stream was probably the most *re-freshed* I have ever felt.

The body is our link to the world, but it is a link that establishes our *dependency* upon the world. We need air, food, water, shelter, and a host of other things not simply to flourish as human beings, but to sustain our very existence. Our desires for food and water aren’t simply desires for pleasurable experiences. They are needs that require fulfillment in order for us to continue as humans.

Of course, that fulfillment doesn’t happen by magic. It requires labor and effort—and in any economy, the division of labor according to the desires and abilities of the people in it. If we wish to continue, we must consume. It is a reality that is as obvious as it is irrefutable.

But contrary to perhaps the most poignant and pressing forces in society, consumption is not the most basic fact about our human existence. In the opening chapter of the Bible, the author writes, “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Where the first creation account speaks of dominion, the second speaks of working and cultivating. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” These passages have been endlessly examined the past few years, and it is not my intent to extend that except in this regard: what marks humans off from the other animals is not what we consume, but what we create.

In this sense, the Biblical account of the creation of Adam and Eve seems to emphasize not our *consumption* of the created order, but rather our *cultivation* of it. All animals consume, and humans are no different. But most (all?) other animals besides humans are caught in the perpetual cycle of birth, consumption, and death, a cycle that humans break in and through the making of culture that can lend them a peculiar sort of immortality. When we are human, we are something more than *mere* consumers.

The point has, I think, considerable ramifications for how we talk about creation and our care for it. Consider contemporary conversations about overpopulation relative to the amount of natural resources. Regardless of the validity of these worries, advocates of caring for creation go awry when they perpetuate an anthropology that treats humans first as *consumers* and only secondarily as creators. It is far too easy and too tempting to attempt to solve the symptom while ignoring the disease. The notion that humans are primarily consumers treats them as little more than animals (and a peculiarly consumptive one at that) and perpetuates the real problem that is in desperate need of addressing.

This is no defense of over-consumption, which is a distortion of our proper relationship to the created order. Rather, it is a suggestion that at the heart of our over-consumption of the world’s resources is an anthropology that associates our identity as humans with the objects that we consume. It is a mentality that has sometimes been given the name *consumerism,* and its tentacles know no boundaries. If Genesis is correct, it rests on an anthropology that is deeply opposed to the reality of who God intended man to be.

But consumerism doesn’t just alter our understanding of ourselves. Because the body is the place of our personal presence *in the world,* it dramatically reshapes how we conceive of creation. Rather than being given to us to be cultivated, consumerism is almost always accompanied by commodification. Rather than having an independent existence and order of its own, the mindset undergirding consumerism reshapes creation according to whatever we think will bring us the most pleasure, treating its resources as commodities to be exchanged in our pursuit of happiness. There is an inherent leveling effect in commodification. We may have, for instance, a special obligation to dogs and cats that have been domesticated that we do not have toward undomesticated lions (by virtue of the former entering into our culture in a way that lions have not). However, when the whole world is simply constituted by raw material for our personal pleasure, there is no room for these sorts of moral categories and special obligations. In other words, there is no *order in* creation at all. The only order is what we make of it.

In this way, the self-oriented ethics of consumerism runs against not biblical teaching about the nature of creation. The leveling effect of ethics in our modern era ignores the reality that not all *types* of bodies are equal. As Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 15:

But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

Paul’s discriminating between different types of bodies matters for how we treat those bodies. While we have to care for all, the shape of our care depends upon what sort of things we are caring for. Treating a fish as though it is a bird ignores the substantive difference between the sorts of things they are, differences that must alter how we act toward each of them.

At the same time, the necessity that links the body and the world is a *temporary* condition (albeit one that won’t be permanently altered until the end of all things). “Food is for the stomach,” Paul writes, “and the stomach is for food. But the Lord will destroy them both.” The body’s need for continued fuel is altered in our resurrection state. We shall, as Rodney Clapp puts it, have an “internal combustion engine” in us, namely, the Holy Spirit who will function as the animating principle.

In that sense, however, the resurrection isn’t an abolition of the original goodness of creation, but a restoration and redemption of it. Our bodies are dependent upon the world for our subsistence, but that is not the deepest fact about our being. We are creators and cultivators. Meeting our basic human needs must come first, but those realities are for the sake of the higher good of participating in the work of cultivating creation (which is why relief organizations have moved toward models of participatory development, or letting impoverished people design and manage their own aid networks). Necessity, as the ancients understood, is the mother of invention. It’s precisely in confronting our basic human needs that our distinct position as sub-creators can find its fulfillment.

***Humans in the Order of Creation***

When arguing that the body is dependent upon the created world for its continued health, we shouldn’t obscure the fact that this dependency is also a dependency on *other people.* If the body is the place of our personal presence *in the world,* it highlights the nearly irreducible sociality of the human person. We are oriented *toward others* and have obligations and responsibilities toward them.

As a boy, my favorite books to read were a series of stories of American legends and heroes. They were stories that perpetuated a strong sense of “can-do” spirit and a healthy stubbornness in the face of trial. But there was also a strong sense of individualism that ran through them, an individualism that runs near to the heart of the American consciousness. We dislike, perhaps more than anyone else, being dependent upon others.

It’s a point that takes social shape. Those that most remind us of our body’s dependency upon other human beings are those which we seek to cordon off and keep from public consciousness as much as possible. The infirm and aged are sectioned off into retirement communities, the children are sent to daycare, and the disabled are just avoided as much as possible. We would rather not be reminded that as they are, so we all are—regardless of whether we realize it or not.

This rejection of the dependency of the body *on others* is nothing other than a denial of the body. I have intentionally avoided the word, as it is perhaps overly charged and generally too freely thrown about. But it’s hard not to see how this rejection of the body’s dependency on others is at best a latent gnosticism, and at worst an outright rejection of the reality of our embodied human lives.

It is a problem that runs straight to the heart of perhaps modernism’s most pervasive (and potentially destructive) influence, *liberalism.* In theological circles, the term is always a dirty word (even liberals tend to think themselves moderates), but in the political realm, liberalism suggests that the organizing unit of society is the autonomous individual, and that individual has no special obligations toward those who gave him birth.

It is, in that sense, a view of the human person that ignores his status as *dependent* upon his parents (at least) for his existence. While John Locke is often rightly credited with being the philosopher that made the position famous, it was Thomas Hobbes before him who was instrumental in persuading Locke of it. And as Gilbert Meilander puts it, “Hobbes's human beings are all will and choice—and no body. Children, as he imagines them, are not born into any institution which corresponds to our concept of the family nor under the care of any person who is father or mother according to our traditional understanding of those roles. Indeed, there is nothing in his picture that could quite be described as a relation between the generations; for there are only sovereigns and subjects.”

The affirmation that the body is the seat of our personal presence in the world, then, is not simply an affirmation of the body’s responsibility toward creation. It is a robust affirmation of our responsible to other human bodies which we are connected to by virtue of our birth and generation. I mentioned in the previous chapter that the body links us to a particular people in a particular place and time. While we are all God’s children, the false universality of contemporary consumerism contains within it strong Gnosticizing tendencies. The reality is that we may be responsible to our parents than those across the world, by virtue of the fact that our bodies are linked together in a way that can never be altered (even full reconstructive plastic surgery takes its meaning precisely as an attempt to escape the body given to us by parents).

In addition, for creation care to be *creation* care, we must respect the place of *humans* in the created order—namely, at the *center.* Genesis 1 and 2 make it clear that humans occupy a distinct space in creation. Which means that if we wish to care for *creation—*that is, to treat it in the way which God intended it to be treated, we must make our treatment of other humans the center of our ethical action. We are not caring for creation unless we care for its caretakers.

I have a bit of a polemical point here that I won’t disguise. There has been much ado about the younger evangelical emphasis on creation care, and a lurking “abortion fatigue” among the younger set. While young evangelicals are pro-life, they have traded a central focus on abortion for a broader ethic of life, turning our attention to issues like poverty and environmentalism.

While I welcome the broader ethic and the renewed emphasis on caring for creation, it is important to make sure our care for the world is properly ordered. In short, the moral evil that is abortion undercuts the anthropology that a Christian environmental ethic depends upon. We care about creation, which means that we care about the humans that God has placed at the center of creation. Our ecology flows from our anthropology—and not the other way around. It is when humans sin that creation quits functioning properly, and it is when humans are restored that the created order will be renewed.

In that sense, evangelical ethics needs to keep the treatment of human bodies at the center of our ethics, rather than moving it to the periphery in order to focus on the treatment of the environment. While there is a correction of a previous imbalance currently underway, we should be wary of replacing one imbalance with another. Keeping humans at the center doesn’t subordinate the environment any more than the Bible does.

We cannot claim to care for the body if we do not recognize and remember the ways in which it makes us dependent upon others for our well-being. Granting for the sake of argument that poverty is sometimes caused by structural situations that are outside of the poor person’s control, the Biblical command to care for the poor, the orphan, and the widow highlights caring for those who cannot care for themselves. There is no one who fits that category more than infants.

At the same time, infants restrict our freedom of choice. Like our own bodies, they are given to us to care for, and they limit the range of options for our lives in ways that can only repel hearts and minds that are shaped by consumerism. The commodification of the infant intrinsic to the pro-choice position was never more on display than in the deeply pro-choice film *Juno.* After Juno has the baby and gives it up for adoption, her dad makes the point clear: “Someday, you’ll be back here, only on your own terms.” She had tried the baby on for size, but wasn’t quite ready to buy. Because, you know, babies should only be ours when we choose them.

In fact, the logic of abortion highlights how we think about the body. The language of *rights* rejects the responsibilities we have toward those persons we create. Even if we were to grant that the woman has rights over her own body in the way abortion advocates claim, as Christians we would still point out that “greater love hath no [woman] than this, that [she] lay down [her] life for [her] friend.” Paul can say that women are saved in childbearing, a line that is unremittingly weird. I am enormously tempted, however, to point out that women give up their bodies for their children in ways that men will never understand. If nothing else, if we imitate the sacrificial love of Jesus we will welcome and embrace the people who are dependent upon us, rather than spurning them (or killing them).

The treatment of other human bodies—including the bodies of infants—is the heartbeat of our theological ethics. While we must recover an appropriate emphasis on treating the created order as God intended us to, we cannot leave bioethical issues like abortion behind. If the body is the seat of our personal presence in the world, then it has an inherent dignity from the moment of conception by virtue of being a *human* body. We cannot ignore the tragedy that is the direct taking of human life even as we seek to remove those social and environmental factors that prompt people to seek it.

***The Body as Shaped by the World***

Gothic has been given a bad name. Within our contemporary cultuer, the appellation almost always refers to individuals who for various reasons have adopted a particularly dark way of dressing and acting. They often wear white makeup to make their skin more pale, and bleach their hair black. I don’t pretend to understand all the nuances of the subculture, but from what it looks like at a distance, it all seems decidedly depressing.

Which is why when I tell people I love Gothic architecture, they generally look askance at me. And yet they couldn’t be more different. Like all such developments, the style was motivated by developing technology that was incorporated into existing thought structures. In the early 12th century at Saint-Denis, France, Abbot Suger took medieval theologies of light and applied them to architecture, creating what is broadly considered the first Gothic cathedral. Where the Romanesque style had an arch that was rounded (like a half-circle), the Gothic arch came to a point at the top, which redirected the weight of the ceiling and allowed them to build taller buildings with much bigger windows.

The extraordinary results have been largely lost to us. Most Gothic cathedrals are so old and underfunded that their windows have grown dirty because of pollution, and their insides have turned musty and dark as a result. Additionally, the paint has worn away. Much like the ancient marble statues of Rome and Greece, medieval architects would have almost certainly painted the insides of their buildings a brilliant white, and the windows would have let in enough light to keep them well-lit during the day.

The theological developments of the 11th and 12th century allowed medieval Christians to shape their buildings in new and remarkable ways. But the technology wasn’t enough. New technologies introduce a range of possible actions. Minds that thought theologically made particular decisions about how to deploy those technologies, and to what ends. Because God is light and has filled his world with different sorts of lights, the medieval mindset naturally wanted as much natural light as possible (contrast that, of course, with our own artificial world of stage lights, smoke machines, and fluorescent lights).

And yet as statesman Winston Churchill once put it, “We shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us. “ Because the bodies are the seat of our *personal presence* in the world, the environments that we put our bodies inevitably altar the possibilities of our actions, and in ways that we generally do not realize. We actdifferently in an environment like a medieval cathedral than we do a converted warehouse—if only because as artists and stage designers know, the eyes are not entirely subject to our own control. Walking into a medieval cathedral, the eyes inevitably move upward, toward the heavens. The windows, the walls, the altar—everything is designed to turn our eyes toward the sky.

The point was G.K. Chesterton’s (and a lot of other people’s) before it was mine. In a talk he once gave, he said:

Architecture is the most practical and dangerous of the arts.  All the other arts we have to live with.  They are things we have to live with, and some have even said, with regard to some kind of music and paintings, that they are things they could live without.   But architecture is not a thing that we only have to live with–it is a thing we have to live in.  We live with it as Jonah lived with a whale.  Jonah could not see the monster and there is a great deal to be said for living in the most hideous house you can see in the landscape.  That is the one place you will be unable to see it.

Chesterton’s point that architecture is the “most practical and dangerous of the arts” should be heeded. At the same time, my claim is limited. I’m not ready (yet) to argue that we should rebuild medieval cathedrals. But we ignore the reality that the world shapes our bodies and our experience of at our own peril. The environment that we live in establishes the context for what we consider plausible human action by limiting the range of possibilities and moving our awareness to specific features of the world around us. And it does so without us necessarily being aware of the exchange that is at work in us. Because the body is the seat of our personal presence *in the world,* the structures (architectural and otherwise) inevitably alter the form that our personal presence takes.

We shape our world, in other words, and then our world shapes us.

***Habits of the Body***

I love the game of basketball. Though I only played formally for one year in high school, I realized that my central limitation wasn’t my skill. I had above average physical talent (for a basketball player), was a hard worker, and could shoot fairly well. It was, on the whole, a passable set of skills. And yet I found that on the basketball court, I never reached the point where I was able to act *unconsciously.* Instead, I spent nearly my whole time *thinking¸* aware of what I was doing and what I was supposed to be doing. My coaches liked my thoughtfulness, as I rarely made dumb mistakes. But at the same time, my self-awareness was a considerable hindrance in terms of actually playing the game well.

We aren’t supposed to think while playing basketball. That’s supposed to happen before, in practice, where we train ourselves to act in ways that are appropriate for the ends which we want to pursue. Basketball players practice tip drills, for instance, so that when the ball is in the air near their own backboard they will react by reaching to tip it in. To switch examples, pianists play scales not because they love scales *per se*, but so that when they reach scale-like sections of music their hands react accordingly.

In both cases, the body lies hidden beneath our conscious experience. In cases where our bodies are functioning properly, we don’t tell our muscles, nerves, and bones to run after a loose ball. Rather, our conscious awareness is directed away from ourselves, toward the ball itself. And in that sense, our bodies are wrapped up in what we are pursuing.

This ability of the body is similar to what philosopher Sean Gallagher calls the body *schema,* which he defines as, “a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring.” The body schema is that system of muscles, nerves, and organs that allow me act in the world *in ways that are particular to me* without me having to consciously direct my body to act in those ways.

While our body schemas are “pre-noetic”—they are, in other words, beneath our conscious experience—they are shaped and formed through interaction with others (particularly our parents as infants) and by interaction with our environment. As Gallagher puts it, “The body schema functions in an integrated way with its environment, even to the extent that it frequently incorporates into itself pieces of the environment that would not be considered part of one's body image.”

Gallagher doesn’t take it in this direction, but our body schema seems to be formed largely through our habitual ways of acting in the world. As our coaches always told us, we play like we practice. When we interact with others and with our environments, we establish habits *in the body,* as it were, that we may or may not be consciously aware of. Part of the point of practice (and having coaches who coach) is establishing good habits, or habits that lead to us being able to accomplish what we intend effectively. But to do that, there is frequently a training (or re-training) of the body that goes on.

At the same time, our range of actions is limited by what we intend or choose. We can do anything we want on a basketball court. We can play the game of basketball, or we can breakdance. Our body acts according to the ends we pursue. But it will pursue these ends in the way we have trained it to, or if we haven’t trained it deliberately, in the ways that come most naturally to it. In that sense, the body schema does limit our range of actions in the world. If we haven’t, for instance, trained our fingers to run through scales on a piano smoothly, then we won’t be able to play a difficult piece as the composer intended—regardless of what we intend to or not.

***The Image of the Body***

I only remember a few stories from Mr. Hatch’s kindergarten class. One of the most poignant involves a girl. (Come to think of it, they all involve girls.) I wasn’t particularly self-conscious as a kid, but when the cutest girl in the class, whom I had a particular attachment to, casually mentioned just how much my ears stuck out, I felt myself turning red.

Prior to that moment, I don’t remember ever thinking seriously about the shape of my ears. I didn’t realize that they stuck out abnormally, probably because I never could be bothered (to my mother’s chagrin) to look in a mirror. Even if I had, my exposure to television by that age was limited to Lavar Burton’s *Reading Rainbow* and the *Andy Griffith Show.* My parents weren’t about to tell me that my body was shaped funny. But my peers were happy to oblige. They always are.

Of course, I have proceeded since that day with a somewhat overactive awareness of how much my ears stick out. From my hats (and I can be found at points with a baseball hat permanently lodged on my head) to sunglasses, I take careful note of whether they push my ears out unnecessarily. I even went through a period where I sat at my desk alternating leaning on each ear in a desperate attempt to pin them closer to my head. I wish I was joking about that. But I’m not.

This is the funny human problem of *body image,* a phenomenon that has had more discussion of any aspect of the body. And yet the term sometimes suffers from some unclarity. It’s not clear what an *image* is, for instance, or how it relates to our actual bodies. To return to Sean Gallagher, his definition of the phrase is enormously helpful. He writes: “A *body image* consists of a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body. “

Of course, those perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs are frequently altered—as mine were—in our confrontation with the world around us. This is a point feminist theorist and theologians have made repeatedly. While there is considerable disagreement within the movement (as in any movement), significant voices have argued elegantly that our body images are “socially constructed.” In other words, our understandings of our own bodies are shaped and altered by our consumption of society’s narrative about who we should be and what we should look like. In most cases, we incorporate this social construction (particularly of beauty) into our self-understanding, and either work like crazy to conform or self-consciously rebel against the hegemonic destructiveness of the social powers.

To put the point differently, at root is the oft-mentioned debate between “essentialism” and “social constructionism.” I may be particularly naïve, but I see no reason to choose between the two. Part of the point of the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis is that *humans* have a *nature.* We cannot avoid essentialism and the liberating restrictions on human choices that entails if we are to pursue human flourishing. At the same time, the body is *in the world,* and the world is a decidedly sinful place. The reality is that worldly (i.e. unchristian) notions of the body and its proper shape *are* incorporated into our self-understanding and body-image as Christians. When that occurs, it obscures—though never obliterates—our essential humanness which takes shape in relationships of love, sacrifice, and care.

Our body images are shaped from a very young age by those whom we interact with in ways that we do not decide or choose. Our understanding of what beautiful bodies are, our understanding of how bodies should act, our pre-noetic habits and patterns—all these are subtly altered by the world in which we live.

In that sense, we inherit our bodies from society and its traditions (or anti-traditions, as the case may be). The body’s original goodness may be obscured by the pervasiveness of sin. But the body is still *given* to us. The gift may be marred, but it is still a gift. And the dignity and glory of humans is that our Maker has given himself in order to restore us. We are exhorted to submit the body to his authority, and to remold it according to the pattern we have in Jesus. The conflict between the world’s systems and structures, which are opposed to the knowledge of God, happens even in the very bodies that we have.

***Virtues Necessary for the Body in the World***

Bodies are the place of our personal presence in the world. Because we are dependent upon the world, and because the world alters us, we need to be particularly judicious about how we live out the life to which we have been called. The posture of our bodies needs to fit the environment we live in, to bring grace and transformation to it according to the power of the Gospel. There are, I think, three particular virtues that should order us in our late modern world.

*Gratitude.* Being *grateful* for our bodies might be the most difficult aspect of living in our late modern world. Some people have experienced debilitating diseases, while others were born with disabilities that severely altered their possibilities. Others feel the weight of racism, while yet others hate their bodies so much that they starve them or lacerate them. There is, it seems, little about our bodies to be grateful for.

At the same time, despite the pathologies of the body our late-modern world has passed on to us, gratitude is the only appropriate response to people whose bodies, marked by the realities of sin and suffering as we might be, have been given life. We are earthen, but always vessels. And the functions or disfunctions of the body can never impinge upon the singular reality that they are the temple of the Holy Spirit and deserve all the reverence and honor that the reality deserves. Our bodies have been given to us, and our only choices are to cynically reject the gift on grounds that it does not meet our standards or refuse to demand of God and his providence what we never deserved to begin with. All of life is a gift, and those who have received are obligated to praise.

*Care.* The poor, Jesus reminds us, we shall always have with us. As I mentioned above, part of what is so debilitating about systemic poverty is the inability of people to meet their basic human needs. In that sense, as humans we need to care for others in such a way that dignifies them as humans. At the same time, our care for others requires something more than compassion. Christian ethics are a particular response to reality, and while emotions are intrinsic for motivating us to act appropriately, they are not sufficient in themselves for determining *how* to act. If we go that route, we open ourselves to the sort of emotional manipulation that propaganda feeds upon. To that end, we need to ensure that our compassion for others is really responding to the obligations imposed upon us by their suffering and our relationship with them.

*Humility.* Bodies are good, but they aren’t everything. And Paul is comfortable speaking of our particular flesh, here and now, as “lowly” (Phillipians 3:21) in contrast to the glorious body which we await. The tendency of our contemporary culture is to ignore the lowliness of our own frail, dependent bodies and the limits that make us human. At the same time, we ignore the reality that we do not always know the effects our actions have on the world and on other human bodies. Because of this, a posture of humility requires the gracious acceptance of other people’s lives in ours that we may think wrong. For instance, consider a difficult case like that of Teri Schiavo, who lay comatose and whose husband wanted to remove her from life support. The bioethical issues are numerous, but one thing is clear: a posture of *humility* toward the other person demands that if there is a *chance* that they are a living, human person, that we treat them as such and not intentionally withdraw their life support.

***A Concluding Theological Postscript***

The good news of the Gospel is this: Christ Jesus died to save sinners. The rebellion of Adam and Eve in the garden transformed their relationship to the created order. Working the land was always part of the plan. But the curse made the fruit of the earth much harder to cultivate and pick. As Paul puts the dilemma in Romans 8:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the salvation for sinners. But as been frequently pointed out, it is a salvation that encompasses the entire created order.

At the same time, it’s important to point out what Paul *isn’t* necessarily saying. He doesn’t seem to be *equating* the restoration of the cosmos with the restoration of humans. Rather, there is a subtle awareness of the differences in how those are brought about. It is *humans* who groan inwardlyand have the “firstfruits of the Spirit.” The Spirit is not given to creation, nor found in creation. He is in his Temple, the human body, and bringing it into conformity with the will of God. The work of the Spirit radiates *outward* through man into the cosmos, restoring the proper relationship between man and creation.

The Gospel makes sinners humans, and humans are meant to cultivate creation. It is impossible to care for the body without caring for the world that it lives in, for our homes, our cities, and our environment. But at the same time, we cannot care for those things properly without understanding the dignity of the place and role humans have within the created order, and ardently defending and preserving that dignity. What will it gain our society if we gain the environment but kill off the people?

Chapter Five: Tattoos and the Meaning of Our Bodies

Body piercing didn’t save my life. And it didn’t save yours, either.

It is a catchy phrase, even if it made for some unsightly t-shirts. Those of us who grew up attending Christian concerts and festivals, and who have spent the past decade repenting both for going and for what happened there, have doubtlessly seen them—Jesus’s twisted body hanging on the cross with the oversized spikes through his hands, and the block lettering on the side: “Body piercing saved my life.” The point is is obvious: “Jesus’ body was pierced, right, so, you know I should be able to get that extra earring, *mom.”*

As a teenager, I rather enjoyed starting fracases—or is it fraci?—in my youth group. That quality hasn’t really gone away, though I’ve learned to temper it with a healthy dose of prudence and congeniality. But growing up, I’d get my kicks out of stirring the pot, watching it come to a boil, and then sitting back and enjoying the debate.

There were few issues that got people more passionate and personally invested than tattoos. Like dating and courting, high-schoolers would wrangle over it as though the whole world depended upon it, and then forget those debates ever happened as soon as they reached college. Overworked and under-developed youth pastors would bravely stand in the midst of it all, attempting to placate both parents and their constituency.

But the great tattoo war of the 1990s is finished. And those in favor won.

While the occasional evangelical leader will still gamely raise an objection, as Charles Colson recently did on his radio program, the prevalence of tattoos among younger evangelicals (and their leaders) has drained the energy from the topic. Mostly, younger evangelicals just don’t care. We are happily tatted up, and focused on fixing deeper problems, like sex-trafficking and poverty.

This shift in focus, though, shouldn’t obscure the astonishing nature of the tattoo revolution. Nearly *40% of* evangelicals between the ages of 18 and 25 have tattoos, and we’re *six times* more likely than our parents to have piercings in places other than the earlobe. The practice has become so popular that when Cross Roads Church made a video mocking younger evangelical worship services, the greeter made sure to reveal his tat to “show he’s got a past.” And all the watchers understood.

It is time, though, for a post-mortem on the body modification movement, not because it has left us, but because it has become so embedded in our consciousness that most of us think there’s nothing there to think about. It’s precisely when cultural shifts move from the surface to the subterranean that they bleed outward into other areas of life. And tattoos and body-piercings are a surface issue—a pun that is as obvious as it is bad.

I realize that exploring the question of tattoos might prompt eye-rolling, and appropriately so. I don’t pretend that this is an issue that is anywhere on the level of importance as feeding the hungry. But at the same time, the widespread acceptance of marking our bodies is a cultural bellweather that signifies how we will deal with other issues, and how we conceive of ourselves in relation to our bodies. Cultures don’t shift capriciously or quickly, and when they do to the extent that evangelicalism has on this issue, generally something significant is at work.

But I have a limited goal, then. I want to try to peer beneath the shift to the assumptions that it depends upon, and those only from a cultural standpoint. You might have had any number of reasons to get that Jesus fish lodged on your ankle, and those reasons may be more or less noble. That’s not my concern, at least not here and now. Instead, I am curious to know why at *this* point in evangelicalism’s history tattoos, piercings, and other forms of body modificationhave become preferred options for self-expression. When previous generations have turned to the pen and paintbrush, we have turned those tools on to ourselves.

***The Mainstreaming of Tattoos***

For the better part of the twentieth century, tattoos were limited to lower classes and marginalized social groups. Perhaps the most famous example of a tatted rockstar was Popeye, the cartoon sailor created in the early 30s, but whose popularity endured into the 80s when Robin Williams made the movie. His bulging biceps were marked by two anchors, signs of his status as a sailor and a member of the lower class.

In such a world, tattoos and piercings were taboo. They were a sign of deviants and outcasts, like bikers, convicts, and sexual revolutionaries. This was especially true during the emergence of the middle class in the post WWII era, the so-called “Leave-it-to-Beaver” generation whose “white-bread” sensibilities and focus on cleanliness and order extended all the way to the markings on the skin. In that sense, the tattoo was an object of resistance against this mainstream culture, an act of defiance against standards widely accepted as “normal.”

As tattoos have mainstreamed, their content has shifted from themes of war, women, and iconic American imagery toward a more exotic, international flavor. In the late 80s, Japanese characters where introduced and became enormously popular, a trend that would have been unthinkable for those who were a part of the generation that fought in WWII.

The transition toward a more pluralist tattoo world raised the stakes for tattooers. Tattoing took on a new level of artistry, and the movement developed a new level of self-consciousness and organization. Spontaneity was out, and reflective deliberation was in. Rather than being a social expression of deviancy or a way of expressing attachment and loyalty—think the classic idea of tattooing your girl’s name on your shoulder—tattoos became a means of self-expression more akin to playing the piano or painting a picture. As such, they are rarely purchased with anything but careful deliberation about how we want to express ourselves.

But like all communities, the tattoing world has not escaped the trappings or temptations of consumerism. If anything, as it has moved into the mainstream, it has increasingly become more consumerist in nature. Websites, books, conventions, and other avenues to show people “custom” designs have exploded, enabling more and more people to get the same custom designs. What began as a sign of marginalization and resistance to the culturally sterile consumerism of suburban American life has, like so many resistance movements, been coopted by the very thing that it originally rebelled against.[[5]](#footnote-5) When rebellion and breaking boundaries becomes chic, as it clearly has been for the past fifty years, the taboos eventually become the norms.

***The Body’s Meaning***

Tattoos were originally taboo because they challenged popular notions about the body’s “proper” shape. In that sense, their cultural significance extends beyond any of our individual motivations for “getting inked.” Before angsty teenagers got inked to remember their youth group field trips, tattoos had a political meaning. The sailor might get his tattoo as an indication of his devotion to America, while the prisoner would do it as an act of defiance against his captors, an expression of his own freedom over and against “the man.”

The point is worth bearing in mind for younger evangelicals whose parents can’t quite understand why we want to get ink. For them, a tattoo had a very different meaning than it does for us, because they existed in a very different world.

But for both generations, tattoos are not “empty” symbols, as if there could be such a thing. They—along with piercings and other forms of body modification—have significance precisely because they are signs that contain meaning within themselves. They are not gibberish, like “raerhspdfiajera8ysdfj[ieraheri” is. Just as the sign of the cross is a visible reminder of our salvation, so tattoos are visible reminders or expressions of other realities.

In some ancient cultures, tattoos functioned as a sign of ownership, either by the pagan gods or by someone else. In more recent times, Nazi’s tattooed Jews as they entered concentration camps, a dehumanizing equivalent to ranchers who mark their cows with their logos. It’s common for Christians to mark themselves with Bible verses—which are at least eight times cooler if in the original language—or the cross, or some other religious icon that expresses their faith.

In each of those contexts, the tattoos are significant precisely because they draw on a common stock of symbols that point to larger realities. They exist in the interesting nexus of what we *intend* by them, and what *society* understands them to be. But the fact that they are social means that there are limits to the nature of our “self-expression,” at least if we are expressing ourselves to anyone at all and not simply engaging in masturbatory communicative practices. To tattoo yourself, for instance, with the Seattle Mariners logo surrounded by a heart and then claim that it expresses your undying appreciation for the Texas Rangers is to commit a symbolic party foul. The public nature of symbols must guide how we use them.

My point—and I do have one—is that our skin and what we do to it is not as private as we sometimes think. We may make personal decisions about how to color our hair, or what clothes to wear, but such decisions are never *private*. They exist within a complicated web of relationships and symbols, the meaning of which we do not have the license to decide for ourselves. How we live in the body—and what we do *to* the body—inherently affects others, regardless of whether we intend to or not.

Some people recognize this and attempt to get around the problem by covering up the tattoo or piercings, or getting them where only they can see them. But that approach to tattoos only reinforces to the public nature of the body. While the tattoos and piercings may only be for you, the fact that they must be covered to remain private is a constant reminder of the body’s social nature. The decision to reveal or conceal our body modifications contains the implicit question, “To whom?” Because the body is a social object, that question is unavoidable.

We all grew up memorizing the line, “No man is an island.” The same is true of our bodies. The skin stretches beyond its limits, into the world around us. It connects us with the world just as much as it separates us from the world, and as such, is the context where our understanding of what it means to be human plays out. Bodies matter. They exist in social communities, and we cannot fail to acknowledge that if we wish to live in them well. What we *to* our skin matters just as much as what we do *within* or *from* the skin.

***How Far the Meaning?***

Even though you’re just as likely to see a tattoo from the pulpit in some younger evangelical churches as you are in the youth group, the widespread acceptance of tattoos hasn’t eliminated fringe and marginalized cultures. If anything, they have continued to push the boundaries of “normal.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, as America experienced a technological explosion, the range of options to customize and modify our bodies exploded as well. Tattoos and piercings mainstreamed—along with nose jobs, breast enhancements, and liposuction—while more fringe forms of body modification continue to break taboos. Whether it is adding spikes or horns on the head, or reshaping the tongue or ears, the underlying questions and issues beneath tattoos are simply being repeated, if only in slightly more shocking form.

While such groups and people are on the margins of both society and evangelicalism—which is only to say that they are a minority—it’s important to take the questions and problems they pose seriously. All marginalized communities may not ever have the cultural influence the tattoing community ended up with, but they still push the window of acceptable body types outward, challenging what counts as “normal” and where our intuitions lie.

The fringe body modification movements, though, have taken two forms. The more traditional form is the aesthetic critique of society and the accompanying elective modifications. Some individuals surgically insert implants like stars and other shapes beneath the skin, creating an unsettling effect that highlights the *plastic* nature of the body. Such modifications don’t seem to serve any *functional* purpose, but are rather strongly oriented toward breaking taboos and expressing a person’s individuality and personality.

At the same time, there is a growing movement to modify the body not only along aesthetic lines or as a means of “self-expression,” but as a way of not only eliminating disabilities, diseases, aging, and death, but *enhancing* the body in such a way that its powers extend beyond what it might otherwise be capable of. The basic goal is to shape and restructure our bodies in such a way that we create a race of technological supermen that are not so different from *I, Robot.* Because who wouldn’t want to live forever and leap buildings in a single bound?

These movements are, again, on the fringes of society. And yet, they expose the intuitions and presuppositions that lurk beneath the tamer, culturally acceptable forms of the same ideologies—namely, tattoos, piercings, nose jobs, etc. Examining the fringes is helpful because they expose the sort of intellectual currents that are shaping our world, and that have been shaping our world the past fifty years.

***The Unstable Body***

The younger evangelical experience of the world has been characterized by instability and superficiality in the areas that matter most, leaving us *desperate* for a deeper sense of meaning and significance.

Our family situation, of course, has been much maligned. And while the divorce claims are overrated, even those families that stay together often lack the sort of vitality and authenticity that younger evangelicals crave. Geographically, we have been transient, shipping off to college in greater numbers and over greater differences than our parents did. Culturally, we have been destabilized by the opportunities to travel and by the growing awareness from globalism that the world is getting smaller.

In one sense, the widespread acceptance of tattoos can be seen as an attempt to navigate the instabilities that we feel. Tattoos and piercings are enormously personal, and frequently tied to narratives and stories that explain their meaning. In that sense, they’re almost like a form of baptism after salvation. We have to find a way of *internalizing* the events that happen to us, *organizing* them into a meaningful pattern, and then *expressing* that meaning outward as a form of solidifying and reminding us of what occurred. Tattoos and piercings seem to play this sort of role for younger people.

In that sense, tattoos and piercings express a type of longing for stability and organization in an otherwise confusing and chaotic world. Their adoption into evangelical circles is a minor indictment of the health of evangelicalism, which is presumably why tattoos have been so vociferously resisted by evangelical parents and leaders.

This also explains why there is so much anxiety around tattoos *permanence.*  Track the conversations between eager millenials and their parents, and one of the central objections to the tattoo is their permanent nature. Even *if* tattoos are simply aesthetic in nature, they have to be treated differently than make-up or clothing, as they mark the body in a unique way. The explosion of tattoos suggests not a denial of death or a refusal to take it seriously, but rather a longing for stability and order in a transient world. When everything else fades away, we are at least left with our bodies and the marks we have made with them, as the lead character in Memento is.

But for Christians, tattoos also seem to be grounded in our personal *experience* of the world, and in that sense are a continuation of a distinctly evangelical point of emphasis: the possibility of real and direct relationship with God. And yet, there is clearly something different at work going on. After all, previous generations, which may have not felt the same sense of dislocation or instability, needed ways to externalize their experiences. That is a *human* need, even if it is one our generation feels more acutely than others. What is it that made *tattoos* a viable option for us in a way that they were not for other generations?

I suspect a significant part of our adoption has to do with our broadened horizons. Through travel, education, and the constant reminders of the limitations that our own cultural experience imposes upon us, we have become entranced by attempting to see the world through other people’s eyes. There is in certain quarters a kind of “cafeteria culturalism” that goes on, where we become fascinated by other cultures and their manner of expressions. That fascination has brought us in contact with other parts of the world where tattoos were more acceptable, like the Pacific, but it has also given us a more diverse and polyethnic set of imagery to tattoo our body with. Everything looks cooler if it’s a Chinese character.

The close cousin of this expansion has been the death of the “meta narrative” that had structured previous generation’s experience—which is to say, “post-modernism.” As Sarah Coakley famously puts it, “The question that seems to press in a post-modern age is this:  if we can no longer count on any universal "grand narrative" to bear the burden of religious and philosophical needs for meaning-making, is it perhaps only resistant fleshliness that we can look to as an Archimedean point of stability—a seemingly unambiguous focus for longings, myths and quasi-religious hopes?  Yet on closer reflection this too--the post-modern "body"—becomes subject to infinitely variable social constructions.”

It’s tempting to think that this notion of the body is peculiar to postmodernism, and there are certain aspects of it that are. But for many of the pre-modern thinkers, like Aquinas and Plato, *matter* was simply *pure possibility*. It was the substratum where change occurred. In that sense, the concept of the soul wasn’t *anti-*matter, but rather organized and unified matter in particular ways. It *formed* matter, or shaped it into *human* matter or *animal* matter.

The central difference with postmodernism, though, is that there is no *form* that establishes *boundaries* for what we can do to our *matter.* There is no “human” that we all have in common that establishes definite limits on what we can do to our bodies. In fact, in some circles there is an antipathy toward any concept that approaches such normative accounts because of the possibility that they will exclude or marginalize those who are different.

But while that is a worry worth hearing, we need some objective criteria that would help us navigate the difference between, say, tattoos and elective amputations—a practice that is precisely what it sounds like. That’s the aesthetic side. On the technological side, the possibility of “enhancing” human powers exposes that the human body *limits* human capabilities, and that it is part of its goodness that it does so. Without some sort of explanation for how bodies need to be constrained, there will be no constraints on those who wish to reshape the body according to their preferred definition of what it means to be “human.”

The introduction of post-modernism and the corresponding broadening of our cultural horizons has undercut the cultural stability around our bodies and what shapes them. The effect is twofold: the sort of cultural narratives and traditions that may have shaped our bodies—even those that were specific to the natural family—have receded to the background, leaving us as individuals to make sense of the world and our bodies on our own. Tattoos promise a meaningful encounter with the body, for they inscribe those things that are often the center of our values on the body. Bu they promise this encounter in a uniquely individualist way, for it is always an encounter that must be rooted in the individual’s particular experience and viewpoint.

In that sense, tattoos suggest that we view the body more and more as a canvass for individual self-expression, but those selves are desperate for stability and unity. Tattoos and piercings are enormously significant for my generation. We love not only to get them, but we love to tell the stories of *why* we got them, and how they have affected our self-understanding. There’s a premium here on uniqueness and creativity—just like we want to make sure no one names their kid the same as ours, or has the same color dresses as our wedding, we are desperate to separate ourselves from the crowd—who look, it seems, astonishingly similar—by marking up our bodies.

Rather than being the site of our personal presence from which we act upon and within *the world*, the body itself becomes an object of construction. We organize our experience and then project it outward on to the flesh, rather than having our experience organized for us, as it might have been in the past. And once organized, we shape our bodies accordingly. As literary theorist Terry Eagleton puts it, “Having moulded the landscape to our own image and likeness, we have now begun to recraft ourselves.  Civil engineering has been joined by cosmetic surgery.”

And yet, the expression of our individuality suffers from what I might call the “*Devil Wears Prada”* problem. The film—since I shamefully haven’t read the book—is about a rather plain young woman who takes a job at a fashion magazine. In one enlightening scene, she laughs when a fashion designer agonizes which blue belt to choose, despite the almost identical shades of blue. The editor of the magazine, a fashion legend, responds by dismantling her, pointing out that the color of the sweater that she is wearing made it to the Target shelves precisely because it was featured in her magazine two years prior.

The point is obvious: even though she *thinks* that her sweater is a defiant rejection of the demands of high fashion, Madison avenue set the criteria that shaped her color choices. In a real sense, her expression of “individuality” is a faux one. She exists, as we all do, within a society that presents to us certain options as acceptable and others as not.

The promise of individuality that tattoos offers, then, may be a false one. In one sense, evangelicals are simply doing what everyone else in the world is doing—consuming the culture around them, which has decided to package its wares under the guise of “individuality” and “freedom.” You might get Tweetie bird, while I get Roadrunner. But we’re both getting tattoos because we live in the culture around us, and because that culture has shaped our preferences about the appropriate standards for creative self-expression.

This is the paradox, then, of the cultural ascension of tattoos: While I think tattoos really do mark a desire for significance and meaning, and suggest that the body and culture have become destabilized, we have not yet moved past the clutches of consumerism *or* the individualism we so frequently criticize. If anything, the dominance of tattoos seems to be the triumph of modern western individualism, for they offer us one of the highest forms of individual expression—the marking of one’s own body—but within a consumerist logic.

We may be influenced by “eastern ways of thinking” and want a chinese character on our arm. But in our context, that sort of selectivity about the world is a sign of the culture’s fragmentation. If we were really Eastern, we might inhabit the traditions in which we were raised and work to change them from within, as—until Hollywood started reaching the East—younger people who are actually “eastern” in their thinking would do.

***Younger Evangelicals and Body Modifications***

Over the past twenty years, younger evangelicals have expressed a growing dissatisfaction for “modern western individualism and rationalism” and evangelical captivity to it. And yet, in their reactions against rationalist and individualist forms of thinking, younger evangelicals missed the aspect of modernity that is perhaps the most destructive: liberalism, or the idea that individuals have the right to do as we please *so long as* we do not harm anyone else.

Most popular level reflection about tattoos and body modification *starts* from the presupposition that we have the right to do with our bodies as we please, provided that the procedures are medically safe. In evangelical circles, this notion of freedom and rights is often papered over with notions about Christian liberty, and buttressed by a decidedly inward way of approaching ethics. As long as our heart is “in the right place” and there are no clear prohibitions in Scripture, then any critiques are necessarily a sign of legalism.

Of course, everyone wants to be on the side of freedom. But the problem with political liberalism (in its contemporary, degraded form) is that it views the body as distinct from the communities it lives in. It is a deeply individualist conception of the body, to the point of being gnostic. It denies the body any intrinsic significance, such that what we do *to* the body, regardless of whether we *harm* ourselves or anyone else, has significance beyond how it makes us feel.

My worry, then, is not with tattoos *per se,* but rather the cultural logic that seems to undergird their adoption here and now. Specifically, while tattoos are generally aesthetic modifications—albeit, permanent ones—more extreme forms of body modification betray a deeply anti-physical strand. Some extreme forms of body modification make the body’s status questionable, either by reshaping it away from commonly accepted standards of aesthetics or by attempting to transcend its particular limitations. We may be earthen vessels, in other words, but if we can, we’ll turn ourselves into tricked out, steel studded, porcelain vessels of awesomeness.

My goal here has simply been to raise the question about whether the widespread acceptance of tattoos by younger evangelicals signals a way in which we have been co-opted by some of these deeper ideologies. We grew up mocking our parents for putting an “I Love Jesus” sticker on otherwise bad art and calling it Christian, and yet we *might* have done the same with some bad philosophies.

***The Bible and Tattoos***

The fact that I have waited this long to bring up the Bible in this conversation breaks all the youth group rules. And I’m doing that quite intentionally. Too often Christians approach this topic and others through a very narrow lens of Scripture, addressing only the two or three most obvious texts that deal specifically with the question, and then move on. That way of reading Scripture intentionally subordinates or ignores passages that might weigh against the conclusions that we wanted to hear from it. The only way to let Scripture inform our lives is to read it patiently, exploring the nuances and the richness of the full counsel of God.

Let’s start, though, with what seems obvious:

There is no straight line that we can draw between ancient practices of tattoos and their contemporary manifestation. In the ancient Jewish world, the dominant uses for tattoos were either punitive or to align people with the local deities. In the Hellenized world of the New Testament, tattoos were primarily punitive. While expressions of associating themselves with local deities did happen, they were less common.

If there is something to be said about purely aesthetic forms of tattoing or other forms of body modification, then, it will have to be an inference. Simply quoting Leviticus 19:28 isn’t going to cut it, as the cultural context is completely different.

But Leviticus 19:28 *is* interesting in that it explicitly prohibits the marking of our bodies. And that’s a piece of evidence that can’t be discounted in terms of “gathering the Biblical facts” about the meaning of our bodies, and their relationship to society. And simply dismissing the aesthetic component is

Understanding the role of the Levitical prohibitions for Christians, though, is notoriously difficult. There are obvious examples of laws that no one follows, and that no one thinks we *should* follow. Maybe the clearest example of such a law is the commandment to not mix fibers, a prohibition which if followed would eliminate most of the clothing options available to us. If you want to follow the tattoos prohibition, you’re gonna have to follow that one, too.

But that law simply highlights the complexity of the issue. In Exodus and Numbers, the priests are commanded to wear clothing made of…multiple fibers. Beneath that disparity is a strong distinction between what was permissible for the priesthood, and what was allowed for the people, a distinction that might suggest that there is something divine and dangerous about *mixing.* The repudiation isn’t an in-principle rejection, in other words, simply meant to distinguish Israel from the world around them, but may point to the godlike power that is demonstrated when humans mix the elements of the earth—a danger that exists in every place and time.

Of course, the dominant Jewish tradition throughout history has been to read the prohibition on tattoos as normative not only for *punitive* tattoos, but aesthetic ones as well. And contrary to piercings, there is no evidence within the Old Testament that the Israelites tattooed themselves for aesthetic reasons.

In fact, the distinction between tattoos and piercings in the Old Testament is instructive. On the one hand, there is lots of evidence that the Israelites pierced themselves for aesthetic reasons, like the surrounding cultures. But rather than *tattoo* their slaves, the Old Testament commands the Israelites to *pierce* them—which is in contrast with the surrounding cultures. The difference points to the relative ownership and impermanence of slaves within the culture of Israel—and to the significance with which they treated tattoos. Whatever else, they took marking someone’s—or their own—body seriously.

To fill the point out, consider the imagery of tattoos in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites are exhorted to know the Shema so well that it is inscribed on their foreheads. In Isaiah 44, the Lord suggests that some Israelites will someday write on their hands “Belonging to the Lord,” and later (49:16) that the Lord has written their names on his hands. In the former, the marking seems to be tied to the perfection of the Israelites’ status as the people of God. Whereas the Old Testament is marked by their infidelity and change, someday they would be so faithful that some will mark the name of the Lord on their body. In both cases, tattoos mark a permanent status and an expression of fidelity—which is to say, they are not aesthetic in nature.

This is as close as the Old Testmaent comes to sanctioning tattoos. And the New Testament, contrary to popular belief, comes no closer.

The first and perhaps most important passage is Paul’s claim that he bears the stigmata of Jesus Christ on his body. “Stigma” is, of course, the greek word for tattoo, and Paul’s point has sometimes been used to justify voluntary Christian tattooing. But curiously, tattoos in Hellenistic culture were almost exclusively viewed as punitive. If anything, Paul is subverting a practice that would have been viewed as dishonorable and discrediting by associating it with the death of Jesus. But this isn’t a point in favor of *voluntary* tattooing, but rather points to the reality of the suffering that Paul endured.

The second central section is Revelation. The famous “mark of the beast” has sometimes been treated as a tattoo, while the people of God get the sign of the Lord sealed on their foreheads. Like Isaiah, the markings on the body have nothing to do with aesthetics or the inner-expression of the self, as they do in their contemporary context, and instead point to the permanent and unchangeable status of those who bear them. Here, while the Hellenistic culture might not know of tattoos that were oriented around ownership, the Bible seems to.

More famously, some people have suggested that Jesus comes down from heaven with a tattoo on his thigh in Revelation 19:6, which reads, “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, ‘King of Kings and Lord of Lords.’” It’s a favorite verse of young evangelicals like Mark Driscoll, who have used it to mock sissiphied men not man enough to get a tat to show their love for Jesus. Nevermind, of course, that the translation of the verse leaves the nature of the “tattoo” *at best* ambiguous. A number of scholars argue that grammatically, the sentence is better translated something along the lines of, “On his robe covering his thigh”—which is to say, the name is inscribed on the part of the robe that would have been visible to the world while riding a horse, and where the sword would have traditionally been placed (even though in the image, the sword is coming out of Jesus’ mouth). The thigh is the euphemism for the place where covenants were sworn in the Old Testament, and that Jesus has his name written on the clothing that covers his suggests that he is the revelation and fulfillment of God’s promise to his people.

But we might say more about this. The name that Jesus has on his thigh is akin to what Paul says he is given because of his suffering on the cross—the “name which is above every name.” In that sense, there is no need for Jesus to add tattoos to his body, which was marked on the cross. Jesus bears that name because it has been given to him, but its content is contained *not* in a tattoo on his body, but in the nail prints in his hands and feet.

There is an astonishing sort of literalism that goes on when young people eager to get tattoos deploy Revelation. Additionally, there is a presumption that all markings on the skin have the same meaning, a presumption that is manifestly false. Simply put, the Bible knows nothing of tattoos that take the shape as self-expression, or tattoos as an aesthetic decision.

Within church history, the witness is mixed. Where Christian missionaries have gone, the practice of tattooing has largely ceased. Constantine banned the practice of facial tattoos as a punitive measure, which is perhaps an indication that he understood the limited ability of the state to mark people’s bodies permanently, for whatever reason. Occasionally, tattoos have been used to commemorate pilgrimages. But most often, where tattoos have existed within Christian communities, they have been used as acts of defiance within regimes where they are persecuted, as the Coptic Christians currently use them. In that sense, the tattoo is an act of political opposition.

In that sense, tattoos are an attempt to continue the tradition of martyrdom and identification with Jesus on the cross. They are not an identification with the dominant culture and its aesthetic standards, as they often are in our culture. Additionally, they are not an expression of missionality, a means of identifying with a particular group in order to reach them. Rather, they are a subversion of the standards of what it means to be an outcast and to have bodies that are marked as such. The opposition of the martyr is not an opposition for its own sake, but an opposition that demonstrates a fierce disregard for this world, rather than an attachment to it. In that sense, the martyr turns not to their own body or the markings on it for a sense of stability and permanence, but the promises of God.

**Conclusion**

What, then, should we make of tattoos? My goal is not to offer an outright dismissal of them as a practice, but simply to raise the question of the role tattoos play in our own culture. The fragmentation of American life and the dissolution of those identity-shaping institutions like the family and the school, and the superficiality of most of evangelicalism has left young people desperate for a sense of identity. Many of them have turned to the practice of marking their bodies. But that decision is a *live option* for most young people only because the counter-culture of the late 50s and 60s has become the mainstream culture, and the dissolution of cultural norms that they desired has triumphed.

Tattoos, in other words, often shift from self-expression to self-construction. The selves seeking to be expressed are as fragmented as the world around us and are looking for a point of unity that they can organize around. The human body has become that point for many young people, who attempt to organize their lives through the narratives that surround their tattoos.

In that sense, the rise of tattoos in evangelicalism points to the failure of evangelicalism to provide a meaningful, organizing depth that is able to withstand the onslaught of consumerism. That tattoos have become a phenomenon within evangelicalism at the same time they have become acceptable to the world around us isn’t an accident. Younger evangelical critiques of the consumerism of our parents have blinded our eyes to the role it has played in our reaction against it. Jesus is our brand, the cross is our logo, and where others put Nike on their back, we put the ICTHUS.

In that sense, to claim continuity with the rest of Christian tradition or Scripture misses what’s unique about tattoos in our late-modern world. In our world, tattoos function as a sort of polytheistic expression of fidelity to our local deities, as our identities are ineradicably shaped by what we consume. But in such contexts, Christians have never attempted to place Jesus within the pantheon of Gods and make him one option among many, but rather have asserted his Lordship through sacrificial love, hope in suffering, and acts of mercy.

Which is to say, as Christians, we need to make sure most of all that our bodies are shaped by faith, hope, and love, and not by Madison Avenue.

Chapter Six: The Body and its Pleasures

There aren’t many things that younger evangelicals speak with one voice about, but sex is one of them. Rob Bell’s provocatively titled *Sex God* is perhaps the best example of the younger evangelical approach to sex and sexuality, but we could list others.

One of the most famous, and most controversial examples of the younger evangelical approach to sex came from the quintessential young-evangelical pastor Mark Driscoll, whose sermon series on the erotic (though perhaps not explicit) Song of Solomon exposed many of the faultlines between the generations. Traditional conservative leader John Macarthur, the founder of Master’s College got squeamish about the frankness of Driscoll’s talk, and let the world know.

Yet the frank descriptions of oral sex coming from the ~~pulpit~~ ~~lectern~~ stool covered over the relative, well, ordinariness of the message. In short, it takes no courage to tell an audience of younger evangelicals that sex is a good thing, and that God cares about our sex lives. Given the frequency at which we like to talk about it, it’s a wonder he cares about anything else.

That’s not a throwaway line. The second-half of the twentieth century has been characterized by a myopic focus on sex and sexuality. From TMZ to Twilight, we are entranced by everything pertaining to sexualized bodies. In theological circles, “theology of the body” has become almost shorthand for talking about sex and the goodness of sexual pleasure—despite the fact that there are other aspects of the body worth considering. Even Pope John Paul’s *Theology of the Body*, perhaps the most influential treatment of the topic to date, is exclusively focused on sex and marriage. It is, at least, a limitation that the Pope was self-aware enough to acknowledge. The equivocation between sex and the body has meant that raising any questionabout the legitimacy of certain forms of sex or sexual pleasure is tantamount to viewing physical pleasure—and by extension, the body—as bad.

The younger evangelical narrative about sex is astonishing for its bravado. There is a hint that everyone has been wrong about sex until now, and that we should talk about how awesome it is to have orgasms so that we can show the world that we love sex too. We love mocking Thomas Kinkade and Nashville for being cheap imitations of the broader culture, but may be doing precisely the same sort of thing with respect to our teaching about sex. They have their Cosmo—we have Christian Nymphos.

Regardless, the story about how traditional evangelicals dislike sex is a convenient—not to mention lucrative—one. Whether it is accurate is more debatable. Before he was writing apocalyptic fiction that we *all* plan on leaving behind, author Tim LaHaye (along with his wife) was describing the intense beauty of sex and sexuality—and selling a lot of books doing it. In fact, the Christian sex-manual world has exploded in the past 30 years. *Intended for Pleasure* is still in print, *His Needs, Her Needs* is a recognized classic, and the more recent volumes *A Celebration of Sex* and *Sheet Music* haven’t exactly been ignored. In fact, the bestsellers on Amazon in the Christian marriage section are populated with books about how to have great sex. It’s not until we hit the bestseller *Every Man’s Battle* that we find an explicit treatment of lust. Judging from Amazon rankings—and there really is no better judge—for every book we buy on how to avoid sin, we buy ten on how to have great sex.

Some corners of evangelicalism, in fact, take the emphasis on great sex to rather surprising extremes. When I was in high school, we had an evangelical “sexpert” come to our public high school and give a talk on abstinence that was a thinly veiled appeal for students to become Christians. The appeal? We have more, and better sex than anyone else. (Which actually is true, but that’s beside the point.)

Which is to say, the narrative about traditional evangelicals being a tad repressive about sex might not fit the facts quite as well as we imagine. Even if our parents didn’t talk about it in the ways we do, they certainly seem to, ahem, have it quite a bit (which is very much better). Nearly all the young evangelicals were raised within the church, and we came from somewhere, right?

(Of course, thinking about that would require thinking about our parents having sex. And that would be gross.)

This isn’t to say that God isn’t interested in your sex life, or that sex is somehow bad. He is, and it’s not. But facts are devastating tools to have around when trying to talk with people about what Christianity actually teaches about sex, and perpetuating misconceptions about evangelicals and sex only reaffirms the negative impression that most people have about traditional evangelicals. That is a great way to get the media’s attention, but it’s a rather ungenerous disposition to have to the tradition which we were brought up in.

In framing our teaching about sex in reference to what our parents got wrong, though, younger evangelicals run the risk of presenting similarly stunted views of sex and sexuality. If the point is what dimensions of sex each generation emphasizes, then our danger is that we will simply emphasize those aspects that make us popular with the world around us—as our parents might have done. If we as younger evangelicals want to move beyond our parents, we should get down to the business of trying to articulate a comprehensive theology of sexuality that remains faithful to the full counsel of Scripture.

But more importantly, the younger evangelical critique that our parents thought sex was icky misses the point. Our parents were wrong in their teaching about sex and sexuality, but they weren’t wrong in the ways that most young evangelicals think they were. They were wrong in deeper, more pernicious ways—ways that younger evangelicals have, by and large, inherited and adopted without critique. Unpacking that is my goal of the rest of this chapter.

*Pleasure and the Creation of Adam and Eve*

When God dropped Adam and Eve into their world, he wove sex and sexuality into the fabric of things, and didn’t hesitate when he was finished to point out that the whole enterprise was good. There can be no equivocation in this regard: the world is a sandbox meant to be played in, and there are pleasures to keep us delighted for a lifetime—including the pleasures that we commonly associate with sex and sexuality.

The move toward the Garden of Eden isn’t an accident. It is most Christians’ favorite place to go when thinking about sexuality, and it’s a move sanctioned by Jesus himself. When asked about what happens in heaven with respect to divorce, Jesus points backward to the original creation. We are on standing on solid ground in suggesting that sex was created by God—it was indeed *intended for pleasure.*

Many of the most popular teachings on sex move on after saying this much, as *Intended for Pleasure* and *A Celebration* *of Sex* both do. It amounts to Biblical throat-clearing before we get down to the business of figuring out which techniques are going to help us *maximize* that pleasure. Rosenau even goes so far as to describe the pursuit of an orgasm as a “healthy sort of selfishness.” After two chapters on the Bible’s robust affirmation of sexuality, what follows might as well be a secular sin manual with a few Bible verses thrown in to appeal to the right demographic.

But starting with the original goodness of sex in creation misses two critical dimensions of it. First, to speak of sexual pleasure as a “good” requires that we spell out what sort of good it is. Sex is a *creaturely* good, which immediately sets it off from the sort of good that God is. And as such, we must understand its pleasure in relationship to the particular sort of things that humans are and their unique relationship to the creator. Our understanding of sexuality must be tied to an account of human flourishing, and that account must be grounded in Scripture, not in the social sciences or psychology (two disciplines that attempt to measure the human experience). Which is simply to say, the pleasure of an orgasm is only a distinctly *human* pleasure when it is pursued in distinctly human ways.

To divorce sexual pleasure from a broader account of human sexuality and personhood reduces sex to the equivalent of what animals do. And that’s a reasonably popular view of sexuality in the world around us. Claims about sex’s evolutionary origins have driven some to adopt rather devolutionary views of how humans should copulate. But human’s status as embodied creatures means something more than being animals with clothes on. When we perform acts that are similar to those of the animal kingdom—eating, having sex, dying, and the like—we should do them *humanly*, with distinctly human goods and purposes in mind.

*The Problem of Freedom*

This account of pleasure only being a good for humans when it is experienced within a cluster of other distinctly human goods opposes one of the deepest intuitions in our culture, namely, that pleasures are permissible and beneficial *regardless* of their origin, *provided* that they experienced by consenting adults (if necessary) and that they do not *harm* anyone.

This intuition is at the heart of modern political liberalism and individualism, and yet it rarely passes unquestioned by evangelicals of any age. Perhaps the clearest litmus test of the intuition is hedonistic drug taking, like marijuana. Many of the evangelicals I know who are opposed to marijuana have almost no coherent reasons why, and some of the younger evangelicals I know are fully supportive not only of decriminalization, but of treating it like alcohol and tobacco. As long as it doesn’t hurt someone else—and for Christians, as long as there aren’t any explicit commandments *against* it in Scripture—then people should be free to do what they want. Including Christians. It’s a generational battle that hasn’t started yet, but is coming…and both sides will be wrong.

The notion of freedom at work in these debates is a deeply modern one, which is to say it is a deeply individualistic one. It is a “freedom” divorced from any account of the world around us, the sort of things human beings are and the goods we are meant to actualize. Contemporary Christians tend to call this account of freedom “conscience,” which we treat as the only resource we have to think about ethics when the Bible is ambiguous.

My point isn’t to critique pleasure *per se.*  Rather, it is to suggest that contemporary treatments of pleasure as a good to be pursued *depend upon* a particular understanding of the human person that may be at odds with the teachings of Scripture. If we wish to incorporate pleasure into our relationship with God, we must do so by way of incorporating it into a proper understanding of what it means to be human. Pronouncing it good in isolation from other human goods leads to problematic distortions.

*Sexual Needs*

The language of “needs” with respect to sex is relatively common within American culture, not least within evangelicalism. When I got married, I received multiple copies of *His Needs, Her Needs*, which suggests that one of the main ways to prevent affairs (an interesting way of framing marital advice) is for the wife to meet the husbands “sexual need.” It’s language that gets channeled into nearly every book on Christian sexuality, including *A Celebration of Sex* and *Intended for Pleasure.*

Sex is, of course, a “need” in one regard: if humans don’t have it, the species will die out. Humans need to reproduce if we wish to continue to populate the planet. But when most people talk about sexual “needs,” they have something quite different in mind. More often than not, sexual expression and “fulfillment” is treated as necessary to attain some sort of level of human flourishing or happiness. The picture of *His Needs, Her Needs* is of men with ravenous sexual desires who need their spouses to satisfy them, lest they go trotting out the door to whomever they can find that will. That might be unequal treatment to women, but men don’t come off particularly well either.

Any properly Christian account of sex, however, *cannot* speak of sexuality in the sense that men and women need it for human flourishing. We need relationships and community. But the act of sex is one possible fulfillment of that need. Otherwise, we should have to treat Jesus as something less than human (or accept revisionist accounts of his sexuality), not to mention all the single people in our midst. I suspect that this view of sexuality, in fact, is near the heart of why single Christians feel like second-class citizens within evangelicalism. Because if they have needs that are necessarily being unmet, they are.

But the language of needs is at the heart of our confusions over what sex is (and isn’t). Consider this: we tell young people that they are supposed to spend the first twenty five years of their lives with their pants on, and we consider this a reasonable thing to expect. And yet when people marry, sex suddenly becomes a need that is intrinsic to their human flourishing. No wonder young people struggle to keep their pants on: either sex is essential to their flourishing as humans, or it isn’t. And since everyone who can have sex legitimately is all-too-happy to say it is, then that will be the dominant message they take away, regardless of what we tell them.

The destabilization of sexuality that happens in Christ, though, isn’t an *eradication* of sexuality. Rather, it establishes it on its proper foundation. Those who marry should have sex, and have it joyfully, for in doing so they bear witness to the original goodness of creation and the goodness of sex. But it is a perversion to make a necessity out of goodness. The witness of Jesus will not permit it.

The distinction between *need* with respect to sexuality is behind Paul’s division between our relationship to food and our relationship to sexual pleasure in 1 Corinthians. Paul points out that “Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach is meant for food—but the Lord will destroy both one and the other.” But he distinguishes between this and our bodies, which are fully involved in the act of sex: “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body…And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.” To suggest that *all* desires akin to food are *needs* is a category error for Paul.

*Industrialized Pleasures*

Contemporary approaches to physical pleasure are difficult to critique. After all, who—besides curmudgeons like me, wants to cast aspersions on something as noble and as lofty as sex? We need, we are so often told, to rejoice in the fact that God has given us these pleasures as gifts to delight in. All that I agree with. But we have taken the gift without the giver, and rather than seeing sex as a pleasure that is tied to the order of creation, we have isolated it and attempted to have the pleasures without the responsibilities.

Which is simply to say, we have divided the body from the soul, and treated the body as an object that is distinct from ourselves, rather than as the seat of our personal presence in the world. As a result, our sexuality is reduced to a means by which we give and receive pleasure, rather than a genuine connection of two embodied persons. The *orgasm’s* the point, rather than the actual union of two human bodies.

There is within this framework a hint of industrializing sexual pleasure, as Wendell Berry has pointed out. Take a gander at our sex manuals, which are indistinguishable in their substance (other than the occasional Bible verse and the Biblical throat-clearing) from anyone else’s. Our emphasis on the goodness of sex has almost single-mindedly focused on improving our *technique*, a pursuit which is encapsulated by our desire to have “great sex.” The phrase demands that we extrapolate from the experience itself and we look on it as from the outside. Great sex according to whose standards? *Cosmo*, I presume.

Or consider *Porn-Again Christian,* Mark Driscoll’s very helpful treatment of the problem of lust. In it, he affirms a married man who has phone sex with his spouse while travelling because he is making the best of his undesirable situation. Driscoll suggests that it’s allowable “because your purpose is oneness.” While Driscoll clearly doesn’t think that this is normal for our sex lives, it’s an odd and somewhat gnostic view of sex that suggests sexual ‘oneness’ can be attained while a thousand miles apart.

But when the actual bodily presence of two people is not *necessary* for oneness to happen, even though it might be beneficial, the body is reduced to a tool to experience a particular sort of pleasure. If the body is our presence, and sex is oriented toward the union of two persons, then both bodies have to be present. Pastorally, the fellow on the road trip who misses his wife might consider getting another job, or learning how to redirect the energy behind his desire for sex to other ends during that season. Paul’s exhortation to married folks to withhold sex for a season to devote themselves to prayer is among his most neglected when questions arise.

The evangelical problem of pleasure, though, is most clear when we look at our addiction to pornography. Because I am a male, I’ll use the example of men looking at women, even though the reverse is growing as well. In pornography, a man looks at a woman with the express intent of gaining some sexual pleasure from her *without reference to any of the other aspects of her personhood*. Her sexuality is completely divorced from what it means to be a particular person with a history, a family, geographical ties, etc. and is *used* for the purposes of bringing the viewer a particular sort of physical pleasure. This is the problem that is frequently referred to as “objectifying” the opposite sex, and it is a real problem.

However, the objectifying of women in looking at pornography depends upon a *prior* objectification of *our own bodies*. When we direct our sexual desires toward sexual objects (which is to say, when we ignore the rest of their personhood), we treat our *own* sexuality—that is, our bodies—in such a way that it is aimed at pleasure alone, rather than a pleasure that is located within the context of the union of two human persons.

To try to put a sharper edge on the point, there is a descriptive element to Jesus’ exhortation that we should “love our neighbor as ourselves.” The point here is that in one sense, doing precisely that is impossible to avoid. We will ultimately treat other bodies—which is to say, other people—the way we treat ourselves. When we reduce our own bodies to the means by which we experience pleasure, we destroy the nature of our true sexuality.

There is a sense where the only way to move naricissists—and looking at porn is an inescapably narcissistic activity—out of their disease is by demonstrating how it is slowly but inevitably destroying them. The problem with porn—and with sin in general—is not *only* that it harms other people, but that it harms ourselves, even when we don’t realize it.

Additionally, we need to prepare for the day when the creation of pornography doesn’t depend upon the subjection of real women. One of the most forceful and persuasive contemporary arguments against the practice is that it fosters sex trafficking and the abuse of women. However, the developments in technology have started to put pressure on the porn industry. As technology has improved, it has become easier to discern flaws in “real” women, thereby making it harder to maintain the aura of “perfection” that pornography depends upon (within videos, at least).

At the same time, graphic technology will doubtlessly improve to the point where the images on the screen will be *virtually indistinguishable* from real people. The scenario isn’t simply an idle possibility: if it happens, it will create the possibility of ‘pornography’ that is created without any real women at all, thereby cutting one of our most forceful arguments against the activity out from beneath the knees. If we can’t demonstrate “harm” to the object, then we have to demonstrate harm to the viewer.

But my central point here is that the pornographic mindset is the same both inside and outside of marriage in that it treats our own bodies as instruments to obtaining pleasure, and in marriage, our spouses as merely people to play the strings. Our hedonism knows no boundaries precisely because we have treated pleasure as a good to be pursued outside the context of a robust theological anthropology that must constrain our ethics.

*The Givenness of the Body, and the Gift of the Body*

“And the two shall become one flesh.” At the heart of the reframing of Christian sexuality must be that line, and the incorporation of it by Paul in Ephesians, who speaks primarily of the relationship between Christ and the church. It is Jesus as the new Adam who reveals to us the reality of the original Adam’s life, and establishes sexuality on its appropriate plane. As Oliver O’Donovan puts the point in a slightly different context,, “New creation is creation renewed, a restoration and enhancement, not an abolition…God has announced his kingdom in a Second Adam, and "Adam" means "Human."” It’s for this reason that Paul can speak of marital intimacy in Ephesians 5, and then inform us that the *primary* referent is Christ and his church.

For Christians, if sex is to be about anything, it must be about *love*. The revelation of Christ to the world is one that St. John tells us is constituted by love, and love is what orders the relationship between him and his church. When sex is removed from this context, it removes the properly *theological* meaning of sex and sexuality and treats it as a reality to be enjoyed independently from its place within the *created* order. Such a dislocation can be nothing but destructive of sex’s intrinsic value, for it refuses to recognized the proper end for which sex was created.

Of course, to suggest that the intrinsic structure of sex needs to take its cues from the reality of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection inevitably destabilizes the purpose of sex as being the *experience* of pleasure. St. John, in describing the love Christ has for the world, informs us that, “By this we know love, that he gave himself for us.” The sacrificial dimension of Christ’s gift is a unique and unrepeatable event, and to suggest that sex take its cues from this notion of ‘love’ in no way impinges upon the uniqueness and self-sufficiency of the love of Jesus for the world.

But it must take its cues from that event, for in Jesus Christ we see not only God’s love for the world, but the reality of humanity under the domain of sin, which is to say, precisely the domain which governs human sexuality as much as it governs any other dimension of the human experience. Jesus is not *only—*a word that betrays—the revelation of God to man, but the revelation of *man* to man. And in Scripture, he is shown as such not by those dimensions which are “normal” to our everyday experience, but in the giving up of his body for the redemption of the world. He is, above all, God with man, for he is *Immanuel.* But he is also given to man, for man. And therein lies his humanity.

It is here that we see the original meaning of sex and sexuality. It is a husband and wife expressing love by freely giving their bodies to each other for each other’s *good*. Inasmuch as the bodies are ourselves in our external dimension, sexual union is a union of two persons precisely when their *bodies* are united.

There is a tendency within even conservative evangelical worlds to talk about some sort of unity of souls that goes on in sex. Mark Driscoll’s advice to the husband depends upon that sort of “spiritualizing” of the act. The conservative ethicist Daniel Heimbach barely glances at the language as he asserts in passing, “Sex is truly spiritual and unites soul with soul.  That much is true." That much is precisely *not* true. It is our souls where our interiority and freedom is preserved, where we remain alone by ourselves, and that we giveourselves out of. It is precisely our souls, in other words, that allow the *two* who become flesh *to remain two.* There can be no confusion of persons in their union.

The reality that the husband and wife relationship inaugurates, though, is a real union in this regard: they move, speak, and act as one *with reference to the outside world.* Our bodies are the place of our personal presence *in the world,* which means the union of bodies really is the establishing of a new social unit that is really one. From society’s standpoint, all that the man has is the woman’s and vice versa. And within the marriage, they have the right and authority over all that the other person has, and vice versa. But that authority exists precisely because they are *two* people, not one. Were their souls fused together, as some people’s language of “soul mates” suggests, it would be the destruction of their love, not the completion.

The point has bearing on how we think of the parallel between the reality of our union in marriage and the relationship between “Christ and the church,” a parallel clearly sanctioned by Paul in Ephesians 5. The membership of the church as the “body of Christ” is a real membership, but it is a membership that is *external* to the reality of Christ’s life as the second person of the Trinity. While we are really adopted as sons, we are not brought into the Godhead as a fourth person, but rather are united with Christ in a particular way, a way that is extrinsic to his life in God. It’s not a trivial point, for it reminds us that Christ and the church remain two, even in their union as “one flesh.”

This self-giving in love (which is specifically patterned after Christ) can only happen when the body is subordinated to the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to know Christ “in the fellowship of his sufferings.” Which is largely Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 6. It’s precisely because we have been *united with the Lord* and that we are “temples of the Holy Spirit” that we cannot join ourselves to a prostitute, because doing so gives her authority over our own bodies. For Paul, the union of *bodies* in sex *necessarily* establishes what amounts to covenantal-type obligations. The act of self-giving in sex (or, alas, of *taking*) establishes mutual obligations on both members of the party *and* gives each person authority over the other person’s body. For Paul, sex with a prostitute inevitably undermines the reality of Christ’s indwelling presence, for it gives the prostitute an authority over our bodies that is meant to be reserved “for the Lord.”

It is in this context, in fact, that Paul develops the notion that husbands have *authority* or *rights* over their wives bodies, *and vice versa.* In a marriage, if one person *refuses* to have sex, they are rejecting the reality which they entered into. But nowhere does Paul say it’s permissible, or even beneficial, for people in marriages to *demand* their right to sex with the other person. His exhortation is much more careful than that: “The husband should *give to his wife* her conjugal rights, *and likewise* the wife to her husband.” Paul’s focus is still on sex as an act of *giving,* not an act that we can claim by virtue of our authority over our spouses.

In fact, there is some reason to think that Paul would think such a claim would contradict our *witness* to the reality of Christ’s love for the world and for us. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul points out that while he has *rights* to money from the Corinthians because he preaches the gospel, he refuses to claim those rights in order that he might be free to proclaim the gospel. Though he is “free from all,” he has made himself a “servant to all.” In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul suggests that it is better for believers to “be defrauded” than pursue their rights against other believers in the court of law. And in the case of Jesus, that is precisely what we see: he refuses to claim his rights, but lays them down and submits to the wishes of his people.

The decision to assert one’s rights over the other person’s within marriage, then, represents nothing but the failure of love and destabilizes the true meaning of sexuality. The witness of Christ undermines the notion that we need sexual fulfillment for human flourishing, which opens up the possibility for people in sexless marriages to work through their issues without demanding sexual activity. Additionally, we should keep in mind that the authority over the other person’s bodies is *mutual* for Paul. There is no privileged sex when it comes to the realities of how sex unites us and the obligations it imposes on us.

Paul doesn’t hate sex. In fact, quite the opposite. It’s precisely because he recognizes its power that he takes it so seriously. In Ephesians 5, the famous passage that is (I’m gonna say it) *way* overused for weddings, Paul points out that “no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it.” Paul is intent on pointing out that husbands “should love their wives as their own bodies.” It is evocative language, for it points to the sort of tenderness and intimacy that marks the best marriages off as unique.

And yet, “nourishing” and “cherishing” take a particular sort of shape in a fallen world where the body grows frail and dies. It points to a love that is *stronger* than death, a love that endures despite the power of death over our bodies in and through aging, and the fear of loss that can confront us even at the heights of our sexual experience. The heights of joy that sexual union promise are temporary, and must be so. For tomorrow we die, and we engage in sex wrongly if we either fear, or ignore, that fact.

It is, in fact, precisely the refusal to recognize that our bodies that are under death that is at the heart of our near-obsession with the orgasm. It is a pleasure that is easily achieved, and easily glorified, when the body is virile and the sexual appetite seemingly infinite. Yet as the body grows older, it also grows “cold,” making sexual desire harder to rouse. The cultural fascination with sexualized adolescent bodies—think Britney Spears prancing about in a schoolgirl outfit—and Viagra are demonstrable evidence that our understanding and appreciation of sex cannot be extricated from our cultural worship of youth.

A love that is stronger than death, though, is a love that endures even when the sexual powers fail and grow impotent (or even when they are not there at all!). In other words, it requires the sort of *patience* that doesn’t fit well in a pornified society where orgasm is all the rage. It’s great to talk about “hot” or “great sex” or wild, electric sex where we paint with all the colors in the rainbows—such a disposition is prescribed in Scripture. Let the young man, it says, delight in the breasts of his wife. It’s wise advice. Because as the wife grows old, the pleasures will have to come from deeper, more enduring places than the smoothness or the sensitivity of the skin, both of which inevitably fade.

*Conclusion*

The careful reader will note that the above pages contain nothing other than a full-throated affirmation of the goodness of sex and sexual desire. Sex is pleasurable, and as C.S. Lewis points out (and Augustine before him), Satan can never make pleasures—he can only distort and corrupt them. The reality is that all the pleasures of human existence are God’s, and sex is no less among them.

However, our inattentiveness to the body has led to a dominantly secular understanding of sex and sexuality that affirms the goodness of pleasure *even when* it is disconnected from any other goods. Even in many of our attempts to “reclaim” the body, we have largely parroted and affirmed those sexual trends which are currently fashionable.

At the same time, the hand-wringing about how to incorporate sex and sexuality into our spirituality seems like a first-world anxiety. It is fashionable to critique early Christians for their hatred of the body (by which, of course, people always mean *sex*, as though sex is the *only* way of treating the body). But early Christians lived in very different economic and social circumstances than our own, in a time when the average life expectancy was 30. If they laid the emphasis on having sex to produce children, they did so with good reasons.

In one sense, our society has a very different problem with pleasure. It doesn’t hate it—rather, it has separated it out from every other dimension of human personhood and has treated it as something to be maximized over the shortest period of time. Industrialization has led to the pursuit of the maximum amount of product at the lowest possible cost. There is no better summation of how nearly all of us, Christian or otherwise, approach sex.

In that sense, those who stand outside the sexual system—those who have “made themselves eunuch’s for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven”—bear witness against the sexual pathologies of our own age by pointing to a life that does not require sexual pleasure for its fulfillment and flourishing. The inability of evangelicals, young and old, to understand and appreciate this sort of life is the clearest indication I know that our approach to sexuality is no different than anyone else’s.

**Chapter Seven: Homosexuality and the Christian Body**

It was an awkward conversation when it started, anyway, but by the end of it I was lost.

We were sitting on the patio of the cafeteria at our conservative evangelical university. We were seniors at the time, and the conversation had transitioned from philosophy to where all conversations between two single men eventually lead: women. Yet the whole discussion had an odd feeling to it, as though one of us was deliberately obfuscating or holding something back.

At some point, my interlocutor garnered the confidence to blurt out, “Actually, I’m gay.”

As a classic member of “small town America,” I had very little interaction with gays and lesbians growing up. The only contexts I had for interpreting and understanding gay and lesbian relationships came from the uproar that Ellen Degeneres caused when she came out as a lesbian and the snide insinuations by classmates that I was gay because I was both celibate and reasonably happy about it in high school. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. (No really. There isn’t anything wrong with that.)

But my personal narrative gets worse from this standpoint. My parents were the sort of conservative evangelicals who took cues from the American Family Association, a conservative advocacy group who at the peak of their power sent Kmart into bankruptcy for their belligerent refusal to stop selling pornography through their Waldenbooks stores. I couldn’t watch Mighty Mouse because he apparently sniffed some sort of drug. But even so, my parents didn’t talk much about homosexuality, and my father never railed against it from the pulpit. Something about knowing your congregation, and all that.

So when my friend informed me that he was gay, I was at a loss. My mind immediately trotted over to platitudes about homosexuality’s sinfulness that I had stored up, but I lacked the courage to deploy them at that particular moment. Somehow, they struck me as potentially counterproductive to *immediately* drop on someone who had outed himself to me. I was, after all, on friendly ground, surrounded by heterosexuals, nearly all of whom thought that homosexuality was wrong in some fashion. So I listened. He told me of the hurt he felt by sexual epithets within our community, and the subtle rejection he had known by those who professed to love Jesus. He told me of his confusion about how to understand his own identity, and his anger toward God.

The conversation about homosexuality within (or without) the Church is so contentious and argumentative that even *opening* a chapter on the topic this way will be seen by some as a concession that Christians simply should not make. Some readers will read the above and dismiss me as someone attempting to covertly liberalize the church by departing from the reality of God’s revelation in Scripture about the shape of human sexuality. My only defense and plea is to continue to the end.

**Homosexuality and Christian Ethics**

The past fifty years mainline Protestants have watched as the question of homosexuality their denominations apart, leaving a string of divisions and lawsuits over church property in its wake. Hostility and animus aren’t vices that restrict themselves to doctrinal positions, and there has been plenty on both sides. Emergent Church advocate Phyllis Tickle called the debate a “battle to the death,” a phrase that seems (alas) too apt.

While evangelical churches have been mostly immune from these challenges, the battle has been coming toward us with astonishing rapidity. In fact, if there is *any* measurable difference in ethos between traditional evangelicals and younger evangelicals, it is on our approach to and treatment of the gay community. When Jennifer Knapp came out as a lesbian in the pages of Christianity Today, she was met with widespread acceptance by younger evangelicals, even while Lifeway (the Southern Baptist chain of bookstores)dropped her music. Soul Force, the movement of students to advocate for gay students on college campuses, declared in 2004 that conservative evangelical schools were next. What followed was a national tour designed to increase awareness and facilitate conversations between evangelicals and the gay community. Andrew Marin, who is perhaps one of the leading younger evangelical thinkers on the matter, has drawn international attention by reaching out to the gay community in Chicago. The situation has been complicated by the political movement to legitimize gay marriage, a movement that most younger evangelicals have met with something approaching either ambivalence or a warm embrace. The softening of attitudes about homosexuality in the public square has corresponded to an increasing desire to be inclusive and welcoming to gays and lesbians.

There are some structural reasons within evangelicalism, in fact, that I suspect will make it even more fertile ground for theological positions that accommodate treating gay and lesbian desires and acts as normative. Over the past fifty years, many of the leading proponents of gay and lesbian theology have built in a view of experience that treats it as a source of theological knowledge alongside Scripture. The proliferation of such experientially oriented theologies is often motivated by the desire to reincorporate the body into Christian theology, as it is difficult—if not impossible—to talk about the body’s place in Christian theology and ethics without examining our experiences of it.

It is precisely at this point in the evangelical ethos where younger evangelicals struggle to think through the relationship between homosexuality and Christian theology. While certain strands of evangelicalism are Biblically rooted, much of evangelical *piety* is still experientially driven, even among those whose charismatic seatbelts are tightest. And that makes arguments against other people’s *experiences* of God—which are frequently talked about in semi-erotic terms—difficult to critique or deny.

It is this route which Walter Wink took in his essay “Homosexuality and the Bible,” and which Brian McLaren would later take in *A New Kind of Christianity.* The argument is straightforward: we *now* know that homosexuality is caused by social conditions, biology, or psychological factors beyond a person’s control. Because of this, the ethic toward gay and lesbians that we have to adopt is one of *inclusivity* that focuses on the radical, self-giving love of Jesus and that sets the captives and the marginalized and repressed free.

There is no reason, however, to choose between the two positions. McLaren and Wink may be right that Jesus reaches out to the marginalized and the repressed, but wrong to suggest that (in McLaren’s case) traditional sexual ethics are the problem. *Abusus non tollit usum*—the abuse of a position does not invalidate its use. The reality is that—as I shall argue—we do not establish the terms by which we are included in the inner life of God, or the terms of the shape which that inner life should take in the world. An abstract commitment to inclusivity without a corresponding commitment to the *life* of the Gospel and the *shape* that life takes in our world isn’t good news, but rather simply provides sanction and affirmation of the particular features of contemporary society that we happen to prefer at the moment.

Our posture as Christians must be one of *listening first* to the gay community and their experience of the world, and we need to repent of the ways in which our witness has been compromised by our failure to communicate the goodness of the life we have in Christ. At the same time, if our ethics are to be *Christian* ethics, they must take shape by understanding and incorporating not an amorphous love into our world, but the specific love which Jesus demonstrated on the cross and to which the *whole counsel* of Scripture bears witness. The Bible is the authorized witness to the reality of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, and church tradition is essential for understanding the ways in which the people of God have restated that witness in various contexts. But because the Bible is the authorized witness to the reality of God’s love in Jesus Christ, it is also the authorized witness of *human* love, which takes its shape in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the revelation of *man* to man.

At the same time, we *must* listen to sociology, psychology, anthropology, biology, and the other sciences to increase our understanding of the ways in which human behavior is formed in our contemporary environment. However, inasmuch as our ethics are *normative*—that is, they provide guidance not for how behaviors and desires *are* formed, but how they *should be* formed—we must take our cues from theology and Scripture. Otherwise, the temptation will be to live in a world created in our own image, rather than under the authority of the God who is the Lord and giver of life.

I should point out that this argument cuts both ways, as it means that we cannot make the *heterosexual* experienceof the world normative on experiential*,* psychological,or social scientific grounds. We are *all* under sin. Our posture of listening to the marginalized and oppressed is one that takes this reality seriously: the temptation to oppress others for reasons that are not grounded in Scripture is real, and if we refuse to listen to others we miss out on the possibility of correcting those sins in ourselves that impede the Gospel. For the same reason, we cannot approach the counsel of Scripture with a prior judgment that we know what it says, unless we wish to turn Christianity into an expansive version of our own pathologies and problems.

At the heart of the gay question, then, is a question about the claims and demands that Scripture makes on *human* sexuality. Will let our bodies be shaped by *authority* or not? The authority of Scripture, however, is not one authority among many. It is not an authority designed for *repression* or *domination* of the marginalized, but an authority that communicates the proper shape of our life before God in a sinful world.

In that sense, the question of homosexuality is a question for us all, not only for those who are gay or who know gay people, for it is a question about the church’s public witness in the world. We would do well to remember Jesus’ admonition about examining the plank in our own eye before attempting the removal of the speck in our homosexual neighbors as a general hermeneutical principle.

***The Conversation that Isn’t***

No one really disagrees that the conversation about homosexuality within the church has been something short of edifying for nearly all involved. When it comes to contentious issues like homosexuality, the possibility of civility has been all been undermined by a media environment that sometimes fosters the controversy it needs to win people’s attention. In that sense, it is a self-perpetuating problem. The media has a financial interest in finding the worst in everyone and everything, because that’s what sell books and draws eyeballs.

But the reality is that the conceptual vocabulary of the conservative Christian response to homosexuality has frequently been adopted categories that may not be commensurate with Christian reflections about the nature of sexuality.

The proclamation of Christian theology is that our sexual desires are not a core part of our identity. We are not “homosexuals” or “heterosexuals.” We are human persons, made in the image of God and with all the rights and dignity thereof. We all start equidistant from the Creator, and the reality of sin has not destroyed our basic equality: “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

Additionally, the evangelical proclamation is that “you have died, and your life is hidden in Christ with God.” The obligatory reference to Galatians 3:28 seems appropriate at this point: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The basic equality of human persons before God is re-established by the person and work of Jesus Christ. But Paul’s proclamation in Galatians 3:28 depends upon his prior claim in 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” There is an identification with the person and work of Christ that establishes our identity as Christians—*not* our sexual desires or actions.

This is not an argument that gay and lesbian desires or actions are normative within the structure of Christian theology. Rather, it’s simply to point out that the language of sexual *identity* is itself inhibitive to a productive and civil dialogue about gay and lesbian desires and actions. I don’t even think that sort of language is unique to gay and lesbians. If anything, my suspicion is that they are continuing the language of sex and sexuality that nearly everyone (including conservative Christians) has adopted about human sexuality since Freud.

The language of sexual identity, in other words, seems to carry within it an intrinsic glorification of sex by establishing it as intrinsic to our human personhood in such a way that we are notpersons unless our sexuality is *expressed.* If being *heterosexual* is core to my identity as a human person, then I will be something less than myself *unless* I cultivate and fulfill my desires for the opposite sex (switch in “homosexual” and the point works as well). The church’s inability to understand and promote celibate singleness as a meaningful expression of the reality of our life in Christ is symptomatic of this understanding of human sexuality.

The language of sexual identity is also at the heart of the contentious nature of the dialogue between gay and lesbians and conservative Christians, for what’s at stake (on both sides) is nothing less than their identity and value as particular sorts of human persons. Consequently, even careful critiques of gay and lesbian desires and actions are considered “bigotry” because the ears on which those critiques fall see those desires as intrinsic to their human personhood. There are structural reasons in the conversation why the debate over homosexuality has been a “battle to the death.”

Paradoxes abound here. On the one hand, large swaths of gays and lesbians wish to make their sexuality a necessary and intrinsic part of their identity as human persons. At the same time, they wish conservative evangelicals who happen to disagree about the morality of their desires and actions to treat the moral evaluation of their sexuality in the same light as they would treat any other type of action. The incorporation of homosexuality into their self-understanding, however, makes disagreement *inherently* exclusive in a way that it does not need to be.

The language of *orientation* doesn’t fare much better, as it indicates a type of fixedness to our desires that precludes the possibility that they might be transformed by the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit. While the language of “orientation” does point to the fact that our bodies and their desires may be shaped by things which we did not control (like the education we received from our parents, for instance), as a category of moral reflection it is mostly unhelpful unless we make a prior decision to establish sex as sacrosanct within the whole scope of human desires.

All this means that conservative Christians would do well to begin by arguing that sexual desires and actions are not at the center of our human personhood, but rather that the center is the reality of our life before God, and to return to language that points to the *formation* of our desires and the *rightness* of our acts. Such language not only has a long history within the Christian tradition, but it returns the focus to the appropriate form our life is to take, even without equating that form with our identity.

Ironically, the language of internal and external is helpful on this score, for it preserves an inner freedom that is separate from our actions in the world. When that distinction is collapsed, it becomes much easier to make a lazy identification between *what we do* and *who we are* as human persons. That distinction, which I think is helpful for both moral evaluation and constructive conversation about human sexuality, has become decidedly unpopular. But preserving it is actually one way to help reestablish civility in the public square.

***Gay Desires and the Possibility of Original Sin***

Until very recently, conservative evangelicals have found themselves embroiled in a debate over whether gay and lesbian desires are shaped by their *choices,* by their *environment,* or by their genetic structure. Identifying causes of *any* phenomenon is extraordinarily difficult, but it is also superfluous and unhelpful for the proclamation of the Gospel or the communication of love to gays and lesbians.

There is a complex interplay between the body and the cultural pressures that shape it. In recent years, for instance, neuroscientists have realized that the brain is more “plastic” than they had previously assumed. In other words, its functioning can be altered by environmental factors *and* by decisions that individuals make as whole human persons. And yet the biological reductionist quest has continued, turning instead to the gene to find a “natural” basis for certain human behaviors. And yet if the basic unit of scientific inquiry is not the brain, nor the gene, but rather the *whole organism,* then we have good reason to be suspicious of the genetic approach either. The body is malleable, and I suspect we’ll eventually find that its plasticity extends all the way down.

At the same time, our desires and approaches to the body and its goodness have been shaped by the world in which we live. We are, none of us, products simply of our own decisions, or our biological structure, or our social environments. Rather, those factors interweave to shape our self-understanding and our loves by presenting certain behaviors as plausible to us that other generations may have found problematic.

This complex interplay means that we cannot approach the question of gays and lesbians simplistically. At the same time, unless we want to privilege our own society and treat it as somehow having escaped the domain of sin, the fact that gays and lesbians exist is not enough justification that their desires are permissible within the structure of Christian ethics. We need, as Oliver O’Donovan has pointed out, a broader account of what the ancients termed “original sin.” In Augustine’s *Confessions,* for instance, he sees his wailings as an infant as a sign of his disordered loves, a nod to the reality that the stain of sin *precedes* his conscious determinations or rationality. If we struggle to understand this, it is a symptom of how deeply our minds have been shaped by enlightenment theories about our human nature being a “blank slate.” If the doctrine of original sin is true—and as G.K. Chesterton pointed out, we have every empirical reason to believe that it is—then we are marred (or is it *have been* marred?) from the beginning.

In that sense, the causes of gay and lesbian desires and behavior are irrelevant to the task of Christian theology, even though they may be important for determining the pastoral response to gays and lesbians in our midst. The deeper questions are whether gay or lesbian desires can be incorporated into Christian ethics without alteration, how those Christians with gay or lesbian desires can bear faithful witness to the Gospel, and whether and how the Church can incorporate gays and lesbians into its midst in a way that submits to the authority of Scripture.

At the same time, if this broader account of original sin is correct, then it implicates *all of us*, not just those who are gay and lesbian. Our desires for the opposite sex may be just as disordered as our desires for the same sex.

And here we return to the theme of the previous chapter, which was that the heterosexual emphasis on *pleasure* as a good that is separated from the rest of other goods—like procreation, the union of two persons in their external dimension, and the good of self-sacrifice—is a dysfunctional approach to human sexuality that manifests itself in addictions to short-term sexual gratification like pornography provides.

It is precisely *this* question of pleasure that the question of homosexuality depends upon. As Rowan Williams has written:

Same-sex love annoyingly poses the question of what the meaning of desire is—in itself, not considered as instrumental to some other process, such as the peopling of the world. We are brought up against the possibility not only of pain and humiliation without any clear payoff, but, just as worryingly, of nonfunctional joy--of joy, to put it less starkly, whose material "production" is an embodied person aware of grace.

Williams is right to point out that the question of homosexuality is one of the possibility of incorporating a “non-functional” joy into our Christian theology. But he is wrong to think that the only way that we can do it is by sanctioning gay and lesbian desires. Joy may be non-functional, but that doesn’t mean we ought pursue it as a good separate from other goods, like a particular sort of heterosexual union or the procreation of children.

At the same time, there is a subtle dismissiveness of actual body structure (where the *body* means the actual place of our personal presence, rather than our brain chemistry or chromosomal structure). As Williams says later in the same essay, “In a church that accepts the legitimacy of contraception, the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous biblical texts, or on a problematic and nonscriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied **narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation** without regard to psychological structures."

I disagree with Williams about the clarity of the Biblical texts, and about whether we can find a Biblically grounded account of natural complementarity. But there is a creeping anti-corporality in Williams’ language. In the passage above, Williams comes close to correlating *joy* to the orgasm and minimizing the *means* by which such joy is brought about (regardless of whether it that joy is instrumental for anything else or not). The body’s structure and what we do with it, in other words, doesn’t seem to matter. All that matters is the psychological euphoria we feel from being in a committed relationship with a person who we desire.

It’s a subtle dualism that Gerard Loughlin shares. As Loughlin puts it, “Indeed it may be suggested that only when theology begins to think of sexual difference starting from the homosexual couple as its paradigm of sexual difference will it be possible to think the difference not in **crudely biologistic terms**, as in so much of Balthasar, but in more properly theological ones."  As in Williams, there is an opposition between the theological and the biological for the sake of affirming the normativity of gay and lesbian relationships.

In one sense, the debate over homosexuality within the church is a debate over whether bodies matter, and how. As Gilbert Meilander writes:

The body is the place of our personal presence. And moral significance must therefore be found not only in the spirit that characterizes our relationships with others, not only in mutuality and communion, but also in the bodily relationship itself. To suppose that mutual love is all that is needed to make a relationship right is to ignore the moral significance of the body. It is, in fact, a kind of dualism that separates our true self from the body. If we want to know how rightly to use the body, therefore, if we want to distinguish between fulfilling and corrupting sexual relationships, we cannot talk only of love, consent, and mutuality. However much my neighbor’s wife and I are drawn to each other, our bodies are already promised to others. However deep and intense may be a father’s affection for his adult daughter, to give himself sexually to her is a perversion of love, not a fulfillment.

To return to my previous musings about the relationship between gay and lesbians and evangelicalism, it is this subtle decision to viewing the psychological experience of love and the expression of commitment in marriage as sufficient for moral reflection that will make it easy for gay and lesbian theology to take root in evangelical soil. The Protestant emphasis on marriage as a *covenant* minimizes the necessity of procreation and establishes the reality of marriage in the ethereal world of “spirituality” and “promises.” As a result, it is nearly impossible to argue against those who want *only* the promise and the ethereal expression of “love” without the crudeness of bodily structures.

***A Theology of Homosexuality***

The question of whether gay desires and acts can be normative within the structure of Christian theology and ethics is a question about the relationship between the original creation and the new creation. While the case is almost always positioned around contentious passages like Leviticus 15, Romans 1, or other debatable texts, my argument is that we need to locate those debatable texts within the *whole* counsel of scripture about human sexuality.

It’s for this reason that I disagree with Richard Hays when he suggests that conservative Christians should de-emphasize their objections to gay and lesbian theology on grounds that Scripture does not say very much about it explicitly. That might be true, but

Even if we ignore the contentious verses in Leviticus about same-sex relations and grant that Sodom and Gomorrah is about hospitality, rather than homosexuality *per se*, we still have to get past the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis in order to affirm that gay and lesbian relationships could be normative within the structure of Christian theology. Leaving aside (again, for the sake of argument) the historicity of the text, it seems clear that it *is* a pattern for normative human relationships as God intended them to be.

It’s a point not lost on Jesus himself. When the Pharisees attempt to put a puzzle about the lawfulness about divorce, Jesus answers not merely by pointing them backward to the original creation, but affirming the original structure for marriage that God established in the Garden (Jesus seems to take Adam and Eve as historical here, but that debate really is beside my point). While the question to Jesus is one of divorce and remarriage, Jesus doesn’t separate sex ethics from marital ethics in the way we contemporary Christians might try to do.

It is, of course, tempting to suggest that there is no normative sexual ethic within the structure of the first few chapters of Genesis. However, taking that route strips those chapters bare of *any* of its content for us. If there is no sexual ethic in the first few chapters of Genesis, then there is no creationethic at all. While traditional evangelicals and younger evangelicals emphasize either the sexual dimension or the environmental aspect of Genesis 1-3, a careful and consistent reading demands *both*. Emphasizing only those aspects of Scripture that we want to emphasize may win us fans, but it misses the challenge that Scripture offers to everyone.

Of course, if the question of the appropriateness of gay and lesbian desires were *that* easy, there would be no debate. And here, we come to my third supposition for why arguments for gay and lesbian theology will take root more quickly among evangelicals than among mainline Protestants. Certain strands of evangelicalism have overemphasized the differences between the Old Covenant and the New, speaking of an “age of law” and an “age of grace.” This emphasis on the new covenant comes close to setting it *against* the old, as though grace abolishes the law rather than fulfills it. In its worst forms, it is accompanied by a lazy dismissiveness of the Old Testament legal code as not providing any insight into morality at all because of the nature of the punishments or the narrowness of some of the restrictions.

At the heart of this debate is probably the most central teaching on homosexuality in Scripture, Romans 1. The passage has been debated *ad nauseum¸* and I present nothing that is new here. But it is impossible to address the topic without addressing the most contentious 15 verses in Scripture. According to Richard Hays, when Paul catalogs the depravities in 1:24-31, he is not suggesting that they are the *occasion* of God’s wrath, but rather the *manifestation* of God’s wrath. Paul is “presenting an empirical survey of rampant human lawlessness as evidence that God’s wrath and judgment are *already* at work in the world.”

Paul’s point in this catalog, though, is not necessarily to single out these particular manifestations of God’s wrath, but rather to argue that we *are all* implicated in it. The point of the passage doesn’t happen until the beginning of Romans 2: “Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.”

At the same time, at the heart of our rebellion against God is a rejection not of his care for us, but of his position as *Creator,* a position that obligates us to live as *creations* with specific purposes. In verse 25, it is precisely because they “worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” that God gives them up to dishonorable passions. The language of God as Creator would have clearly returned Paul’s audience to Genesis 1, where God establishes Adam and Eve in the garden as sexually complementary. As Richard Hays puts it (and against Rowan Williams above), “Thus the complementarity of male and female is given a theological grounding in God’s creative activity. By way of sharp contrast, in Romans 1 Paul portrays homosexual behavior as a “sacrament” (so to speak) of the antireligion of human beings who refuse to honor God as Creator. When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator’s design.”

The main reply to this position is that Paul has nothing like contemporary homosexual relations in mind, as his real critique is against pederasty, or the worship of young boys. That has all the advantages of a good story without the benefits of being true. As [ ] argues, the evidence suggests *both* that gay relationships in the ancient-near east world had many more commonalities between now and our own time than is commonly presumed. Additionally, Paul’s mention of lesbian relations suggests he knew of non-pederastic homosexual relationships that would have shared the level of commitment that contemporary lesbian relationships share.

It is in this context that Paul suggests the activities of gays and lesbians are “against nature.” Paul is not taking his cues from the environment or particular animals in it. Rather, he has a theologically informed account of humanness that respects our status as *created* and our sexuality as *given* by God, rather than something that we can form however we want.

Here, however, is where things get tricky. In what is probably the most forceful case on behalf of making gay and lesbian relationships normative, Eugene Rogers points out that it is precisely the phrase “against nature” that Paul uses in Romans 11:24 to describe the engrafting of the Gentiles into the covenant people of God. Rogers turns away from the question of individual orientation and morality toward establishing a communal standard that is grounded in the corporate welcoming of those who are “against nature.” In his summary of his position, he turns to Galatians 3:28 and argues: “Its monitory force is this:  do not let social or natural distinctions so turn into moral ones that you fail to see the Holy Spirit at work.  For if you do so you Gentile Christians put your own salvation, your own community membership, at risk.” That seems precisely right as a point about inclusion and exclusion. Those who have gay and lesbian desires (or even commit gay and lesbian deeds) are just as welcome as the rest of us in the covenant people of God, and welcome “just as they are.”

At the same time, there are substantive differences between race and sexuality that have to play into our sanctification and our witness to the world as the collective people of God. In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, for instance, Paul argues that we should separate ourselves from those who claim to be Christians but sin sexually and are unrepentant. Paul’s logic depends upon an “in-group” and an “out-group” that is demarcated even upon sexual purity. As Alistair May writes, “Christian social identity is, for Paul, symbolized in assumptions about moral difference.  'We' differ from 'them' in regard to ethics, and particularly sexual ethics.  Believers are [‘holy’]:  unbelievers are [sexually immoral (‘pornoi)]." As May goes on to argue, Paul thinks that their sexual immorality *reveals* that they are a part of the unbelievers.

It is in this context that Paul turns to the effect of sexual immorality on our *individual* identity before God. The results are somewhat jarring for us: he treats sexual sins as *unique* by virtue of the fact that they alter our relationship with the indwelling Holy Spirit in a way that no one else does. Consider the following from 1 Corinthians 6:

“The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. For every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

The body is *for* the Lord, which means it is to be given to the Lord to do with as he wants. We have been bought with a price and are *owned* in body and soul by the God who gives himself for us. At the same time, the Lord is *for* the body. He is on the body’s side, and gives himself on its behalf. The contrast between the body and our stomach’s couldn’t be more clear: where the Lord will destroy the stomach and food, the Lord will reestablish the body (which is to say, the place of our personal presence in the world). In that sense, Paul wants to establish a *difference* in food ethics and in sexual ethics. The freedom that the Gospel brings takes a different shape with respect to each.

When we reach 1 Corinthians 7, I think it becomes clear that Paul really does think that we would be better off not marrying and having sex. Because sex establishes a *real* union of two persons in their external dimension (which is to say, us in our bodies), he thinks the union gives the other person authority over us, an authority that may be best preserved for God. If Paul seems extra sensitive about making sure Christians are “equally yolked,” this is why.

However, “better” doesn’t meant the alternative is “bad.” Paul’s point about sexual immorality hinges upon his understanding of the purpose and goodness of the original created order, in which “the two shall become one flesh.” While his notion of “sexual immorality” has been endlessly discussed, the primary referent is almost certainly along the lines of prostitution. At the same time, Paul’s logic not merely *affirms* the goodness of the original creation, but seems to depend upon it.

Paul’s point that sexual sins are unique for their *effect* does not mean they are *more destructive* than other sins, or that they are any more damning than other sins, or that it is harder to be forgiven from them. The body, our flesh and bones, is the temple of the Holy Spirit—and Paul seems to be suggesting that if we do not *give* ourselves in our body to the right person in the right way, we defile the temple in a way that is particular within the kingdom of God. As May summarizes:

“Thus sexual immorality is a unique sin.  It is uniquely against the body conceived of 'realitistically' as a member of Christ. Of course, other sins can exclude a man, even a believer, from his inheritance in Christ (6.9-11), but this need not mean that our verse should be read other than absolutely.  For Paul does not say that sexual immorality is unique in its damning consequences, but in its locus and effect:  in the *manner* in which it disrupts union with Christ.  Sexual immorality is unique precisely because it is no mere ethical breach, but because it is a direct transfer of the body out of union with Christ and into that with a [prostitute].”

There is, of course, reconciliation possible when we sin sexually. And this isn’t a sign that Paul thinks *badly* of the body. Quite the opposite: Paul has such a high view of sex and its role in our life before God that he takes the reality of sexual sin far more seriously than most of us are willing to take it.

At the same time, Paul’s logic pushes beyond prostitution toward other sexual sins generally. 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11 suggests that those who (unrepentantly) practice homosexual acts will not “inherit the Kingdom of God,” a point that seems to rest more on the fact that they have not been “washed…sanctified…justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God.”

Paul’s argument doesn’t depend upon a hatred of sex or sexuality. Quite the opposite. Paul understands that it is unique in its power and effect on our relationship to the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Because of the nature of the union, it *necessarily* requires a covenant between the people who engage in it.

The arguments that gay and lesbian relationships can be normative within the structure of the Kingdom move beyond the teachings of the old and new testament in ways that are not warranted by the texts, and in ways that undermine the authority of God as *Creator* and the goodness of the original created order.

At the same time, it is clear that *something* changes at the Resurrection. As I pointed out previously, Scripture seems clear that the dependency of the body on the created order is abolished. But the new creation does not *abolish* the order of the first creation, but rather renews and reestablishes it (to borrow Oliver O’Donovan’s line). Paul’s point that “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” doesn’t mean those categories are all the same or eradicate the possibility of social hierarchies within the structures of the kingdom of God (there are, we should remember, only twelve seats around the throne). Paul is comfortable speaking of various members in the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians, though he inverts the standard categories of value by saying that those which we think are the *least* valuable we treat with special honor.

In other words, the revelation of Jesus Christ does alter our relationship to the old covenant and to the order of creation. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10 with respect to Exodus, those things were written for *our* benefit. The resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us *new* insight into the Old Testament. But the point of the new covenant and Christian liberty is not to sanction however want to live, but rather to shape us and mold us into the sort of humans who God intended us to be. New creation is creation restored and renewed.

*Gays and Lesbians within the Church*

The reality is that gay and lesbian activities are wrong, but that doesn’t mean that gays and lesbians are outside the covenant people of God or the structures of the church. There are two dimensions of human history: our time before our adoption into the inner life of God, and our time after it. And yet the Christ whose atoning blood provides forgiveness for all our sins is the same Christ whose resurrection gives us the power to overcome the reality of sin in our bodies. “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God.”

If the argument above is correct, then gay and lesbian acts are not sanctioned as normative within Christian ethics. This is only a rejection, however, of gays and lesbians identity as human persons created in God’s image *if* there is a pre-decision made to incorporate our sexuality into our personal identity. Otherwise, gays and lesbians are in the same position we all are: struggling to bring their desires in conformity to the order of creation and to understand *why* they have been “made” in such a way that their desires may never be fulfilled.

Augustine, the ancient theologian who is a frequent target for his views on sexuality, actually proves a helpful resource on this score. He argues that loves have a proper *order*, that they need to conform to the objective set of values that are tied to reality. It is, in one sense, a point that we would all agree upon until we start to realize that it introduces the possibility of our own loves being disordered. As an example, if we love our cheesecake more than Jesus, our loves have been disordered.

The reality is that this disordering happens to all of us from a very early age, through means that are quite outside our control. The world is broken, and having disordered desires is part of the tragedy of living in it. In that sense, it makes no sense to privilege homosexual desires as particularly wrong. If anything, they are what Richard Hays calls them: the manifestation of the judgment of God on a world that had *already* confused the Creator with the creature. Or as Oliver O’Donovan puts it, “Desire is…one aspect of what Christian doctrine used to speak of as “concupiscence,” a brokenness of the world reflected in a confusion of desire that our human society instills in us.”

In that sense, we return full circle to the presence of original sin, which disorders our desires and instills concupiscence in all of us. But again, O’Donovan: “If the distinctiveness of gay experience reflects original sin in some way, it is because it also reflects the fractured quality of society and its loveless disorder, a disorder for which we all share common responsibility and pay the common price, the fruit of our uneven social formation.”

Yet as Jesus argues in Matthew 15, it is not what goes into a person that defiles us, but what comes out. The “heart” is the inner sphere where we are free to respond to the reality of our circumstances. To strike an individualist strain (though not an individualistic one), part of the dignity of being human is having the inner freedom (when it is restored by the Holy Spirit) to acknowledge and confess our desires before God. We are, none of us, safe from the purifying fire of the presence of God.

And yet our pragmatic, pastoral response to sin must be (in one sense) distinct from our position that a behavior is wrong. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul subverts the established order precisely by suggesting that each person should remain in the condition in which they were called—if uncircumcised, then remaining uncircumcised. If slave, not being concerned for our freedom. This is no endorsement of the existing social order—rather, it is a tactical and pastoral response for the sake of the Gospel that is established on a long-term understanding of how social structures and institutions change.

In one sense, this is the strategy that some missionaries take when moving into cultures that endorse polygamy. It is an adaption of Paul’s strategy in 1 Corinthians 7 of exhorting people to remain “in the condition in which [they were] called.” While Paul’s point is about non-sexual institutions, it is one place where a parallel to marriage might be warranted. Fifty years from now, after all, what happens when a gay couple who has raised a child from an infant becomes a Christian? Do we break up the home and destroy the stability of the child? Or do we trust the transformative power of the Gospel to work its way through that situation more slowly, realizing that cultural and social transformation takes more time than we might otherwise want to allow?

At the same time, this is no sanction for those with gay and lesbian desires to continue to act on those desires. Like all pleasures, sexual pleasure *reinforces* our desire for a certain activity. Part of the goal of Christian sanctification is aligning our physical experiences of pleasure around the sort of activities that they were designed to accompany.

The one pastoral response that is wrong is to associate the experience of gay and lesbian desires with the *call* to singleness that Jesus mentions in Matthew 19. Singleness as a vocation within the church is a unique calling that is wrapped up with our orientation toward the Kingdom of God. It is a voluntary renunciation of sex in order to be wholly devoted to the Kingdom and the King’s purposes. My argument that gays and lesbians should refrain from sexual activity is on different grounds—celibacy as a remedy for sin is a different thing than celibacy for the Kingdom.

***A Word about Transgenderism***

The dualisms at play within the conversation about sexuality in our late modern era are many. On the one hand, the notion that sex and gender have been socially constructed lends itself to a dualist notion that allows people to reshape their bodies to make political statements about the repressive norms of dominant social sexual conventions. In addition, there is a subtle dualism between our bodies and our psychologies (or souls, as they’d say in the old days). It is this dualism that undergirds gender dysmorphia, which prompts some people to feel as though they have been ‘given’ a body that is the “wrong” sex. This sometimes leads them to pursue hormonal treatment and sex-change operations, as they seek to remake their bodies according to their own self-understanding.

In one sense, the notion that we can and reshape our bodies to fit our preferred self-image is indicative of the same sort of desire to dominate the created order that is at the heart of the potential exploitation of other human persons. Yet our moral categories within evangelicalism are so impoverished that if we cannot find an explicit prohibition against a particular action within Scripture, it fits our understanding that people have a right to do with their own bodies as they want, and it doesn’t harm anyone else, we have very little to say about it. Sex-change operations, which fit all three categories, are a good litmus test of the problem.

Near the bottom of the notion that people *can* reshape their bodies according to their psychological desires is something that approaches the exploitative desire to dominate that ruins our relationship to creation.

Yet the body is our place of personal presence, which means we ought to cultivate hearts of gratitude for it and the life we have through it. The body is not raw material to be reshaped according to our will, but is *us*. The tragedy of gender dysmorphia is partly a rejection of the status of our bodies as *given by God,* a rejection that we may have been educated into by society, parents, or friends.

At the same time, this orientation toward domination has been at the heart of the Protestant experience of family and sexuality for the better part of a century. Contraceptives, which are rarely (if ever) even *questioned* by evangelicals have fostered what some have called the “contraceptive mindset.” At bottom, it is the technological domination of our sexuality, such that we get to control when and how we have children. The separation of sex from children is one of the particular pathologies of the modern era.

I mention only to challenge conservative evangelicals who find developments like sex-change operations problematic to make sure we are without sin before casting the first stone. In one sense, such extreme (and tragic) cases are the canary in the coal-mine—they reveal the trajectory and direction of ideas that failed long ago to take captive in our own institutions and lives.

***A Concluding Word***

In his masterful book *The Deep Things of God,* theologian (and former professor Fred Sanders) points out that when intellectual movements become decadent, they forget *why* they believe what they believe. The forgetfulness takes two forms: people of a conservative temperament cling all the more strongly to the fragmented ruins of their beliefs, while progressives tend to discard them. Though Sanders doesn’t say it, a decadent intellectual environment also undermines the possibility of civil dialogue about points of significant disagreement, because no one can quite remember *why* we disagreed with certain behaviors in the first place.

Discussion between people who disagree in the church is not an end in itself, but it can be an expression of grace and charity that orients us toward the truth which we were created to know and understand. Christianity’s public witness does not simply depend upon what conclusions we come to about homosexuality, but *how* we come to those conclusions. And if we speak with the tongues of truth and exegesis, but have not love, we are little more than clanging gongs.

I have in the above pages tried to present a case for what I think is behindthe argument against gay marriage, namely a doctrine of creation that suggests that it is redeemed and restored in Christ. At the same time, I have attempted to argue that gay and lesbian desires are simply one manifestation of the brokenness of our society and the reality that we are *all* shaped badly because of the world we live in. The careful reader will notice that I placed the argument about our broken understanding of physical pleasure prior to the case about gay and lesbian relations. My goal in doing so is to point out that the sort of dualisms that undergird gay and lesbian behaviors are at work in us all.

The Lord is for the body, and the body for the Lord. And the Lord will raise it up on the last day. The reality of our bodies is that they are damaged goods upon delivery, but that the Lord of the universe chooses to make such damaged goods his temple. We look forward to the resurrection from the dead, and the life that is to come—a life of purity, holiness, and unity in the Holy Spirit.

**Chapter Eight: The Body Shaped by Grace and Gratitude**

My friend Abraham is a sculptor.

The word has lost some of the gravitas it once held. Anyone who can hang up bullhorns in a circle—as one artist I recently saw did—or weld together scrap metal into an industrial animal design can claim the name, and there’s no one to tell them they are wrong.

We’ve come a long ways from Michaelangelo hammering away at massive stones of marble. There’s a story floating out there that when he would look at a piece of uncarved marble, he would see the form in the rock and remove everything that *wasn’t* it. I don’t know if it’s true or not, but it’s a good story.

That’s how Abraham sculpts—old school. With chisels and hammers and massive pieces of rock. When hanging out at his studio one evening, I saw he had bought a new piece of orangish-marble. When I asked him his plans for it, he causally replied that he was still working on it, but that he thought it was a flamenco dancer. A long time later, the form emerged into the most stunning flamenco dancer I have ever seen. It’s a piece I wish I could afford.

Sculpting is a laborious process. Abraham spends countless hours removing tiny bits of rock that less trained eyes would never notice. He sees every imperfection in the stone, removing many of them, but leaving others in his pursuit of beauty. Like all crafts, every mark has to be intentional, as most of the time they are irreversible. Gluing parts back on is just a little gauche if you’re a sculptor. Every decision that he makes has to fit into what he sees in the stone, and his desire to uncover it.

Sculpting is not a bad metaphor for the work of sanctification—with the necessary qualification that the metaphor breaks down quickly. We are *passive* in the work of sanctification, we are not *passivists,* to coin a word. While Paul is right that we “have been sanctified,” and that it is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit that makes the temple holy, we still *do things* in sanctification, things that are not contributive to our salvation but are ordered responses that open and submit our bodies to the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit who makes the Word of God living and active to us.

Here is the other danger in the metaphor of sculpting. In the late modern world, the body has become a *project* by means of which we attempt to reshape the body according to our inner self-understanding (regardless of whether that self-understanding actually fits the bodies we have been given or not). We spend enormous amounts of time and money sculpting our bodies to fit our preferred ideals of beauty. We lift, we run, we stretch—all for the sake of health and a sense of energy and self-confidence.

I am teetering on an edge here, as health and beauty and energy *are* good things. Yet we have to realize that they are not neutral things, when disconnected from the practices by which our bodies are sanctified. Bodily training has some merit, Paul tells Timothy, but it is a secondary value next to our “training unto Godliness.”

Sanctification—the process by which we are conformed to the reality of our salvation which is in Christ—has to do with our bodies as much as with our souls. But it is not a *project* that we undertake in order to bring ourselves into conformity with the Gospel. Rather, it is a *response* to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit who makes the Scriptures active and authoritative to us, and in that sense is the second *moment* of the Spirit’s work in us. In sanctification, we are called to conform our bodies to an ideal, but that ideal is not health, energy, feeling good about ourselves, or any other normal standard of approaching our bodies. Rather, it is a life of self-giving, of sacrificing our bodies for the sake of others, of being conformed to the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whom we live, move, and have our being.

***The Body of Faith***

Sanctification is a response to the gospel, which engenders faith in us through the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit. In that sense, the work of sanctification is a work of faith that God has been faithful to his creation even to his own hurt. The Lord for the body, as it were, and so the body for the Lord.

There isn’t enough space to offer a comprehensive analysis of what constitutes faith in the New Testament, and I don’t think I am equipped to offer that if I tried. But one passage in particular merits careful attention, for it is at the heart of Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel and his understanding of the nature of the faith we have in Jesus Christ.

In Romans 4, Paul examines the life of Abraham to argue that the righteousness of those who are his heirs is not by *works*, but by *faith.*  According to Paul, God had promised Abraham that he would be “heir of the world,” a nod to the idea that Abraham and his progeny would be a “blessing to the nations.” It was Abraham’s faith in these promises of God (which are “Yes” and “Amen” to the glory of God!) that was “counted to him as righteousness.” And the faith that we have in the working of Jesus Christ is of the same kind.

Abraham believes the promises of God that he would be the father of many nations. But Abraham’s belief is not an abstract or arbitrary commitment to the promise. There is something in God’s *character and nature* that Paul identifies at the heart of Abraham’s belief. It is not enough to believe that God *desires* to keep his promises. Rather, we must affirm God’s *ability* to keep his promises, and it is precisely that ability which Abraham leans upon.

Consider Paul’s language about the context of Abraham’s faith: “in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” He points specifically to God’s power as *Creator*, to call or *speak* things into being. There is more than a hint of the Genesis narrative at work in this context.

Yet in a fallen world, the fallenness and mortality of our bodies calls the power of God into question. As Paul writes, “[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.” Abraham’s own body is old, and long past the time when he might bear children. And Sarah is *obviously* infertile. The fulfillment of God’s promises to them *depend* upon the reviving of what has clearly died, yet it is precisely God’s ability to do that which Abraham rests upon.

The God who creates, though, is also the God who recreates. Paul expands the point away from Abraham and his belief in God despite their barrenness, to us and to our belief in Jesus Christ despite his death: “[Faith] will be counted [as righteousness] to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” The faith that is counted to us as righteousness is not just grounded in the propitiation of Jesus Christ for our sins (the cross), but is a response to the power of God to reshape the created order by bringing his *life* into it. Jesus died for our sins, but lives to restore our humanity.

In Romans 1:15-16, Paul writes that he “is not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe.” We must believe that God has redeemed us by the power of the cross, where our sins are atoned for and we find forgiveness. But just as there are two aspects of the same work by the Holy Spirit—our regeneration and sanctification—so there are two *aspects* of the faith we have in Jesus Christ. We also believe that God has the power to transform our physical bodies according to his power. As Paul writes in Romans 5, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”

As an interested observer of the theological landscape, I can’t help but notice that two of the fastest growing movements worldwide share this notion of faith: that physical bodies are transformed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Though I am neither charismatic or Roman Catholic (though I share different sympathies with each of them), they both emphasize physical transformation as the heart of the Christian faith. Charismatics tend to locate that transformation in the physical healing of individual believers’ ailments and diseases. Roman Catholics locate that transformation in the Eucharist, where the bread and wine *become* the physical body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Again, I have *strong* disagreements with both camps. But what I think they get right is this: faith is faith in God’s power to altar the shape of the physical world according to his plan and his promises, which is affirmed in the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

***The Life of the Mind, the Life of the Body***

My grandfather died only a few weeks before I got married. It was the first time someone so close to me had died, and I was surprised at how well I took it. We all expected it to happen at some point, but that doesn’t mean it’s not a shock. We may joke about the inevitability of death and taxes, but that doesn’t mean they’re welcome guests at our party.

When we think about death at all, most of us approach it as a reality that is at some point in the future, rather than something that shapes the way we live and move here and now. And yet for Paul, death is not just an event, like a wedding or a birthday. It is an ongoing reality that altars the very structures of our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. As he says in 2 Corinthians 4, our “outer man is decaying.”

Paul’s theology has sometimes been maligned for his radical dualism of “flesh” and “spirit,” a dualism that ostensibly inherently devalues the body by emphasizing the soul at the expense of our bodies. But to the extent that Paul is a dualist, he is candid about the body’s status as shaped by sin. The war between “flesh” and “spirit” isn’t a war between the body and the soul—it’s a war between two *spheres* of human existence under two very different authorities. The sphere of the “flesh” is characterized by the Law, death, and sin. The sphere of the Holy Spirit is one characterized by grace, life, and the triumph over sin.

The good news of the Gospel is that the work of salvation and sanctification has been done for us (“for you *were* sanctified”). We have been set free from the Law and sin by virtue of our union with Christ through his Holy Spirit. Our sanctification, in this important sense, is not really ours to accomplish. The temple is the Lord’s to rebuild, for as it is under death, it can only be brought to life by a God who has the ability to call being out of non-being.

There are, however, two aspects of this sanctifying work that we participate in. The first is that we set our *mind* on the Holy Spirit. As Paul writes, “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” Or later, in Romans 12:1-2, he exhorts us to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” The life we have in the Spirit requires that our minds—our conscious awareness and cognitive faculties—to be set on the reality of the work that Christ has done for us. They must be set on the “things of the Spirit.”

At the same time, the reality of the Spirit’s indwelling moves us to submit our *bodies* to his authority, to surrender them for his *working* and *use* in the world. Again, from Romans 8:

“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. **If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”**

Paul’s language is a direct echo of Romans 4 and his discussion of Abraham’s faith. Just as he and Sarah’s bodies are renewed to bear fruit in keeping with the promises of God, so our bodies—our personal presence *in the world*—are renewed to bear fruit grounded in God’s *kept* promise in Jesus Christ. It’s a point that we could make from Romans 12 as well: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Paul is interested in the whole person, but “bodies” here has a very specific referent: we are to *present* the flesh and bone that we live in and through to God, that he might use us *in the world* as he used Christ in the world.

**Presenting the Body, Attending to the Spirit**

I have become convinced that for all the critiques of Saint Paul, his theological anthropology is actually revolutionary. While the twentieth century is full of thinkers (many of them French) who realized the importance of the role the body plays in human experience, Saint Paul got there first—which makes it all the more tragic that our reading of Paul in the last twenty years has almost exclusively focused on other dimensions of his work.

In chapter four, I argued that the body has habits that are engrained into it, and that shape our actions in the world. While some of these habits—like good footwork on the basketball court—might be learned through seasons of intense practice, the goal is to get them beneath our conscious awareness so that we don’t have to think about what we’re doing, but can direct our attention instead to what needs to be done. These habits are shaped by our interaction with the world starting from a very young age.

Consider, for instance, my habit of breathing—or rather, of not breathing. It turns out I hold my breath quite a bit. I’m not sure why, but I have trained my diaphragm to stay clinched as much and as long as possible. I don’t think I realized this until I was playing piano and an observer pointed out that I hadn’t taken a breath in a while, at least that they could discern.

In one sense, my body has been trained to not breathe. I didn’t wake up one day and decide that I wouldn’t breathe deeply. But it affects everything that I do throughout the course of a normal day, including how likely it is that I will get angry when something goes wrong. And I very rarely notice it or attend to it (except when I pray and it becomes obvious that I’m not breathing well at all).

Our body stands beneath our mental attention. But attend to one aspect of it (as I just did with my breathing), I am able to notice all sorts of phenomenon that I wouldn’t notice otherwise. I realize how little control, for instance, I have over my breathing. Even when I attend to it for a little while, as soon as my attention moves away (like, you know, to write about breathing) I quit breathing deeply again and return to my previous pattern of holding my breath.

This is, I think, what Saint Paul is getting at in Romans 6, where he writes:

“Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. **So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”**

Paul goes on:

“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”

Paul’s exhortation to *consider* ourselves dead to sin and alive to God is a redirection of our mental attention toward the reality of our life in Christ. The word is variation on *logos,* a Greek word that includes in its semantic range a cognitive dimension. While there is a temptation to make the shaping of attention overly individualistic, that would be a mistake. We have “died with Christ” in baptism, a public reality that demands we remind each other of the reality which we individually consider. What’s more, to return to an earlier theme, we are shaped from the outside in and will “consider” that which we are presented with. Sound preaching matters—but so does architecture, for they both may capture our attention at various moments. “Set your mind on things above,” Paul tells the Phillipians. It is a process that is nearly impossible if we don’t take into account the physical environment that our minds live in.

Paul also notes that we are to not let sin *reign* in our mortal bodies, which suggests that sin *can* reign *in* our mortal bodies. That doesn’t mean that our bodies are inherently evil—but their habits, their tendencies, their responses have been shaped by living in a sinful world. Part of my experience of not breathing regularly is motivated by a sense of control that I have allowed into the very fibers of my muscles, a sense of control that keeps them tense.

Paul’s strategy for not letting sin reign is one of *presentation*—we offer ourselves up to God as “living sacrifices.” Where once “sin reigned in death”—that is, our bodies—grace must now “reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The reality of our lives is that we are united with Christ, and the work of sanctification means bringing our bodies in accordance with that reality.

This “presentation” is inextricable from the reorienting of our minds around the reality of the Gospel. But Paul goes one step further, exhorting us to offer *our members* as “instruments unto righteousness.” Our hands, our feet, and other parts of the body are to be presented to God in such a way that he can use them for his purposes in the world.

This presentation of our *members* of our body can’t be separated from our *considering* the body as alive to God in Christ Jesus. The very act of directing our conscious attention toward our body (rather than toward the world the body is oriented toward) necessarily fragments it, such that we cannot focus on our own body as a whole, but only on its component parts. As Sean Gallagher puts it:

"Further, as one's conscious attention is directed toward one's body, there usually takes place a discrimination or isolation of the outstanding bodily feature defined by the circumstance.  In such experience the body becomes consciously articulated into parts, although the isolated bodily feature or part continues to function only in relation to the rest of the body, which may not be the object of conscious attention.  Thus, a body image often involves a partial, abstract, and articulated representation of the body in so far as attention, thought, and emotional evaluation attend to only one part or area or aspect of the body at a time."

This fragmentation when we attend to our bodies isn’t necessarily bad. When I play basketball, I go diving for loose balls—and I don’t distinguish between myself or my body. But when I attend to the body itself, I focus on my shoulders, or my neck, or any of the component parts to which I am drawn. And when I want to retrain my footwork on a basketball court so I am faster, or more agile, I focus intensely on the members of my body that I want to retrain.

In that sense, sanctification requires the offering up of our bodies—our selves in our external dimension—to God as a living sacrifice, and presenting our members to him in order that they might be retrained so that they are “slaves of righteousness” rather than “slaves of sin.”

Our “presentation,” though, is not something that we do *in order to* attain salvation. Rather, it is an ordered response in obedience to the regeneration of the Holy Spirit who makes the reality of the good news in Jesus Christ present and authoritative to us. Gratitude is the proper response to grace, and it is that which motivates all our efforts. Paul is comfortable talking about “disciplining” his body. The question is, according to what pattern, for what ends, and in whose power?

We might formulate Paul’s notion of sanctification this way: the locus of transformation is the mind and body, the pattern to which he conforms is the pattern he has in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the end to which he works is to “please God,” and the power by which he operates is the indwelling Holy Spirit. Change the locus from the mind and body to the world and we end up de-individualizing the work of God in Jesus Christ in a way that undermines our confidence in our own salvation. Lose sight of the pattern in Jesus Christ and we risk recreating the world in our own image. Make our end something other than pleasing God, and we will inevitably fall prey to idols. And seek to transform ourselves in our own power and we shall inevitably die from exhaustion.

**The Practices of Sanctification**

One of the central differences in younger evangelicalism has been the shift toward *practices* as the heart of the Christian faith, rather than *beliefs.*  This is frequently regarded as the shift from *orthodoxy* (right belief) to orthopraxy (right practices). The movement is often positioned as a recovery of the embodied nature of theology and the church, and a desire to shape the world according to the pattern we have been given in Christ.

As someone who writes at a blog named *Mere Orthodoxy,* it’s probably obvious on which side of the debate I fall. But my sense is that the debate has suffered from conceptual unclarity, and from a thin notion of “belief” that separates it from the patterns and habits of our lives. Right *belief* for the Christian is an affirmation of the recreative power of God in Christ Jesus, a power that transforms the structures of our own bodies to bring them in accordance with his will and desires. Our belief in God is not *less* than assenting to the proposition “We believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth,” but if it is the faith that Paul talks about, it is something *more* than that assent. It is an affirmation that involves the entire person, body and soul. For we truly do *live* by faith.

At the same time, I really am interested in *ortho-*praxy, maintaining appropriate standards of Christian practice. There is a question, though, about who gets to decide what the “ortho” is. There is a tendency to divorce the presence of the Holy Spirit from the ecclesial structures and the historical practices of Christian spirituality that I think we ought to guard against. I happen to love talking walks through the country and feeling the wind blow through my hair. It makes me feel alive and grateful for the creation that God has placed me in. But there is a hint of self-selectivity that drives those activities, such that we would learn to experience the Holy Spirit only in and through those activities that give us pleasure anyways.

The debate couldn’t be more stark over the issue of yoga, which has become increasingly popular and accepted within Christianity in America. In his book *Church Re-Imagined,* emerging church leader Doug Pagitt describes the yoga sessions that his church, Solomon’s Porch, hosts. He quotes one of their leaders describing what transpires in yoga as saying, "This state of being is holy.  It is at this time that we become closer to God, aware of our bodies, of the divine."

On the other hand, Southern Baptist Albert Mohler had hard words for those Christians (like Pagitt) who think that yoga is commensurate with Christianity. In an article that made national news, Mohler writes:

When Christians practice yoga, they must either deny the reality of what yoga represents or fail to see the contradictions between their Christian commitments and their embrace of yoga. The contradictions are not few, nor are they peripheral. The bare fact is that yoga is a spiritual discipline by which the adherent is trained to use the body as a vehicle for achieving consciousness of the divine. Christians are called to look to Christ for all that we need and to obey Christ through obeying his Word. We are not called to escape the consciousness of this world by achieving an elevated state of consciousness, but to follow Christ in the way of faithfulness.

Mohler suggests that the positions themselves are “not the main issue,” but that they are “teaching postures with a spiritual purpose.” They cannot be done, he claims, without “intense meditation.”

Like Mohler, I’m *very* wary of using yoga (or massage, or long walks in the park, or sniffing flowers in the springtime) as a regular *practice* that we *use* in order to connect our bodies to God. The reality is that a sense of the “divine” is very different than a confrontation with God through his Holy Spirit. In one sense, if someone does yoga and feels the Holy Spirit’s presence, so much the better. That in itself does not sanctify yoga as a means of grace.

At the same time, I’m more optimistic than Mohler that the body shapes of yoga can be separated from its spiritual content, largely because they don’t seem torequire the intense *meditation* to achieve that Mohler claims they do. Mental concentration is a very different thing than *emptying* your mind, and while yoga requires people to focus their attention on their bodies, any exercise or bodily training seems to require a similar sort of concentration to do well.

As a practical matter, my wife has found a yoga studio that frequently offers sessions without the ‘spiritualized’ overtones. And when she ends up in one of them, she prays for the instructor and her fellow classmates, a practice that I find as amusing as I do devastating. There’s something, after all, about going on the offensive in our spiritual warfare.

Part of the problem of identifying what counts as *ortho­*-praxy is sorting through the ambiguity of what practices *mean.* A Baptist, Roman Catholic, Presybetrian, Lutheran, and Anglican might all take communion. While there would be some subtle differences and a spectrum about things like clothing, the presence of an altar, communion rails, etc., the actual act themselves share a lot of similarities. Yet each person believes that something *very* different is happening (or not happening) in the action. In each case, the practice means something different.

At the heart of church practices is a desire to recover the *incarnational* nature of the church. Scripture, however, says almost nothing about Jesus’ embodied life and rarely presents him eating, walking through the forest for fun, or experiencing the other pleasures we prefer to focus on. In other words, there is a tendency to be so *incarnational* that we quit focusing on *the Incarnation* as Scripture bears witness to it. If our practices are really to be *Christ-focused and centered,* then they must take their cues from the authorized witness to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, the Holy Scriptures.

The body is a temple, meant for the Spirit’s presence. But the people of God were not free to build the temple however they wanted, but were given a pattern from heaven to build it according to. In the same way, we do not get to shape our bodies however we want, with whatever tools or practices that we approve of. Rather, we are called to shape our bodies according to the pattern we were given in Jesus Christ, and the practices that he left for us to imitate.

***Fasting, Prayer, and Silence and Solitude***

In spiritual disciplines, we reshape the members of our body to bring them in conformity with the righteousness that we have been given in Jesus Christ. We remove those habits and patterns of sin, eradicating the consumerism, greed, fear, anger, anxiety, pride that shapes how our bodies feel, function, and act. And we replace them with faith, hope, and love.

There are numerous books on spiritual disciplines, and Dallas Willard’s are some of the best of them. What I offer here is not a comprehensive survey, but rather an apology and personal exploration of *four* practices that I see in Jesus’ life that I would argue are at the center of shaping the members of our body into instruments of righteousness.

*Reading Scripture.* Our incarnational practices will only be oriented toward *righteousness* as long as they are rooted and grounded in the authorized witness to the reality of the Incarnation. “Man does not live,” Jesus says, “by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Jesus’ point is that man really does live by bread, though if he tries to live by that *alone* he shall surely die. In a fallen world the *life* that we need is deeper than biology. The word of God does not abolish biology, but establishes it on its proper foundation.

We often think of our Scripture intake as something that we do in isolation from the rest of the community. However, it is precisely *in* community where we need to hear the word most. The “word of God is active among you,” Paul tells the church in Ephesus. It can only be such if our communities are formed not primarily on our *mission* of bringing justice to the world, but in *response* to the hearing of the Word of God.

Not only that, but we should get away from only *reading* the word and focus on *hearing* the word. Reading is a public act when it is read aloud, and the reading aloud altars our understanding of it. When we hear Scripture read, it embeds itself into our lives in a way that it doesn’t when we simply read it.

Scripture *shows us* the shape of the life to which we must conform. In that sense, our digestion of Scripture is our foundational spiritual practice. When we are confronted by the word of God, it draws our attention to aspects of the world and ourselves that we probably would have chosen to ignore otherwise. And in that cognitive reorienting, we learn to set our minds on the things of the Spirit and so to shape our embodied lives appropriately.

*Fasting*. In a previous chapter, I argued that the body is *dependent* upon the world for its ongoing health and vitality. This dependency relationship is primarily expressed through our need for food, which requires the sort of conscious, intentional activity that other ways in which we are dependent do not (like breathing, which I do without thinking, even if I don’t breathe very deeply or often).

I have said little about the role beauty plays in the body, especially for women, and how our relationship with food is frequently motivated by an unhealthy desire to compare ourselves to problematic and false ideals. My silence is simply a conscious decision grounded in the fact that I am not a woman, and so don’t have the same authority on that issue as I might on others. But I will say this: where previous generations of Christians would have shaped their bodies through a structured calendar of fasting and feasting, we prefer the more self-focused approach of obsessing about calories, workout partners, and holidays.

While some Christians have argued that fasting’s place in the Christian tradition was motivated by a hatred of the body, the reality is that it was more often motivated by something like Saint Paul thought: “But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Like Jesus, Paul was able to differentiate between eyes which were inherently sinful, and eyes trained by sinful hearts that might cause those hearts to sin further.

Yet fasting is something different than the abstention from food grounded in the denial of the body’s desires. The practice is instead a positive affirmation of Jesus’s claim that we do not leave by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. We are being nourished when we fast, only nourished by a different source than the physical world we inhabit. As Jesus says in John 6,”It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

In that sense, fasting more than any other discipline requires being encompassed about by Scripture when we do it, for our body’s dependence upon food is so compelling and strong that it is nearly impossible to chasten our desire for food without soaking in the word of God.

In Matthew 19:5, Jesus links fasting with the separation that we have from the bridegroom, which suggests that fasting orients us toward the eschatological life we have in Christ—a life in the body, but where the body is no longer dependent upon the structures of this world for its nourishment. Fasting, in a sense, shapes the body into the way it will be in heaven, for it teaches the body its true source of physical nourishment. Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food—but the Lord will destroy them both. Fasting gives us a regular reminder of that, and chastens us in a way that reminds us of our sin.

What’s more, fasting eliminates the *anxiety* and *energy* that we turn toward our food production and consumption, which frees us to pursue the Kingdom of God *first*. Anytime I fast, I am amazed at how much more time I seem to have, time that is for reading the word and prayer. Fasting and praying “Thy Kingdom come” reminds us that our source of life and even our daily bread is not our own hand, but the providence of God.

All this is focused on the reasons to fast in the structure of our normal Christian lives. There are other reasons, as well. People fast in response to sin, and when they experience great need.

I should remind you, however, that the fasting of food is not a denial of the goodness of pleasure, but rather establishes it in its proper horizon. Our culture spends an *enormous* amount of time and energy preparing food. We *all* eat like kings, in part because we *have* immanentized the eschatological life through our technological production. Culturally, we need the warning Paul gave the Phillipians:

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.  Their end is destruction, **their god is their belly**, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.  But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, **who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body,** by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Fasting is at the heart of preparing us for that transformation by dethroning our belly, the seat of our appetites and our desires. Because the stomach controls so much of our interaction with the world, it needs *discipline.* It needs to be properly ordered according to the reality of the Gospel and the life we have in Jesus Christ, a life that focuses on our citizenship in heaven. Fasting is nothing less than an affirmation that we are made for another world.

It is tempting to treat fasting as an individual practice, and sometimes it is. Yet I have found that it has dramatic social implications, implications that make it best practiced in the structure of the church (and no sense reinventing that wheel—might as well practice the church calendar). Because food is at the heart of our social order, giving up food forces us to reshape our communities and form them on a different foundation. Fasting is a dramatically social discipline.

Which is, perhaps, why Jesus says that we should take pains to do our fasting in secret, lest we have our reward in full. Fasting alters our bodies in ways that we cannot control. In my own experience, I do struggle to smile and “lift” my face as much as I sometimes am able to do without thinking. The reality is that the joy in my face is almost entirely tied to the satisfaction in my stomach. And fasting reveals that to me in ways that I might never realize otherwise.

It’s for this reason that it is best done in accordance with the church calendar. As evangelical Protestants, we get nervous anytime people start talking about Lent, Advent, or other festivals. Yet the body needs organization—just as there are natural seasons that shape and structure our experience of the world, so the church realized that there needed to be different seasons for our relationship with God. Fasting in preparation for Easter, and then feasting for a long period after it. Penitence before Christmas, celebration after. The church calendar structure reverses what has become normal life for most American Christians—binge, then purge.

One final argument: I have sometimes heard people dismiss fasting because they feel more irritable or impatient. That is, it seems to me, precisely the point. In fasting, we relinquish control over our own lives by breaking the link between us and the world, and subordinating ourselves to the Kingdom *first.*  Our impatience, our irritation, our frustration when the natural goods of food are taken away are an indication of how much we attempt to control the world around us, how we pray “Ours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.”

*Prayer.*

Washing dishes can be a rich and fruitful time of communion with God. But not all activities are like washing dishes. In fact, because of the *sort* of activity washing dishes is, it is particularly conducive to praying well. It is physical, but does not require a high degree of mental concentration. It is also repetitive, which means it is easy to fall into something of a *rhythm.*  It is often solitary, which means it is easy to talk quietly without anyone thinking that you are, in fact, insane. It is also done standing up, which means it’s harder to fall asleep.

As evangelicals, we have majored in a conversational style of prayer that is grounded in our emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And that’s the right emphasis to keep in place. But our *environment* matters considerably for the sorts of conversations we have. The candles, flowers, dim lights, and white tablecloths we put out for romantic dinners shape the body’s perceptions in such a way that we have certain expectations for how the conversation will proceed. Yelling like you’re at a football game is incommensurate with the environment, and almost unthinkable for anyone with any measure of self-awareness. The environment sets the context for what is, and is not, appropriate speech.

The same is true of prayer. What we look at while we pray, whether we close our eyes, the prayer room we find ourselves in, whether we choose to kneel, stand, lift our hands, or lay prostrate—these are the sorts of actions that set the context for appropriate speech.

We tend to think of prayer as a purely mental activity. And to the extent that it is a conversation with God, it is a mental activity. There is some truth to Claudius’ line from *Hamlet* that “Words without thoughts never to heaven go.” Yet there are *two* aspects of our sanctification, and the Lord doesn’t just want our thoughts. Altering our posture for prayer is one way of surrendering our bodies as “living sacrifices,” by giving them up to him for his service.

In that sense, *prayer* requires a specific sort of training of the body, training which Jesus reveals in the Garden of Gesthemane is necessarily empowered by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus approaches his crucifixion, he takes Peter, James, and John with him into the Garden and asks them to pray with him. When they fall asleep, Jesus chastises them: “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Jesus’ use of “flesh” here is interesting, as it does suggest that the body itself needs to be trained so that it is capable of praying fervently when fervent prayers are required. If we spend our lives training our bodies to pray only when we’re lying in bed falling asleep, then when our time comes to do spiritual battle for the Kingdom of God, our bodies will be unprepared, regardless of how willing our spirit is.

The chief organ, though, that prayer reshapes is the *tongue*, which James calls one of the most difficult organs to control in the body. In one sense, prayer retrains our lips so that we *speak* a different language than the rest of the world. While the emphasis in young evangelicalism has been placed on *contextualization* and speaking the same language as people, prayer is an act that is inherently exclusive (unless we wish to be universalists), for it is an act that is a response to the reality of the freedom we have in Christ. In that sense, our *primary* language must be not the world’s, but the language of Scripture and the church, which orients us toward the Kingdom (seek *first* the Kingdom).

Yet the emphasis needs to be on re*training* our lips. Consider the phenomenon of accents. Our accents are shaped by the context in which we are raised, and the words that we hear. Outside of actors, none of us choose how to shape our tongue in that way. It’s a principle that extends to our vocabulary, and frequently to our content. Like it or not, we almost always end up inhabiting the language game of the people who we surround ourselves with. And in many cases, our vocabulary is incommensurate with the reality of prayer.

Young evangelicals, the world I live in, have been increasingly comfortable with profanity (which is hardly profane, as nothing they are referencing seems to be sacred anymore). On one level, the argument has been motivated by a desire for contextualization and a reduced emphasis on the importance of words. My point isn’t to weigh in on whether specific words are right or wrong. I have, at the moment, no interest in that. Rather, it is to say that our *lips* seem to be more shaped by the language of Hollywood than that of Hebrews, or John, or Matthew. Regardless of its semantic content, the F-Bomb is simply incommensurate with the language of prayer.

One further point about prayer: the evangelical tradition has emphasized prayer as a means of connecting us with the Triune life of God, which is the right thing to emphasize. At the same time, because prayer reshapes our bodies according to the pattern we have in Christ, it is an essential part of our participation in the work of God to renew the cosmos. Consider one of the most important passages in Romans:

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Paul is clear: it is *we* who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, not the creation. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, “For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.”

Redemption works outward from humans who are empowered by the Spirit. But our experience is one of *identifying* with creation through *groaning*, a groaning too deep for words. If our care for creation is to be properly theological—grounded in the revelation of Scripture and empowered by the Spirit of Jesus Christ—then we must take seriously the fact that *prayer* is the foundation for our action in the world, for in and through prayer in the Holy Spirit is he able to move *beyond* our groaning for the redemption of our bodies and bring *new life.* Prayer is the heartbeat of the new creation.

*Silence and solitude.*

Silence and solitude are sometimes treated separately, but in this world it is practically impossible to experience one without the other. Not that it’s easy to experience them at all. While Paul was able to speak casually about the “inner man,” I suspect few of us have ever confronted him. Our lives are inundated by images and sounds that mean the only time we give ourselves room to cultivate any sense of inner life is when we sleep.

The notion of an “inwardly focused Christianity” has taken a beating in recent years. While some of it is deserved, we’ve now reached the point where the reaction is bordering on over-reaction. For all of our focus on *externality* and making Christianity *visible* in the world, our visibility must be shaped by the invisible Holy Spirit, and our *externality* shaped by the Spirit who testifies to our spirit (which is, I think, an inward reality for Paul) that we are sons and daughters of God.

Particular disciplines will take on a unique level of importance depending on the context in which the church lives. Silence and solitude are, I am convinced, at the heart of equipping the church to live authentically before God in this world. Christians are starting to count the costs of living in a world where entertainment dominates, and where noise and light pollution are inescapable facts of human existence. As a people, we are “distracted from distraction by distraction,” in T.S. Eliot’s words. But distractions are not just *mental* realities, but *physical* realities. A noise enters our heads by way of our ears, which the body has no natural means of closing (unlike the eyes). Our bodies intertwine us in the world, and our world overstimulates them to the point wherewe no longer have any meaningful inner life to shape the world to speak of. We are constantly responding as we have been trained.

Long before the age of electronic white noise, Blaise Pascal wrote that “all human evil comes from…man’s inability to sit still in a room.” Sitting still in a silent room requires an enormous amount of self-discipline, self-discipline which requires a *self* to implement. It is far easier to simply give ourselves over to amusement and entertainment, but there is also no faster way to become a shallow, insubstantial human being.

When Christians talk about silence and solitude in Jesus’ life, they most often point to Jesus’ frequent attempts in Luke to rise early in the morning and leave everyone to pray. Those are good arguments that I see no need to repeat. Yet there are two additional approaches, more theological approaches, that I find interesting.

On the one hand, our solitude and silence reminds us of Adam’s original solitude before the creation of Eve, a solitude which was essential for confronting him with his need for specifically *human* company. During his time alone, he names the animals, a process by which he must have inevitably been confronted by the fact that *none* of them were “suitable” for him. That confrontation with the world altars Adam’s self-perception, preparing him eventually for the creation of Eve. Our experience of solitude and silence, in this sense, isn’t a denial of our need for human company, but rather an affirmation of *a particular kind* of human interaction. It is easy to fall into bad relational *habits,* where we neglect the reality of other people’sstatus as human *persons* before God. Solitude and silence break those habits, allowing us to reshape them on our return.

On the other hand, by removing ourselves from the world and its structures and institutions, and by removing our speaking and acting in the world, solitude and silence remind us of our own death, and train us to die well by approximating our own passing from this world.

Within evangelicalism, we love to focus on Easter Sunday, where Jesus bursts forth from the grave, and on Good Friday, where Jesus gives up his body on behalf of others. What we rarely attend to, though, is the time in between Jesus’ sacrifice and his resurrection—*Holy* Saturday. The holiness of Saturday is a holiness of *silence*. The man Jesus no longer cries from the cross, nor does the church yet proclaim “He is risen!” The disciples would not, I suspect, have given up their hope in the Messiah. Instead, I think they would have questioned whether they were right that *Jesus* was the Messiah. In that sense, Holy Saturday is a day of silence from God, a day of questioning from man, and a day of *waiting* for the Messiah to deliver Israel.

Yet there is a crucial difference between Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection and ours. For Jesus, Good Friday precedes Easter Sunday. For us, Easter Sunday precedes Good Friday. It is specifically because of the hope we have by virtue of Jesus’ rising from the dead that we can embrace silence and solitude, and wait for the resurrection power to burst forth in our own lives. Our silence and solitude really is fellowshipping with the death of Jesus, for the death of Jesus is judgment on the sinful structures and institutions of the world (“He who does not believe in me,” Jesus tells us, “has already been judged”). Yet it is judgment with a particular end in mind, namely restoration and healing—resurrection.

Except a seed fall to the ground and die, it cannot bear fruit. In silence and solitude, we prepare ourselves to bear fruit by falling to the ground alone, before God, and be connecting ourselves with the soil in which the seed of the Word is planted. “The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are sons of God.” In silence and solitude, we listen for that Spirit and put to death all else, surrendering our bodies, hearts, and minds to God so that he can use them as instruments of righteousness, rather than unrighteousness.

***A Final Inconclusive Word***

Bodies shaped by grace are bodies shaped by gratitude. In the revelation of God to man in Jesus Christ, we are confronted not only by the reality of the maker of the universe, but are given the pattern for which our gratitude is supposed to take in this world. Grace has a shape, and that shape is Jesus. But gratitude has a shape as well, and that shape is—Jesus. For it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.

The body shaped by grace is shaped by God’s providential care in the world. From money, to children, to food, all that the body produces and requires is not our own, but is given to us by our Father in heaven. He delights in giving gifts to his children, especially the gift of himself in his Holy Spirit. The life of the Christian is a life lived in response to those gifts, and the only response we have that is properly our own is gratitude.

Yet an embodied life shaped by gratitude is a life of giving all that we have received back to God. There are other means of grateful response that alter the body that I could have highlighted. Giving money to the church is a means of responding to the reality that all that we have is given to us, and giving our children back to God is a means of establishing our relationships with them on their proper foundation. But I have chosen the above because they are some of the clearest means of expressing gratitude in Scripture, and the most crucial for our age. Yet if they are not encompassed about by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, they are little more than chasing after the wind.

I leave the final word to Karl Barth:

In the hearing of this Word, then, the being of man can and must be more precisely defined as a being in gratitude.  That casting of his faith on God which we have described as the true history and being of man is not so audacious and strange and fantastic as may appear at first sight. Rightly understood, it is in the strictest sense a natural human action. In it the creature remains in full self-possession, and exercises as directly as possible the true being beside which it has no other. It is, as it is told by God that He is gracious to it. In daring to cast itself upon God, it corresponds to the Word without which it would not be this human creature. When we understand the being of man as a correspondence to this Word, we understand it as a being in gratitude. Gratitude is the precise creaturely counterpart to the grace of God.

**Chapter Nine: The Body and the Church**

The lights go down while the band walks on stage. A subtle blue light makes them nearly indistinguishable from the hazy mist the fog machines put out. They may be people, or they may be oversized Smurfs about to rock our world. It all comes clear when the music begins. The lights change color in time with the bass drum, as the fog slowly dissipates.

It would be great if this was a U2 concert, but it’s not. It’s a relatively standard evangelical youth group in Southern California. The only thing that was missing were the pyrotechnics, which I suspect the high schoolers would have eagerly tried had not more discerning heads prevailed. I mean, who wants to play with fire in worship?

Over the past twenty years, the “worship wars” have been a central feature of the evangelical experience. The old folks want their hymns, and we younger set prefer the explosions and thumping bass of the concert hall. Or so the narrative goes. The reality, it turns out, is that the leading edge of younger evangelicalism has deep reservations about the entertainment-driven worship atmosphere of mainstream, suburban evangelicalism.

My goal isn’t to rehash the worship wars. Instead, I want to approach from a different standpoint: the body. As I argued in an earlier chapter, evangelicals haven’t paid much attention to the ways in which our bodies shape the world, and the world shapes our bodies. And because of that, we have often taken our cues from the world around us, a world that is marked by a deep discomfort with the body.

At the same time, one man’s *syncretism* is another man’s *baptism.* What appears to one person as giving over the heartbeat of Christianity to an ideology that opposes it might appear to another as the contextualization of Christianity in the world around it. The only escape from the dilemma, I think, is to identify the pattern for worship within the Christian Scriptures, and to affirm only those practices that can be grounded *theologically*. That may mean bad news for light shows, but so be it. Christians will never win the entertainment war in worship anyway, as no church should ever be willing to pour the resources into crafting a “worship experience” that U2 will put into crafting their concerts. After all, we’re not charging $65 a ticket.

***Evangelical Freedom and Structured Worship***

Evangelicals of *all* ages tend to be paranoid about legalism, and for good reasons. A law centered community is one that operates according to false standards of excellence, and that restricts freedom in ways that are contrary to the good news of Jesus Christ. Those whom Jesus sets free are free indeed.

Yet we have deep confusions about the nature of the freedom we have in Christ. The Gospel doesn’t merely set us free—it gives us the *pattern* for a life that is set free. In that sense, it establishes the conditions for our freedom, conditions which we must heed if we wish to live worthy of the calling on our lives. The freedom we have is not for eating and drinking—or rock music or hymns—but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

In other words, the Gospel sets us free, but Paul’s argument to the Corinthians is that freedom and *order* are not incommensurate. Because of our appropriate wariness of legalism, evangelicals frequently mistake any sort of order with the law. But legal*ism* requires not that our salvation take a certain form, but that we take that form *in order to be saved.* The difference is slight, but crucial. There may be an appropriate pattern for worship, without that pattern itself being *salvific.*  In worship, we respond *as* humans to the working of God. But humanity has a shape that we didn’t invent ourselves, and that we see in the person of Jesus Christ and the canon which bears witness to him. In worship, we gratefully give ourselves back to God in the manner which he has laid out for us.

It is popular to criticize evangelical worship services for ignoring the body. As I argued in a previous chapter, evangelicals don’t hate the body—they just don’t think much about it, which means we end up taking our cues from the rest of the world around us. It just so happens that the world around us doesn’t like the body much, but that’s a flaw, and not a feature of evangelical theology.

Within the structure of evangelical worship, there is room for the body. The limitation we currently have is that the body only plays a role when we *express* ourselves *spontaneously.* We don’t mind people kneeling or raising their hands in our worship services*.* But such actions are rarely encouraged. And they are definitely not a *structural* feature of the evangelical worship liturgy, as they are in other traditions.

This emphasis on the *expressive* and the *spontaneous* body misses an important aspect of the relationship between our bodies and ourselves, namely that the body shapes the mind. How we act in the body can alter how we feel, think, and act. Additionally, there is an element of *training* our bodies in Christian worship. When we see Jesus, “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Christ Jesus is Lord.” We emphasize the latter half of that line, but downplay the former. If we have spent our lifetime preparing for that moment, then I suspect we shall kneel more willingly and happily than those who have never practiced for it.

There is a privileging of spontaneity, I think, because we tie it to *authenticity.* For some reason, the planned and the prepared seems less *authentic* than the spontaneous. It’s a difficult case to make, though, in other arenas of our embodied lives. People who run plays on the basketball court are not inauthentic. In fact, we expect them to spend many hours repeating them so that they perform the motions “naturally.” Their authentic expression on the basketball court isn’t *opposed* to practicing plays. Rather, it takes shape within the order and structure that they live within.

At the same time, contrary to most people’s perceptions about order in worship, it doesn’t preclude spontaneity. Rather, it establishes a framework so that when spontaneous things do occur, the community doesn’t descend into chaos. The insertion of formal prayers, for instance, doesn’t mean an actor can’t go “off script” in any particular moment. But it does mean that he doesn’t have to write the script on the spot, either.

In reality, evangelicals *are* committed to order in their worship. As a son of an evangelical worship pastor, I saw my dad’s “order of worship” every Sunday. The question is *what* we are ordering. We identify which songs we want to *corporately* sing in response to the working of God in our midst, and which passages of Scripture we wish to *hear corporately* (though there are, I submit, far too few of those to be truly *evangelical*). What we ignore is those *actions* we want to corporately undertake (except for tithing—we’ve got that one *down*) in response to the working of God. Include kneeling together for confession of sin every week and people get skittish about being a legalist. Give a corporate opportunity to give money every week, and no one bats an eye.

***Repetition, Vain Repetition, and The Body***

There is one more reason, I think, why evangelicals have been averse to *ordered* incorporation of the body into their worship settings. There is a deep nervousness about *vain repetition*. Chastened by the threat of legalism, *form* gets associated with form*alism.* And there’s some decent reason for evangelicals to worry. After all, if smells, bells, and kneelers were enough to revive our broken faith, the Episcopalians wouldn’t be where they are now. Church practices are not enough. They need to be accompanied by a deep commitment to historical orthodoxy—which the Episcopalian church has not had.

But a caution is not necessarily a critique. And Jesus’ warning against *vain* repetition is itself not a condemnation of *repetition.* In fact, repetition seems unavoidable in life. How else would will embed Scripture into our heart except through the constant repetition of it, both to ourselves and to others? The seasons seem like they repeat every year. And as G.K. Chesterton famously suggested, the sun rising is so glorious that God seems to want it to happen every morning. The problem, as any child knows, is not repetition but in hearts and minds that have lost the meaning of what is repeated because the leadership has neglected to teach them.

Evangelicals aren’t necessarily opposed to this sort of repetition, either. After all, we repeat choruses in our singing every week. In fact, the repetition of a chorus is part of the experience of the song. It is the same as before, but drop a few instruments and slow it down a little, and all of a sudden it is slightly different. The remarkable aspect of *repetition* is that it is never *quite* the same. Though the words and actions do not change, the teaching of the church draws our attention to different features every week in the same way that the ministry of the musicians highlights different aspects of the song we are all singing.

Again, I don’t want to minimize the dangers of empty formalism. Young evangelicals who have walked the “Canterbury trail” have been around for decades now. But we need to realize that we walk it with hearts that have been shaped by our evangelical experience, and that we take the energy and devotion we inherited into new forms, forms that have sometimes left those raised within them immune to transformative power of the Gospel. The danger of our devout repetition become empty is more real than many of us care to acknowledge.

But fear cannot be our final word. Just as contemporary evangelicalism stands as inheritors of a tradition that has much to teach the church at large (namely, the emphases on cross, conversion, Bible, and salvation), so we can learn from other ecclesial traditions the importance of the body in worship without adopting their errors or losing our own distinctives.

***Missionality and Pragmatism***

Over the past twenty years, evangelical worship services have been shaped by a strong missionary impulse that lies near the heart of the evangelical tradition. From the “seeker-sensitive” movement, to the explosion of “missional communities,” the church’s role as the *eschatological people of God* has frequently taken a second place to the church’s role as the bearers of the Gospel to the lost and dying world. As a result, evangelical worship has frequently been oriented less around disciplining existing believers into the life we will enact in the new creation, and focused more on bringing more believers into the fold.

There are strong pragmatic tendencies at work within the movement, tendencies which tend to minimize the importance of the physical body for discipleship and conversion. In some evangelical corners, for instance, the building of church buildings is seen as a lavish waste of resources that detracts from serving the poor—rather than a means of shaping the world, and ourselves, in response to the beauty which is revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The pragmatic and the missional impulses have met in the newest phenomenon within evangelicalism, *church online.* Churches like *lifechurch.tv,* North Point, and other evangelical megachurches offer services that are completely over the internet. They include singing, teaching, giving, and in some cases even offer baptism and communion.

I jump straight to church online for this reason: it is the logical extension of a problematic anthropology (and hence, ecclesiology) that has been at work within evangelicalism for some time, and is still at work in many of the corners of evangelicalism that think “church online” is not really church. Those who are taking church online are simply taking what most evangelicals believe about the human person to its logical extension, namely, that the body is immaterial for Christian worship.

Allow me to frame the conversation this way, though. The missionary impulse behind online church is very real, as are the conversions and changed lives that have resulted from it. Whatever else I have to say, I see no grounds for denying the validity of the religious encounters that occur in online church.  The testimonials of conversions and changed lives that have come about through online church should be taken very seriously.

At the same time, the heart of the online church proposal is that the physical body is not necessary for the *corporate worship* of the church. It is not, as is sometimes presented, necessarily a denial of the need for local communities. In fact, many of the online churches are trying to connect people in small groups in various parts of the world. While it might be *nice* if the body is present for worship, they contend that bodily presence of individuals is not *normative* for the church to require.

Outside of a few large exceptions, church online is still a relatively rare practice within evangelicalism. Far more popular is the use of video sermons in multi-site or multi-service churches. More often than not, the use of video sermons is justified pragmatically: the pastor would get exhausted preaching that many times, and the church lacks enough qualified and capable preachers to fill the gaps. There’s a hidden clause there that most video sermon advocates will acknowledge in private—there aren’t enough preachers to “maintain current attendance levels.”

Here’s my point: the use of video sermons paved the way for church online. In fact, the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers seems to make church online *more* consistent with protestant theology than video sermons. The use of video sermons suggests that the physical body of the preacher is not necessary for the effective preaching of the Gospel. There is no wayto affirm this, however, without affirming that the physical body is not necessary for the *hearing* of the word without establishing the pastor in a category separate from the rest of his church.

In that sense, the critique that mega-church pastors who use video sermons have made themselves “Protestant popes” has real weight. To pick a theological analogue, one of the problems Protestants reacted against in the middle ages were perceived abuses of communion. Specifically, priests were consecrating communion by themselves, for themselves. Luther’s response was to argue that communion was only efficacious when it was said in the hearing of the community. Our contemporary treatment of Protestant pastors is functionally the same problem, for we have so separated the *giving* of the sermon from the community that *hears* the sermon. In principle, the use of video sermons entails that the pastor could give the sermon with *no one* in the room and it still ‘count’ as them preaching the word of God.

This doesn’t even start to approach the problems of baptism and communion. Some critics of church online argue that they cannot be done online. But if the body is not necessary for the effective communication of the Gospel, then it isn’t clear why it’s necessary for the taking of communion, unless there is some meaning intrinsic to the particular bread that the community shares, or to the combination of ***that*** bread with ***that*** pastor, or to ***being in a particular place together.***  The same Spirit who overcomes spatial distances to communicate the Word through *preaching* can surely make the taking of communion effective when thousands of individuals simultaneously partake of bread that has been consecrated through the prayer of the online preacher.

One final critique of online churches and video venues: functionally, there is nothing preventing a church from adopting an “all-star” lineup of pastors. Why listen to only one, when you could hear Mark Driscoll one week, Craig Groeschel after him, and John Piper the next? The expansion of excellent preaching is one of the blessings of our technological era. And yet there is a latent danger here of “pastoral porn,” the loss of the church to accept younger pastors who are not already rock-stars. In one sense, Mark Driscoll became Mark Driscoll by practicing his craft again and again. There is a danger that in 50 years, we will have one preacher left who will proclaim the word of God, and the papalization of evangelical Protestantism will be complete.

The response to all of this is, of course, that Paul wrote letters to the churches that would then be read to the churches. In that sense, he was comfortable using technology to proclaim the word of God. The argument, however, equates the use of technology by *apostles* such as Paul with pastors in their local congregation. The apostolic nature of the church, however, doesn’t necessarily entail that local pastors have the same authority as Paul.

Additionally, those letters would have been read in the communityby an embodied person, whose reading would have affected the audience’s hearing of the word through their choice of emphasis and stress. In short, they would have allowed for the sort of spontaneity that video sermons preclude. As any performer—musical or otherwise—knows, the reaction of a crowd has a profound effect on the performance. A tired crowd can make a performance drag, while performers will feed off an energetic crowd. Part of the drama of Christian preaching is that at any point tongues of fire might descend (metaphorically speaking) and that the community will be lifted up through the preacher’s word. Because the transaction in video sermons is necessarily one-directional—even our *prayers* can’t impact the preacher, since the sermon already happened—it removes this element of drama. In that sense, the discontinuity between video sermons and Paul’s reading of the scripture is real. That Paul sent letters does not entail that he would have non-live sermons given on Sunday.

In essence, my argument is a *reductio.* It is impossible to adopt video venues without also allowing for online church. And both rest upon problematic theological anthropologies. Church online suggests that bodily presence is not necessary for corporate worship, while video venues take a “body for thee, but not for me” approach, elevating the pastor above his people with respect to what is required for corporate gatherings.

But those evangelicals nodding their heads should start by looking inward, as these ecclesial developments did not happen in a vacuum. Rather, they are simply adopting the anthropology of evangelicalism to new contexts and technologies. A sincere and Godly missionary impulse and an emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s ability to overcome limited, physical, geographical arrangements, rather than work through and within those arrangements, are at the heart of the mega-church ecclesiology.

Yet there are good reasons to be wary of this anthropology, and the view of church it leads to. The body isn’t simply a tool for me to communicate with the world. It is different than my iPhone, or a letter, or an email, or a video blog. It is the place of my personal *presence.* I am only *present* where my body is, which means that if I am not gathered bodily in the presence of the people of God (“let us not give up meeting together”), I have not been *in* or *at* or *with* church—all spatial metaphors that depend upon our embodied lives for their meaning. The minimization of this spatial aspect of the church (gathered *together*) treats participants like angels, not humans. We only gather *humanly* when we are present together in our bodies.

Because the body is my place of *personal* presence in the world, though, and not just that by which I communicate with the world, it is a center of meaning on its own.  It reveals more than I might consciously intend or choose.  Tony Steward, an advocate for church online and pastor at lifechurch.tv, [has pointed out that discipleship is possible online because they have established](http://www.catalystspace.com/content/read/concerns_about_church_online/) a “permission environment.”  But in embodied communication, we reveal more than we consciously permit.  The particular shape of my smile, or the particular hunch of my shoulders can betray more anxiety or joy than I might be conscious of at any given moment, which is precisely what makes local communities so difficult and so important.

Second, and related to the first, in appealing to the spiritual universality of the church, advocates of church online utilize a problematic theology of place, which I suspect further reinforces the rootlessness of the people they are ministering to.  Andrew Jones, a writer and missiologist who has advocated for the validity of church online, has  [rightly argued that Hebrews and John 4](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2009/07/the-virtual-church-keeping-it-real.html) challenge the geographically bound religious thought that seemed to be present in the Judaism of Jesus’ day.  The God whom we worship is not tied to a specific mountain, but really is “spirit and truth.”

Yet as Oliver O’Donovan argues in an essay on the importance of *place* to our Christian witness, the universality of the church an be instantiated either abstractly or concretely.  Church online, with its distance from the normal structure of human life, rests on an abstract notion of ‘universality’ where our churchly relations are scattered far and wide.  Church online contradicts the embodied nature of Christian universality.

O’Donovan appeals to the parable of the Good Samaritan to make his case, which opens with the line, “As it happened…”  While the parable clearly demonstrates that the Gospel transcends religious and social identities, it does so from within the contingent arrangements of our lives.  He happened to be travelling one day, and the need was thrust upon him.  The universal takes shape in the local.  G.K. Chesterton puts it this way: “The man who lives in a small community lives in a much larger world.  He knows much more of the fierce varieties and uncompromising divergences of men.  The reason is obvious.  In a large community we can choose our companions.  In a small community our companions are chosen for us.”

It is important to point out that for an increasing number of people, “normal life” and the sort of contingent arrangements that make it up are happening online.  But there is, I think, an important difference that makes churchly relations more difficult:  the lack of geographical boundaries makes it easy and likely to *choose* our communities.  Because of the low entry points into ‘communal arrangements’—one need only select the right url to begin engaging a completely new set of people—the social ties that are formed are easier to break.  The body limits our choice (especially in the case of family!) by putting us in proximity to people not of our own choosing.   The overwhelming testimony of the human behavior online is that the freedom to associate with anyone we so desire leads not to diverse and varied communities, but rather homogenous and self-selected cliques.

In that sense, church online has simply taken the sort of self-selecting nature of gated communities and moved it online in the name of “mission.”

The Spirit is *able* to overcome the boundedness and limits of our embodied lives, but the pattern of Scripture is that he works *in* and *through* those limits. Our bodies are intrinsic to our humanity, and we are only human in the church if we are embodied in the church. Evangelicals are in desperate need of a theology that takes seriously bodily *presence* as a unique mode of being in the world, and a view of the church as place where we gather humanly.

***The Communally Shaped Body***

My hope in writing this book was that I would be able to avoid the tricky territory of communion and baptism. The theological waters here are deeper than I am comfortable swimming in, so I offer this section with some trepidation. Because my own opinions on these matters are unsettled—more unsettled, I should say, than my opinions about online church—I want to frame them carefully.

The mainstream evangelical church I grew up in practiced monthly communion. This is relatively standard practice within many evangelical churches, particularly those who view the practice of communion as many Baptists do—as an ordinance that is oriented toward remembering the death of Jesus Christ as our means of connecting with him.

Outside of Baptist circles, the position has few defenders. Many young evangelicals have left the confines of that position for more sacramental theories of communion and baptism—they treat them instead as “means of grace,” or ways in which God gives himself to us in and through the physical elements of this world.

The sacramental position is frequently positioned as having a “higher” view of the body, as it treats the physical elements (when consecrated) as means of connecting us with God. Those who treat communion as a memorial ceremony, the argument goes, don’t value the body or the ways that it connects us to God. A sacramental view of communion gives us “food for the journey,” as it were, while a Baptist view leaves us hungry.

I have some sympathies for these critiques. One of the most encouraging developments in young evangelicalism is the recovery of weekly communion (particularly in the Acts 29 movement). Regardless of whether communion is a sacrament or not, our taking of it is one of the central ways in which we connect ourselves to the Christian tradition and which we bear witness to the world.

Yet I am wary of arguments that suggest *only* sacramental approaches to communion (or baptism) properly dignify the body. The most common definition of “sacrament” is a “visible means of an invisible grace.” Yet this definition is fraught with difficulty, as specifying what is different about communion and baptism on the one hand and the created order on the other turns out to be more challenging than it initially seems. The “sacramental imagination” with respect to creation treats the created order as full of God’s communicative presence. It seems to do something more than reveal how God thinks to us—rather, he is actually present *in* the created order in a way that forces us to respect his dignity.

The question of sacraments seems to be a question about *divine action.* In the practice of communion, who is acting? Is God acting to communicate his care and love for us in some way, or are humansacting in their response to his grace and love? For Baptists, communion is a *eucharist—*in that it is the divinely ordered *human response* by the visible church in gratitude for the forgiveness we have in Jesus Christ and the regeneration we have through the Holy Spirit. Because our response is in body and soul, and because *gratitude* is the heart of the Christian faith, taking communion weekly is just as important to Baptists as it is to Anglo-Catholics.

In that sense, Baptists may not have a “sacramental imagination.” But the gift of the created order is *really given,* and Baptists don’t need to see Jesus in the trees to thank him for giving them to us. In fact, we can appreciate the trees *as* trees, and realize that the created order is really independent of God’s existence. While he may dwell within it, in his freedom he is not tied to it.

A similar argument could be made regarding baptism. Rather than being a *means* by which God dispenses grace to us, baptism is instead a response to the reality of God’s regenerative activity that marks someone off as a member of the people of God. Baptism functions as a physical marker (like circumcision) of membership in the community. Our grateful obedience to the gospel makes baptism not optional, but rather the normative, *human* response to the love of God.

In that sense, there is nothing *intrinsic* to Baptist approaches to baptism and communion that devalue the body. If evangelicals think badly of the body, the sources (I would argue) lie elsewhere. Additionally, a “low” view of baptism and communion that treats it as an optional, occasional response is a bug and not a feature. If the gospel not only brings us into the Christian life but *shapes* the Christian life, then baptism and communion are normative for all Christians to pursue within the visible church. The question of sacraments is a question of whether divine action occurs, but the church is full of humans, rather than angels or gods, and the properly human responses of baptism and communion are enough to merit a much “higher” view of them than Baptists have yet given them.

***The Body in Worship***

The worship wars have almost exclusively focused on the purported shallowness of choruses verses the theological depth of hymns. Occasionally, they reach out into a debate over whether we should ever play more than four chords in our worship. Yet they rarely reach the heart of the issue, which is *how* music shapes the body even before our cognitive apprehension of the words. Our bodies are shaped at levels deeper than we consciously realize, and there are few media that affect us more deeply than music does.

I would say “we now know” this to be the case, and toss out some of the scientific evidence that examines how music affects the brain. But the reality is that Christians have known that music affects humans by virtue of their bodies long before the neuroscientists got to it. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis didn’t invent the idea that creation was sung into existence—that is a tradition extending all the way back to *at least* the blasted neo-Platonist Augustine.

Music has a way of moving us through time as a narrative moves us through a story. Music is not a set of random notes on a page. Rather, one note *leads to* the next—it moves us along, and sometimes takes us back to the beginning, or alters certain themes we’ve heard before. Like movies, there is an unfolding in music that takes *time—*but *how* the music takes time is subtly altering our perception of what ‘long’ and ‘short’ is. Music has a directedness to it, which means the *sounds themselves* do something to us.

The rule of thumb is simple: the more complex the music, structurally speaking, the more delayed the emotional gratification is. Complex music requires more patience, for it takes longer for the beauty to unfold. Four chords and a four-four beat takes very little time, for the gratification has been set on the bottom shelf. As Jeremy Begbie argues:

It is worth noting in passing that much of the music currently employed in Christian worship deploys remarkably little in the way of delayed gratification.  Admittedly, a congregation must be able to grasp quickly new hymns and songs if music is to enable and release their worship, but as I have argued elsewhere, rather too often goals are reached directly and predictably with a minimum of the kind of delay of which we have been speaking.  Could we be witnessing here a musical articulation of the tendency in some quarters of the church to insist on immediate rewards and not to come to terms with the (potentially positive) realities of frustration and disappointment?"

The reality is that most of our music is designed to induce the sort of short-term emotional and physical pleasure that pornography induces. While it’s of a different genre and moral quality, it further integrates into us the idea that pleasure should come quickly and easily, without effort or labor.

I’m not arguing that we should have a Bach cantata play for every song. But evangelicals need to think more carefully about the way music affects our embodied lives. Because as evangelicals have taken their musical cues from the concert arenas (all while decrying the derivative nature of Christian music) the nature of Christian worship has been effectively transformed away from the community voicing her gratitude before God toward the easy manipulation of emotions through musical pyrotechnics.

On a practical level, evangelicals would do well to start with turning the volume down. I call it “Anderson’s Law”: the volume of the worship band is inversely proportional to the volume and vitality of the congregational worship. In other words, as the band gets louder, the congregational singing gets quieter and vice versa.

The reality is that our embodied lives are *musical* lives. We sing because we’re human. When the children of God enter Zion, it is with signing and with dancing. But the church worshipping with one voice is impossible if the church can’t hear herself sing. And as the volume of the music increases, the likelihood that the atmosphere will turn into a performance, rather than worship, increases as well.

The body is the place of our personal presence in the world, and our singing establishes our presence in a particular sort of way. Focusing on the body requires not just singing, but singing in ways and to music that reflect the reality of the Triune God and the order of the creation in which he has established us. As in all things that we do in the body, it is not a private activity, but an activity that happens in a public space, where we act on others and they act on us. Singing shapes our heart by altering our emotions.

***Concluding Remarks***

There is more that I should say about the body and it’s role in corporate worship. From the liturgical arts, to architecture, to kneeling for confession, the body is at the center of our properly human response to God. As I argued in chapter four, the body is shaped by the world around it—and that world has to include the church. The contemporary evangelical approach of making church cater to our existing desires and preferences doesn’t take seriously her responsibility to disciple people beyond where they currently are.

Communion, baptism, singing, kneeling—these are the practices by which the church is known as the people of God, for the church exists as the people of God through her worship. The mission of the church is to make worshippers, and it does that by grounding its worship in an anthropology that is robustly biblical—that takes seriously the body as the place of our personal presence.

**Chapter Ten: Death Comes to All Men**

He had managed to do more than most men accomplish in a lifetime. He started organizations aimed at converting the world to Christianity, and could woo women with either poetry or electric salsa moves. He wasn’t the most interesting man in the world, but he was close.

We all expected that it would be an encounter with lions in Africa, or a failed parachute while skysurfing, or dysentery in the jungles of Brazil that would kill him. He was, in our minds, practically indestructible and had the good fortune of travelling to some of the world’s most exotic locations. But he died alone on his bed, a solitary victim of swine flu. Justin Key was 26. He is still missed, and frequently remembered.

A peculiarly modern phenomenon followed next. Friends, family members, and acquaintances turned to Facebook, filling his wall with memories, quotes, and words of sorrow. There were, literally, hundreds of comments, many of which were words of encouragement for friends and family, but most of which were directed to Justin himself. Though being dead, he apparently still reads Facebook.

The way we interact with death and the dying reveals a lot about how we think about ourselves. 150 years ago, Americans would have kept the bodies of the dead in their homes for the funeral and mourning period, and then take them to the church yard or to the homestead where they would be buried. Now, we send the bodies to the funeral homes who wheel them into their inter-faith chapels and then bury them in our non-sectarian cemeteries or cremate them. What was a ritual shaped by communities of family and faith has become a consumer experience managed by professionals whose goal is profits and sanitation.

The invention of the cemetery, in fact, was one of the most singular changes in how our society structures death. Walk into churches in small Midwestern towns, and you’ll frequently walk through a graveyard. Even the name is different. A *cemetery* is a city devoted to the dead, a place where they dwell on their own away from the rest of civilization. It was one of a cluster of social changes that contributed to our general avoidance of death—an avoidance encapsulated by our general refusal to speak of the matter to the dying.

At the same time, our avoidance has lead to a common effort to defeat death itself—and the factors that contribute to it. The most common reminder of our mortality, wrinkles, are anathema. Aging is the one “disease” we all know we’ll catch, so we hold out hope that our billions of dollars in research will find a way to stop or slow down the inevitable march of time. We have replaced the resurrection from the dead for the fusion of science and technology. If we can learn just enough about the body in order to replicate it’s self-healing processes, we can render the promises of God that have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ not false, but irrelevant.

Avoid or defeat. And preferably, defeat so we no longer have to avoid. That is the peculiar pathology of our era. As Daniel Bell wrote in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,* “The deepest nature of modern man, the secret of his soul as revealed by the modern metaphysic, is that he seeks to reach out beyond himself; knowing that negativity--death--is finite, he refuses to accept it.  Behind the chiliasm of modern man is the megalomania of self-infinitization.”

The earliest Christians, however, would have found death inescapable. The walls of their earliest meeting places, the catacombs, would have been lined with the decaying bones of the city’s forgotten ones. The average age of death in was 30, and as the new religion grew, the Roman Empire responded by launching a program of torturous executions.

Yet by refusing to flee from their oppressive circumstances or the presence of death in their midst, the earliest Christians bore witness to the Gospel proclamation. God in Jesus Christ does not avoid death or defeating it through techniques of reshaping humanity through plastic surgery or technological development. Instead, death is defeated when it is embraced, entered into willingly in the knowledge that there is a deeper magic at work in the universe. Christianity is predicated on the unique irony that the instrument of torture has become a symbol of glory, and that it is “very much better to depart and be with Christ.” To die, Paul writes, is gain. The devil is defeated with his own most powerful instrument.

The death of Jesus is the presupposition to the resurrection of Jesus, and it is his resurrection that grounds our freedom to stare our own mortality in the face without fear. All the promises of God are “yes and Amen to the glory of God,” and they are kept by his power to restructure the physical universe. While we live in that reality, we look forward to the resurrection of the dead as the final fulfillment of the kingdom which Jesus inaugurates in his life, death, and resurrection.

***Death as Dissolution***

Why do people die? Though frequently asked, the question is rarely just a question. Rather, it almost always an expression of frustration at the experience of loss. Death is hard to make sense of, hard to understand—especially the death of young people. It is important to acknowledge and feel the tragedy of losing any human life, but we acutely feel the loss of those like Justin Key who passed in their youth. Their death heightens our awareness that regardless of when it comes, death is unremittingly tragic.

As Christians, it is tempting to pass over the senselessness of death and move straight for comforting passages out of Romans 8: “God works all things for good for those who love him.” It is a temptation we should resist more often, I think. The resurrection from the dead must shape our understanding of death and its meaning in our own lives, giving us confidence and hope in the face of it. But the more we ground ourselves in the life that the resurrection brings, the more we will confront the meaninglessness and senselessness that death reveals. The same Bible that contains Romans 8 also includes Ecclesiastes.

Death is, however, not just an *event* that happens to us. It is a *reality*—or rather, an *un*reality—that we live in, that stretches backward to shape how we live in and through our bodies in our normal lives. We are *mortal* bodies.

As I suggested above in chapter three, as the place of our personal presence in the world, the body is an organized, animated, unified whole. The body clearly has parts, but when we are living and moving in the world, we don’t necessarily attend to them or notice them. We don’t even necessarily attend to the fact that our *bodies* are acting in the world. *We* drive cars, walk through doors, pick flowers, and run through rainfalls. And we type on computers. I don’t really notice my fingers as I’m typing, even though they’re working far too slowly for my preference. My inner life is, in fact, almost entirely directed toward the words that they are typing, and desperately trying to make them interesting.

“The wages,” Paul tells us, “of sin is death.” It is precisely the rejection of the body’s proper end and purpose that leads to the dissolution of the human person. “The body is the Lord’s!” And when we refuse to acknowledge it as such, and bring it in conformity with that reality, we work against its integrity as an organic and unified whole.

But once introduced, death no longer functions only as the *consequence* of sin, but is transformed into a force that actually leads to sin. A mortal body is precisely one that works against itself and against the reality of the restored human life that is available to us in Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reverses the order that he had used in calling death the wages of sin: “The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.” Death is the unfortunate invited guest who takes over the party, and that no one outside of the one who is able to “call being out of non-being” is able to stop.

The body is unified whole, but using it or any of its parts for purposes for which it was not intended will undermine that whole’s ability to function and operate well. As someone who grew up in an area with routine floods, I was perpetually tempted by the chance to drive very quickly through large puddles of water. Turning cars not designed for water transporation into floatation devices sounds fun. But water in the engine, it turns out, is not particularly conducive to its flourishing.

The reality is that in systems—organic or otherwise—like the body that have interdependent parts and that are unified wholes, once a part of the system begins to decay, it contributes to the decay of the other parts that are dependent upon it. And as anyone with an old car knows, once that decay begins, it can be difficult to reverse.

The Christian conflict with death, then, is a conflict with *corruptibility* and the degeneration of our bodies. “Though the outer man is wasting away,” Paul writes, “the inner man is being renewed.” The world in its current state, under the realm of sin, is transient and impermanent. It is not just the glory of the world that fades away, but the world itself, which is why Paul repeatedly exhorts the churches he has authority over to attend not to those aspects of the world that are fading away, but to those which are permanent. This is a dualism, but it is a cosmic dualism, and one that is specifically tied to our position looking forward to the resurrection of the dead. Paul longs to be “clothed” with a new body that has not been given to corruptibility, a body that the Spirit has endowed with incorruptibility and that cannot decay.

Yet here and now we face the dissolution and decay that culminates in the event of our death. It is a dissolution and decay that cannot be avoided or covered over with makeup. Rather, it is a dissolution that must be attended to, examined, and ultimately embraced. “Teach me to number my days,” the Psalmist prays, “that I may present unto thee a heart of wisdom.” It is a challenging message in a world that refuses to accept our own death and decay.

***Death and Human Limitation***

It’s a funny metaphor to use, but the contemporary fascination with vampires is nothing short of a revival of the genre. *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* and *Interview with a Vampire* restarted the party in Hollywood, while Buffy and Angel made vampires cool for teenagers. And then *Twilight* continued the trajectory that had started in *Angel* of softening vampires’ image. The ruthless, inhuman vampires of old have been transformed into sparkly, angsty teenagers whose looks are apparently irresistible. The weird confusion of their desire for human blood with their sexual attraction is one of the fascinating, and mildly disturbing aspects of vampires 2.0.

As a projection for what humans want, the revisionist vampires of Twilight are about reasonably accurate. They don’t die, their bodies do superhuman things, they don’t sleep, and they are undeniably attractive. And the erotic tension is heightened by the impossible gap between them and their human lovers, and by the undeniable self-sacrifice that the young girl has to make in order to marry Edward. It is an odd twist on laying down our lives for those who we love.

Part of the dynamic of human flourishing is the thrill that comes from expanding the horizons of what we think is possible. We practice piano in order to play songs that we weren’t able to play before, and practice our jump shot in order to make shots we would have previously missed. In every case, the disciplines of practice increase our capacity to act successfully in the world in the ways in which we want to act.

At the same time, the body *is* capable of far more than we imagine. The Navy SEALS have perfected the art of pushing their candidates to the limits of their physical and mental abilities without killing them, as a way of demonstrating that their physical capabilities and powers have been significantly underutilized. And our generation loves focusing on those incredible physical powers. The iconic war hero during the middle of the 20th century, John Wayne, was a broad shouldered man whose particular attraction was his commanding presence and steady southern drawl, and whose physical feats were impressive, but within the range of possibility. Our own age prefers the exploits of Jason Bourne, the trained weapon who we are pretty sure is indestructible and who can do things with his body that seem to be outside the realm of normal human capabilities.

Navigating which limits have been artificially established by ourselves and our own mental limitations, and which ones are there for our own good, is at the heart of living wisely in our late-modern era. The rising obesity level indicates that many of us would do well to channel our inner Navy SEAL and break through the boundaries of our living rooms to get some real exercise (with the guidance of a doctor and a personal trainer, naturally).

At the same time, if human freedom is to remain distinctively human*,* it must respect the limits that have been built into the created order for our own well-being. *Sabbath ergo sum,* as Descartes might put it. The body in its original goodness was created as dependent on the world for its ongoing sustenance, and in need of rest and restoration. The Sabbath is not only a profligate and superfluous celebration of the goodness of the created order, though it is that. Our observation is crucial for replenishing and restoring us for the ongoing work we have to do. The Sabbath is recreation, which simply means that our bodies are *re*created in and through our rest.

The same is true of that other aspect of human existence that reveals all the pathologies of our modern era: sleep, which in our pathological approach to it is either master or villain. We either give way to lethargy and allow ourselves to sleep the day away, or we go the route of vampires, eschewing sleep and embracing work as much as we humanly can. As one aspect of human existence, sleep too is under sin.

It is also at the heart of our experience of the body, for sleep points to our own mortality and death. As John Paul II writes regarding Adam’s sleep in the Garden of Eden, “Considering the specific language, first it must be recognized that in the Genesis account, that sleep in which man is immersed–thanks to God-Yahweh–in preparation for the new creative act, gives us food for thought….Perhaps, therefore, the analogy of sleep indicates here not so much a passing from consciousness to subconciousness, as a specific return to non-being (sleep contains an element of annihilation of man’s conscious existence).”

If the Pope is right, then sleep is an inherently isolating phenomenon. While the movie *Inception* was a fun exploration of what might happen if we could enter into each others’ dreams, we go into the unknown with no one to take our hand. While the Christian proclamation is not an individualistic one, it does address individuals and call them to faithful obedience to the gospel. It is we, as solitary individuals, who must take up our crosses and die. And it is we who must close our eyes and go to sleep, for we are not among the deathless ones or the sleepless ones.

The point of death’s individualizing power can’t be underemphasized. The living communicate with other human beings, which entangles them in the responsibilities and privileges that come with being human together. Death ruptures this ability, bringing only silence.

At the same time, our sleep is an affirmation of our need for constant *re*creation by a power that is not (yet) intrinsic to our being as human persons. As such, when we sleep we give ourselves over to the providential care of God. It’s astonishing to think that previous generations of Christians might have had their children pray it, but there are few words that express better what’s at stake in our sleep: ” Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” As general advice, “let go and let God” is remarkably unhelpful and possibly unbiblical—except with respect to our sleep, where it is precisely the sort of disposition that we should cultivate.

Learning to sleep healthily, in fact, is preparation for a life that recognizes and embraces the limitation of death. The bioethical movement to overcome death and aging through technological means known as “transhumanism” is predicated on the supposition that death is to be defeated through medicine. It is a seductive challenge to the heart of the Gospel, which suggests that it is not medical technology that defeats death, but rather the miraculous power of God in Jesus Christ. A fringe movement, perhaps, but it shares a family relation to the sort of pathological approach to life that energy drinks encapsulates: we wish to do as much as possible on as little sleep as we can, and we need technological enhancement (i.e. drugs) to help us do it. The biblical commandment to “be not drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit” is not a condemnation of alcohol in itself, but rather captivity to technologies that produce cheap imitations of the life the Spirit promises to us. Our endless pursuit of frenetic activity coupled with our addiction to life-enhancing drugs and medicine comes close enough to the pathology that it should make us pause.

The reality is that death is not one of the limits (like sleep) that was established as part of the original created order to be respected. But inasmuch as it contains within it a “specific return to non-being,” sleep reminds us of our body’s need for the resurrection of the dead and the power of God who calls “being out of non-being.” In that way, we should embrace sleep not simply as a natural reality that we need to help us feel good throughout the day, but as an affirmation of the providential care of the God who was faithful to his promises in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

***Death and Formation of the Community***

As an unremittingly individualist experience, death is also one of the most foundational realities for human communities. Birth, marriage, and death—these are the moments when people gather together and recognize new realities that shape the fabric of our lives. While ours is on the surface a particularly anti-ritualistic age that prefers the pretense of choice and individuality over the appearance of formality, birth, marriage, and death have a unique significance for human communities.

For Christians, the funeral is an opportunity to engage in the distinct practice of remembering. To minimize this sense in which we memorialize those whom we have lost with a *merely* or *just* is to underestimate the gravitas that humans place on the act. Recalling locates ourselves in a particular place in a story, giving us perspective on our own situation and context. Because the community that we live in is a human community, it is a historical community. The “inside joke” depends for its existence not on a snobbish desire to exclude, but on the fact that any group is shaped by its memory of shared experiences and realities, and the retelling of those experiences deepens the group’s identity and character.

In one sense, the practice of looking backward at the life of those who have died orients the community not simply around the life of that person, but around its own history in and through that members’ life. How we interpret their life and death reveals the nature of the ties that bound us together, but also shapes the nature of our community going forward. The body that loses an arm, a foot, or a fingernail has to adjust to a new reality by reinterpreting itself and exploring the different possibilities and prospects before it. It cannot do this, though, without remembering where it has come from and the way in which that member of the body shared and shaped its life.

At the same time, this memorializing for Christians is neither an act of tragic nihilism nor an attempt to create meaning where it does not exist. Rather, it is an act of faith, and as such a forward looking act. Our memorializing takes its character not *simply* from the fact that we have lost the person, but from the deeper and more powerful fact that we shall meet again. For the Christian, remembering is never far from anticipation. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. This is the lodestar for our Christian experience and the way the dead shape our Christian community.

The Christian proclamation is that death is unremittingly tragic, but it is not the end of the story (and the resurrection may structure our account of death, but it does not mitigate its tragic nature). The silence of death is not an interminable silence, but a pause in the symphony of our lives. We must “play the rests,” as my piano teacher repeatedly reminded me. But within the dynamic power of the kingdom, the silence of death is not the end of the melody but is swept up in a glorious concluding theme that is brought on by the trumpet call.

Because we are historical creatures, our lives are shaped by those who go before us. The life of any local church is not only constituted by those who happen to be walking around at the moment. That would entail, as G.K. Chesterton has put it, the tyranny of the living. Such a tyranny is predicated on a falsehood, for the world that the church inhabits is a world that was shaped by those members who no longer inhabit it. The truism that our forgetfulness of the past dooms us to repeat it misses the deeper reality that we cannot understand even our own reality without knowing where we have come from.

Here we hint at the notion of tradition, which Chesterton identified as the “democracy of the dead.” Yet as Plato well understood, democracies can quickly devolve into tyrannies. What we need is tradition without traditionalism, tradition that appreciates what we have at hand while reaching behind the early 1900s to the resources of the Christian experience throughout the centuries. For those forgotten dead have shaped the character of our own world and Christian community as well. One need not think tradition infallible to learn from it (“teach me not the wisdom of the past, but of their follies!”). We are at a unique period in human history, if only because *every* period of history is unremittingly unique. While we need the resources of tradition for the faithful proclamation of the Gospel and to understand our own identity as the people of God in the late-modern world (a world shaped by misconceptions about the role of Christianity throughout history), we also need to constantly hear the word of God anew and to find creative, faithful applications of Scripture to our unique challenges.

As evangelicals, it should trouble us that our only ongoing remembrance of the dead happens on a secular holiday, Memorial Day, where we remember those who fell while defending our country. There are resources in the broader Christian tradition to draw from: the church calendar memorializes certain saints throughout the year, providing opportunities for the church to tell the stories of the faithful departed and to reinterpret its own identity in the context of their lives and deaths.

At the same time, we have contexts and opportunities at hand. Just as evangelicals have made popular the times of “sharing of God’s grace” in our services as ways of strengthening and edifying the body, so we should set aside the occasional period to remember the stories of God’s grace in the lives of those who have gone before us.

Perhaps most importantly, the central memorial service is—for sacramentalists and non-sacramentalists—the communion meal, where we reinterpret our own experience in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the good news of the Gospel. This is the center of our identity as the church, for we are formed in response to his working. Whatever I have said above does not take precedence over this singular reality. But neither does understanding ourselves primarily in light of the cross preclude memorializing the dead. Instead, it is a form of imitating those who imitate Christ, who walk according to the pattern that we have in Paul, Epaphrous, and Timothy. It is a way of *honoring* those men and women whose lives have reflected the glory of Jesus Christ, and of orienting our own lives and community around the cross because of their witness.

***Death and the Post-Death Body***

The implicit argument above is that death is a reality that does not simply touch the individual who dies, but the entire community that they live in. As ourselves in our external dimension, our bodies are simply not our own but entangle us in the web of relations that is the Christian community. The arm cannot say to the foot that we have no need of it, and when the foot ceases to be present, the arm will inevitably act differently.

In essence, this approach to the body entails that regardless of what the law says, the central caretaker of the dead is not the natural family (though they may have a privileged voice in the matter) but the church. When the natural family lacks the resources to properly care for the dead and treat them with the dignity they deserve, it is the church’s opportunityand responsibility to care for its own.

Yet I fear that for most evangelicals, the question of whether the church has responsibilities toward the bodies of those who died is a foreign one. Ethics, we tend to presume, has only with how we treat the living, not the dead. Yet if ethics is an ordered account of the obligations the Gospel implicates us in, then we need to at least *reflect* about the way we treat the dead, to see if it is informed by a rich account of Christian anthropology that is grounded in Scripture.

In one sense, this ethical reflection within the evangelical community is a rearguard action. Most evangelicals have tacit commitments on the body and its meaning that have allowed them to uncritically adopt functionally secular practices of disposing of the dead. The problem is concentrated on the question of cremation, a fringe practice that has been slowly normalized since the 1960s.

The reality is that like many of the ethical issues I’ve mentioned, Scripture doesn’t directly address whether cremation is permissible for the Christian. In fact, it doesn’t say much of anything at all about it. However, a robust Christian anthropology that takes seriously the body as the place of our personal presence in the world makes it difficult to see how cremation could be a normative practice within the Christian community. It is not merely that the “trajectory” of Scripture is opposed to the practice, but that a well-ordered account of *what* cremation is and *what* the body are make it at best questionable for Christians to pursue.

In fact, the arguments surrounding cremation highlight just how deeply our secular intuitions about the body run. If the body is a piece of property that we are attached to and used to, rather than *us* in our external dimension, then it’s not clear why it matters how we treat it after it has died. It’s the same argument that “it’s all going to burn,” except applied to the human person rather than the cosmos. And with decidedly more literalism than the cosmological position generally entails. In one sense, the argument is one from silence. The Bible doesn’t prohibit it, ergo it’s permissible.

On the other hand, the argument surrounding cremation almost always has implicit pragmatic assumptions, assumptions which are conflated an individualist and anti-ecclesial treatment of the human person. Cremation is, after all, significantly cheaper than burial (a fact that the Walmarts of burial stores have exploited to some effect) and the money is better given to the poor (or as is more likely, spent buying new windows or a nice meal out).

The position has a strong intuitive pull, if only because our intuitions have been mostly shaped by individualism and pragmatism rather than the reality of Scripture. As I argued above with respect to tattoos, our bodies don’t exist in a vacuum. The symbols that we decorate with them have a public meaning.  And so do our ceremonies and rituals. Burial and cremation are political acts. They do not create laws or elect officials, but they contain a public meaning in them that bears witness to the world around us about the content of the Church’s proclamation with respect to human bodies.

It is, in other words, no accident that anywhere Christianity has spread throughout human history, cremation (like slavery and the oppression of women) has eventually ceased. We believe in the Resurrection of the dead, which is a belief that these bodies shall be (in some sense) restored to us. There are metaphysical questions, of course, about the nature of that resurrection in and through our decay. But the gap in our understanding about *how* our bodies bridge the gap between their burial now and the resurrection then is no argument that we should exert our will over even the process of decay through technological manipulation.

If anything, the lacuna signals that *Christian* burial is constituted by an act of faith: we *believe* in the Resurrection of the dead. The affirmation is one that cuts against our pragmatic and individualistic institutions, for it is an affirmation that takes its shape in the church. When and where individual families lack the resources to bury their loved ones, the Church should supply those needs, for the death is one of its own entails a responsibility by the whole community that is deeper even than the natural family’s.

At the same time, there are positive reasons to treat the body with reverence and care (which, I take it, the destruction of the body through technological means simply does not do) even after death. As the place of our personal presence, our bodies have a unique dignity that demarcates them among all the other objects of the world. The Temple is sanctified by the Spirit’s presence. While the Spirit’s withdrawal alters the meaning of the Temple, it does not establish it as simply one object among many in the world. Rather, it is still established as unique and special, even if it is only as the place where the Spirit *was* present.

So the body. While the living are the proper and primary objects of human care and concern, the rituals and rites that we surround the disposal of our dead reinforce and reveal the grounds for our concern for them. There is a lurking dualism in the dismissal of the objections against cremation, for if we really are unities of body and soul, then the dead body deserves respect and care in a way that it rarely gets.

I wholeheartedly grant that cremation is an “outlier” issue for Christians, and not much worth haggling over. At the same time, such issues reveal our cultural presuppositions and what is shaping them. Everyone *knows* they have to get our approach to euthanasia or abortion right. But the philosophical attitudes and mindset is the same for those issues as it is for cremation and burial, and an uncritical adoption of the one practice may signal that we are less robust in our positions on the more critical bioethical questions of our day. How we treat those after they die, in other words, reveals how we think about the living.

In that sense, evangelical ethical reflection needs to proceed beyond the explicit prohibitions and sanctions of Scripture to see how the anthropology that Scripture presupposes and reveals in the person of Jesus Christ shapes our witness to the world in our day and age. As Christians, we need to be resurrection-centered people, and our laying of our own into the ground is a public affirmation that their bodies are to be treated with respect and dignity. We may let nature decompose them, because we can not do otherwise (nor should we, for the resurrection of the dead does not come through technological sustaining). But that is different than the intentional destruction of the body which is *inherent* in the practice of cremation, which is a practice grounded in the assertion that anything nature can do, we can do more efficiently and cost-efficiently—which is to say, industrially.

Here is my only point: as Christians, our witness and proclamation against dualism needs to be *consistent.* It does no good to decry those who think the world is going to burn if we burn bodies willy-nilly. If traditional evangelicals have a theology that is gnostic, they had practices that affirmed the goodness of the body. Our own world has largely traded.

***Death and Physical Suffering***

My wife’s Uncle John has lived in almost unremitting physical pain for nearly 7 years. He was bitten by an incredibly rare spider, Ctenus hibernalis, which has destroyed his ability to live without pain. The medical condition that the bite caused his muscles to seize up, making the normal activities of his life almost impossible. John has become a testing ground for painkiller cocktails, most of which have worked only for a short period until his body develops an immunity against them and continues to degenerate.

I think about John a lot. I first met him when my wife and I were dating and was astonished by his overwhelming cheerfulness, a cheerfulness that has remained throughout his trials. He and I had similar aspirations and goals: he works for Campus Crusade, reaching out to faculty members at secular universities and equipping them to do their work Christianly. When I spoke to him about his relationship with my wife, he mentioned how fervently he and his wife had prayed for her when she was a child. He is one of those rare souls who can confess such a thing without a hint of pride, and without introducing doubt regarding its veracity. He is truly an Alabaman in whom there is no guile (excepting only, perhaps, his fervent love for Auburn).

John Myers has suffered unlike anyone I have ever met. In a world that prides itself on our ability to avoid the experience of physical pain, John has had no escape except suicide, a suggestion that repels me even as I write it. Yet in John’s situation, that is precisely the option that our culture has grown to accept—and that many evangelicals cannot understand why they should reject, except because “God tells us that we shouldn’t.” In our anesthetized world, unremitting and unavoidable physical suffering like John’s is utterly incomprehensible to us.

At the same time, the subtle but deadly practice of cuttingamong younger people exposes the sort of pathologies that can develop in a world that understands and incorporates pain as well as it does pleasure (namely, not at all). Like pleasure, pain’s association with the positive goods it is meant to accompany can quickly unravel, which allows pain to become an *experience* to be pursued for its own sake independent of any other aspects of human reality.

It’s important to realize that the same world provided the conditions for both the self-destructive behaviors of profligate physical hedonism and the self-mutilation of cutting. There is something of a family resemblance between the two pathologies. Even though it is difficult to see how a world drunk on the physical experience of pleasure is self-mutilating, inasmuch as it undermines the body’s integrity and purpose, that is precisely what it is. The self-mutilation of cutting is more obvious and more twisted, but still seems to be motivated by the nihilism of a world that goes no deeper than image and appearance.

Those who cut themselves, in other words, may be acting as canaries in the coal mine. Canaries are particularly sensitive to the atmosphere, a trait that made them particularly useful to miners, who would take them beneath the earth to act as early warning signs against deadly gases that would be imperceptible to the miners themselves. Cutting is one pathological response to a world that has failed to help young people order and understand their lives properly.

In a previous chapter, I argued that part of the fall is that our selves have become disordered. The Holy Spirit’s presence brings the reintegration of the body and the soul, but does it in a way that doesn’t demand that we let go of our physical desires but rather transform them and bring them in alignment with the reality that God has given us access to in Jesus Christ. The spiritual *disciplines* order how Christians pursue this reintegration not only by establishing the proper means for it, but by reorienting us toward our proper end as humans: the living God of the universe who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In a real sense, problems like cutting are the results of a secular world trying to reintegrate the body and the soul around ends for which humans were not designed. It is like a secular spiritual discipline, designed to punish and discipline the body for its misdeeds. Not unlike anorexia, cutting is an assertion of an unhealthy self-image on the external body itself through the felt experience of pain.

Our normal experience of pain heightens our awareness of the gap between our conscious experiences and our bodies themselves. Stub your toe on a door, and the exclamation is always, “I stubbed my toe.” Tear the labrum in your shoulder, and you’ll describe how your shoulder hurts. The experience of pain objectifies the body in a unique way, highlighting the fact that we are subtly different than the molecules that make up our flesh and bone. It is no accident, I think, that many of the contemporary arguments for various forms of dualism have started with these sorts of descriptions.

Because the body is organized by the soul, it is no wonder that we find the experience of pain so difficult to understand, for the sort of pain that troubles us is often a result of the body’s decay, dissolution, or breaking. And when such pain is ongoing and cannot be repaired or remedied, as it is in John Myers’ case, it becomes all the more difficult to understand in light of our human experience.

The reintegration of the body and the soul, though, is a working of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead—which is perhaps why the charismatic movement has been the most “embodied” wing of evangelicalism. A.B. Simpson, R.A. Torrey, and other charismatic leaders emphasized bodily healing in a way that other elements of the evangelical movement did not. Without descending into the thorny questions about when God heals, why God heals, why God doesn’t heal, etc. it’s worth pointing out that the Holy Spirit’s restoration of Jesus Christ is a power that, presumably, we all have now.

At the same time, we wait in hope for the resurrection of the dead, and a world obsessed with the healing powers of medicine and our technological mastery of every dimension of human existence may need—or produce—people like John Myers, whose witness and legacy is precisely in the way he has identified with Jesus Christ in and through his physical suffering. John would take physical healing if the Lord wanted it. But such healing would be temporary, for his body would continue to degenerate and eventually die. Ultimately, our need is not for bodies that are restored to a reasonable level of health here and now, but for the resurrection of the dead. And as Paul is happy to put it, we are saved in hope.

***Conclusion***

At Justin Key’s funeral, the same quote from G.K. Chesterton was read several times, for it was a quote that Justin had kept on his Facebook wall. It encapsulated Justin’s life, and gave us comfort and encouragement in his death. I quote in full:

"Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die. 'He that will lose his life, the same shall save it,' is not a piece of mysticism for saints and heroes. It is a piece of everyday advice for sailors or mountaineers. It might be printed in an Alpine guide -- or a drill-book...He can only get away from death by continually stepping within an inch of it. A soldier, surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine. No philosopher, I fancy, has ever expressed this romantic riddle with adequate lucidity, and I certainly have not done so. But Christianity has done more: it has marked the limits of it in the awful graves of the suicide and the hero, showing the distance between him who dies for the sake of living and him who dies for the sake of dying."

Though we live in the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil. But our warfare shall not be through anesthetizing every pain or technologically triumphing over our oldest, darkest foe. Rather, our victory is won for us in the person of Jesus Christ: O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting? To live is Christ, but to die for the Christian is to gain, for it is to depart and dwell with God Himself until the end of all things when the world is restored.

As Christians, we have nothing to fear from death. Fear not those who can destroy the body, but him who can destroy the soul in hell. The disintegration, the corruption, the instability that death works and that culminates in our departure from this world are not the deepest reality of the Christians lives, even though the suffering and pain that they induce are devastating to our human flourishing. But as my pastor once told me, all healing begins with pain. Even the needle to anesthetize the patient begins with a prick. Except that a seed fall to the ground and die it can bear no fruit. The reality is that our confrontation with disintegration and death is one that must stare it squarely in the face without quivering, for the God whom we serve has defeated it in the person of Jesus Christ.

**A Concluding Postscript by way of Summation**

I have of late–but wherefore I know not–lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises, and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire–why, it appeareth no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.

What a piece of work is a man!  how noble in reason!  how infinite in faculties!  in form and moving how express and admirable!  in action how like an angel!  in apprehension how like a god!  the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!  And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?  Man delights not me…

The judgment is uttered by the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet, whose dithering about his gruesome task later calls him to question his own status as a human. The unhappy circumstances he finds himself in and his inability to incorporate them turns the world into a barren wasteland rather than a garden teeming with pleasures and delights.

“What a piece of work is man!” The reality cannot be denied: we are a little lower than the angels, but only a little lower. The excellency of our reason, the magnificence of our art, the heights of our accomplishments—we have put a man into the heavens, a fact that would have mystified and astounded anyone prior to the 1950s. And we are now about to take tourist trips to visit them for the holidays. We are truly and wonderfully made.

Sin destroys our vision by making the unseemly appear beautiful and the beautiful appear repellant. In *Lamentations,* a book of the Bible that deserves to be read more frequently within the evangelical church, Jeremiah condemns the people of Israel for falling prey to precisely this inversion:

The precious sons of Zion,worth their weight in fine gold,how they are regarded asearthen pots,the work of a potter’s hands!

A world tainted by sin destroys that which God has created, a truism that most of us are too quick to affirm and too slow to see in our own lives. To value that which is worth its weight in fine gold as an earthen vessel is to respond inappropriately to the world, to not cherish it in the way that God cherishes it.

Paul inverts Jeremiah’s metaphor, suggesting that the earthen vessels that Jeremiah had intimated were less valuable are actually the center and source of value—but not *strictly* because of the fact that they are earthen, but because they are constituted and kept by the power of God in Jesus Christ. “But we have this treasure *in earthen vessels* to know that the power is from God and not from ourselves.” What makes the human body a *human* body is that it has been sculpted and shaped by the Creator in a particular way, and the same Creator who made us has worked to remake us through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.

Most of the pathologies of our late modern world may be summed up by a singular refusal to accept the reality that our restoration will not happen through medicine or makeup, but through our remaking at the last trumpet. Our consumption, ever motivated by the irrepressible desire for bodily comfort, has expanded as fast as our waistlines. Our belligerent refusal to grow comfortable with our own bodies, with the fact that they wrinkle and eventually die, has prompted us to nip and tuck ourselves in desperate attempts to fashion our bodies according to our own self-image. And then, as if to complete the pathological cycle, we turn the whole process into a reality TV show. Before there was a “Home Edition,” Extreme Makeover was a relatively unsuccessful real-life version of *Nip and Tuck.*

But we are all Gnostics now, not just those wealthy suburban women with enough disposable income to turn themselves into Angelina clones. We glorify sex, but quarantine the fruits (when we have them). Our sex lives have become dominated by technique and the demands to maximize pleasure, where performance is measured not by the effectiveness of communication but by the frequency and the power of the orgasm. We trade the presence that comes from sharing the same physical space—and the dangers inherent in it—for the security and comfort of our screens and earpieces.

We live in a world where our bodies are shaped by the hedonistic pursuits of physical pleasure divorced from any other attachments or goods, the demands of aesthetic perfection, the belligerent refusal to accept physical suffering and the pain that sometimes accompanies it, the seeking of glories on the sports field, or the manic pursuit of physical health. In each case, we give ourselves to a standard of performance and embodied living that takes its cues not from the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but from the structures and systems of our fallen world.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus affirms the world for he restores the world. But his affirmation is one that stands in judgment over the world as well (“the world is already judged,” he says in John), for the world is shaped by sin and rebellion. Evangelicals have historically been marked by a withdrawal from the world. Younger evangelicals hungover from this legacy (and too often from other things) have moved in the opposite direction, profligately seeing the hand of God in nearly every social reality and cultural object. Whether he is really there is an open question—that we have seen him there is uncontestable.

In one sense, the problem of cultural engagement encapsulates the difficulties of speaking about the body without giving ourselves over to a liberal theology that invariably starts from experience rather than the revealed word of God. Many of us are tempted to spiritualize the experiences of the body without any criteria to distinguish between the warm fuzzies that come after a good bit of exercise and a nice long yoga session on the one hand, and a confrontation with the reality of the person and work of Jesus Christ through his Holy Spirit on the other. Yet this is precisely how liberalism takes shape: through an emphasis on being *incarnational* that is not measured by the Incarnation, by the privileging of our experience as a source for theological reflection rather than as a necessary component to the work of seeing how the Gospel wishes to speak to our own situation.

Such an approach to the body has already taken root within many sectors of evangelicalism. And until evangelicals offer richer, more compelling alternatives to even the one I’ve attempted to articulate in these pages the trajectory toward mainline Protestantism will inevitably continue.

As Christians, we need bodies that are shaped by grace, and not an abstract grace that simply incarnates our therapeutic orientation but a grace that is tied to the specific, special revelation of Jesus Christ, who sets us free from the deadly forces and power structures of this world and recreates our lives according to a standard that is entirely his own. We have been set free from death by the power of the resurrection, which means that the core of our identity is not in *any* external standard but only in given us in Jesus Christ. It is no minimization of the body to say that this freedom moves from our inner man, the seat of our personal life before God, out through our individual bodies into the structures of the world. “Though our outer man is wasting away…”

The Gospel frees us, then, to be beautiful, but not tied to our beauty. It frees us to be unseemly, but to not identify with our unseemliness. It frees us to be fat—my favorite writer in the world, G.K. Chesterton, was monstrously fat—without consuming us by focusing on the effects of sin, rather than their root. And the more we are a people whose lives are encompassed by the Gospel, who share the gospel with each other and remind each other of the power of Jesus Christ that we each have through the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit, our communities will be shaped by grace and freedom as well.

But freedom is not license to act however we want. When Augustine suggested that we should “love God and do what we will,” he had nothing in mind like the sort of thoughtless, volitionally oriented ethics that the phrase is generally deployed to defend. Reality is an ordered thing, and freedom is an empowered response to reality as revealed and centered in Jesus Christ. Which means that it has a shape, and that shape is love. Our freedom is not for eating and drinking, for orgasms and rock music (or for non-orgasms and organs). The kingdom of God is *righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.* And no freedom that is not oriented toward love, rather than the imposition of our wills and our individual pursuit of pleasure, is no freedom at all.

Our lives, our bodies, are gifts that have been given to us. They allow us to move in the world, to experience mist off waterfalls and wind running through our hair, to taste tea and marvel at slug races (yes, I’ve done this). “What a piece of work is man!” And yet we corrupted the body by turning ourselves away from the source of our life and the proper end of our activity, the presence and glory of God. The gift was really given, but like the impetuous child who receives a baseball glove when he’d prefer a BB gun, we abused the gift (and ourselves) in our displeasure.

In Jesus Christ, God has restored us by giving *himself* as gift to us for our redemption *and* our sanctification. He has forgiven us from our sins, and has given us new life through his empowering presence, the Holy Spirit. But his empowering presence not only gives us a life of freedom, but establishes the pattern for our response. And the pattern is Jesus Christ, who was given to the world for the world, and who was put to death at the hands of the world. The life that we live is a life of receiving what we have been given, and giving ourselves back to the Giver.

To return to the Heidleberg Catechism, my only comfort in life and death is:

That I with body and soul, both in life and death,

am not my own,

but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ;

who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins,

and delivered me from all the power of the devil;

and so preserves me

that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head;

yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation,

and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life,

and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

In his loftiest, most beautiful thoughts on marriage, St. Paul reminds us that “No man ever hated his own body, but nourishes it and cares for it.” Paul doesn’t stop there, though, but moves quickly to specify the shape of the caring that we are to implement: “just as Christ loves the church.” For while “bodily training may be of some value, godliness is of value in every way.” Our body is a temple, but Christ destroyed the temple and raised it again in three days. In the Old Testament, God demonstrates an enormous amount of care in building the temple and in preserving its proper functioning. In the New Testament, he affirms the Old while reestablishing the way we live in and through the temple.

The difficult and glorious reality is that we cannot breathe new life into a broken faith. It is not in our power. We can, though, open ourselves to the power of God by responding to the working of his son Jesus Christ on our behalf. But we “have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the power is not from ourselves, but from God.” Our faces will someday shine like Jesus’ on the mountain, because we are none of us mere mortals. But must be worked by the one “who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

“Except a seed fall to the ground and die, it can bear no fruit.” It is the premise of this book that if our Christian life is barren, it is because we have neither cultivated the soil nor put to death the sinful habits and patterns of the body. “Therefore I urge you, brothers, in light of the mercy of God, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, which is your spiritual service of worship.” It is an exhortation that, if not heeded, ultimately undermines our Christian lives. We are saved into a life of sanctification, a life of submitting the body to the authority of Scripture and living in the reality of the grace of God. I leave the final word to T.S. Eliot:

LORD, shall we not bring these gifts to Your service?  
Shall we not bring to Your service all our powers  
For life, for dignity, grace and order,  
And intellectual pleasures of the senses?  
The LORD who created must wish us to create  
And employ our creation again in His service  
Which is already His service in creating.  
For Man is joined in spirit and body,  
And therefore must serve as spirit and body.  
Visible and invisible, two worlds meet in Man;  
Visible and invisible must meet in His Temple;  
You must not deny the body.

1. Meilander, “Homosexuality in Christian Perspective,” emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. O’Donvoan, RMO, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This means that evangelicals are actually *ahead* of the times. Many of the most popular intellectual movements of our day have lost sight of the actual flesh and bones by reducing “the body” to its social dimension and meaning. More on that anon, but it’s worth pointing out that evangelicals had social bodies before they were cool. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In a footnote, Allison points to Plato as the problem, as do most critics of evangelicalism. However, no one has yet explained which evangelicals have been reading Plato. I suspect if they had, they (like Augustine) might affirm the resurrection of the body loudly and unequivocally. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brett McCracken’s *Hipster Christianity* describes the phenomenon well. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)