

NARRATIVES OF THE GENDERED BODY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM

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Christianity is a story about God. More specifically, it is a story about God taking on a human body to save human beings through the death, resurrection, and glorification of that body. This means Christianity is also a story about bodies. And since the human beings who proclaim the good news of Christianity are embodied creatures, Christianity has always been a story told *through* bodies, as the apostle Paul declares: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Cor 4:10). A central way Christians have proclaimed the story of redemption through their bodies is through asceticism: deliberately denying the body its desires for goods like food, sex, sleep, and comfort for spiritual goals. Put differently, asceticism disciplines the body and its desires to attain other, higher goods in the story that it tells. This paper examines the stories animating Christian asceticism from the late 3rd to mid-5th centuries of the church.¹ My focus is fasting and virginity, since the latter in particular came to dominate the fourth-century ascetic imagination, and the ways in which these disciplines were gendered in both theory and practice. I argue that asceticism is always downstream of the larger theological story of humanity’s creation, fall, and redemption, such that doctrinal errors upstream distort asceticism in harmful and distinctly gendered ways.

Early Christian views of asceticism were explicitly situated within the divine economy: God’s actions to create, redeem, sustain, and perfect his creatures. Our fourth-century authors believed it was this narrative that revealed the nature and purpose of the body and therefore informed how humans should use the body at their current stage of redemptive history. This was particularly true of virginity, which by the fourth century had come to be viewed as the highest

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the terms “early Christian/ity,” “fourth century,” and “patristic” interchangeably to refer to this era. I give less attention to Augustine than he deserves in this paper, identifying mainly where the story he tells about gender differs from the story of many of his contemporaries, since the latter is my focus here.

form of embodied Christian life.² Early Christian theologies of virginity were built on a core story about human beings: they were created good by God, but fell from their original state when the first humans sinned, becoming subject to the corruptions of sin and death; they have been redeemed by Jesus Christ; and they are awaiting Christ's return, when they will be restored to their pre-fall state. The goal of asceticism in general, and virginity in particular, was to reverse the fall and to imitate, as much as possible in the fallen body, the kind of life humans had enjoyed in Eden and would enjoy again in the resurrection.³

Though early Christian authors had different ideas about what this ideal human life would look like, they agreed that it would be “angelic.”⁴ Central to their reasoning was Jesus’s teaching that “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they are like the angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30). In most fourth-century interpretations of this passage, “marriage” referred to what was widely assumed to be the purpose of marriage: procreation through sexual intercourse. Since procreation would be abolished in the eschaton, the patristic authors argued, so too would sexual difference.⁵ And if sexual difference would not feature in Christians’ future life,

² Peter Brown, “The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGuinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq (Herder & Herder, 1987), 427.

³ Teresa Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 180–81. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 17.2 (NPNF 2.5, 406) is typical here: “the resurrection promises us nothing else than the restoration of the fallen to their ancient state; for the grace we look for is a certain return to the first life, bringing back again to Paradise him who was cast out from it.” Cf. Anthony the Great, *Letter 1*, trans. John Sanidopoulos, <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2018/01/the-seven-great-letters-of-saint.html>.

⁴ E.g., John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis XVI*, in *St. John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 1–17*, trans. Robert C. Hill, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, vol. 74 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 207; idem., *On Virginity*, 10.3, 11.1–2, 27.2 (Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts* [Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005], 105–6, 113); Basil of Caesarea, *First Homily on Fasting*, 3 (trans. Kent Berghuis); Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 13, 24 (NPNF 2.5, 360, 371); Methodius of Olympus, *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, 2.7 (trans. Herbert Musurillo [New York: Newman Press, 1958], 57); Basil of Ancyra, *On the True Purity of Virginity*, 51, cited and translated by Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 185.

⁵ Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 109–116. Jerome and Augustine are exceptions to this general rule, albeit for different reasons. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 382–83; Beth Felker Jones, *Marks of His Wounds: Gender Politics and Bodily Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 90–96.

it must not be part of humans' ideal state and as such could not have been present before their fall into sin. They concluded that sexual reproduction was not part of God's original design for human beings.⁶ To reconcile this conviction with God's pre-fall command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:27–28), many fourth-century authors turned to some form of double creation: God originally created humans to be unsexed and immortal; he only created sexual differentiation and desire as an accommodation to their fall into sin.⁷ Marriage was a gracious gift, to be sure, but it was only a consolation for the original, "better" form of immortality that humans had forfeited through their disobedience.⁸ In the early Christian imagination, then, the theological story of the sexed body was inescapably intertwined with the story of sin and death.⁹ In contrast, to abstain from sex and procreation was to defy the cycle of death.¹⁰ Within this theological narrative, to pursue an "angelic" life through virginity meant to pursue freedom from

⁶ Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, "Asceticism and Anthropology: *Enkratēia* and 'Double Creation' in Early Christianity," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 138; Brown, "Virginity in the Early Church," 430; Ton H. C. Van Eijk, "Marriage and virginity, death and immortality," in *Épektasis: mélanges patristiques offerts au cardinal Jean Daniélou*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser (Beauchesne, 1972), 228; Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 161–219. Augustine—but not Jerome (see *Against Jovinian* 1.29, in NPNF 2.6, 368)—is again an exception here. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 399–402.

⁷ See, e.g., Jerome, *Letter 22.19* (NPNF 2.6, 29); John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 14.3–14.6 (Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 108–109). There was significant variation in the details. Some, such as Evagrius of Pontus, believed humans did not have bodies at all in the first creation; others, such as Basil of Ancyra, believed humans originally had androgynous bodies (Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 184–205). Gregory of Nyssa believed human beings would have multiplied by reproducing in the same manner as the angels were it not for the fall (*On the Making of Man*, 17.2–3, in NPNF 2.5, 407; see also the discussion in Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 105–106); John Chrysostom believed God likely would have populated the earth by creating all humans like he did Adam and Eve "or in another [way] that I cannot say" (*On Virginity*, 17.5, in Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 112).

⁸ Van Eijk, "Marriage and virginity, death and immortality," 224; Brown, *The Body and Society*, 294–96.

⁹ Marriage "springs from disobedience, from a curse, from death. For where death is, there is marriage." John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 14.6 (Miller, 109). See also Jerome, *Letter 22.18* (NPNF 2.6, 29).

¹⁰ "We should wean ourselves from this life in the flesh, which has an inevitable follower, death; [and] we should search for a manner of life which does not bring death in its train. Now the life of Virginity is such a life... the power of death cannot go on working, if marriage does not supply it with material and prepare victims for this executioner." Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 13 (NPNF 2.5, 359–60); cf. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 117–145; Brown, *The Body and Society*, 297–98.

the corruption (i.e., physical and moral decay) and passions that characterize the human condition between the fall and the eschaton.¹¹

Fasting went hand in hand with virginity in early Christian asceticism for two reasons. First, fasting was, like virginity, a way to reverse humans' fall from paradise and return to our original, angelic state.¹² It was Adam and Eve's failure to fast from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that led to their expulsion from Eden; a person who fasted was able to succeed in the struggle against physical temptation where the first humans had failed.¹³ Put differently, to fast was to prove oneself to be the master of, rather than mastered by, one's physical appetites. Exercising this mastery in the present imitated and anticipated the future angelic condition of not being subject to the body's demands.¹⁴ In both virginity and fasting, then, human beings deliberately abstained from the concerns necessary for the preservation of life east of Eden—eating and reproduction—to be free for communion with God, just like the angels.¹⁵

The second connection follows the first: fasting was among the Christian's most important disciplines for controlling the desires of the flesh and as such was an essential guard against sexual temptation for virgins. Early Christian ascetic writers were wary of all physical sensations as potential footholds for temptation. "Through the five senses, as through open windows, vice

¹¹ See, e.g., Methodius, *Symposium*, 2.7 (Musurillo, 57); Basil of Ancyra, *On the True Purity of Virginity*, in Van Eijk, "Marriage and virginity, death and immortality," 226; John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 10.3, 11.1, 77 (Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 105–106, 117); Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 16.11 (NPNF 2.5, 405), *idem.*, *On Virginity*, 1 (NPNF 2.5, 343–344); Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 203–204.

¹² As Basil of Caesarea explained, "Since we did not fast, we fell from Paradise; let us, therefore, fast in order that we might return thither." *First Homily on Fasting*, 4; cf. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew* 13 (NPNF 1.10, 80); Jerome, *Letter* 22.10 (NPNF 2.6, 26); Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 176; Pseudo-Athanasius, *Discourse on Salvation to a Virgin*, 6 (trans. Teresa Shaw in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Richard Valantasis [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000] 88). Thus, Basil of Caesarea (*First Homily on Fasting*, 5), Jerome (*Against Jovinian* 1.18, in NPNF 2.6, 360), and Evagrius of Pontus (*Sententiae ad Virginem*, 10, in Susanna Elm, "Evagrius Ponticus' *Sententiae ad Virginem*," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 [1991], 104) believed Christians should avoid consuming meat and wine, since they were not consumed in Eden.

¹³ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 220–21.

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 18.4, cited in Van Eijk, "Marriage and virginity, death and immortality," 228; Pseudo-Athanasius, *Discourse on Salvation to a Virgin*, 7 (Shaw, *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, 89).

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *On Virginity* 11.1, 77 (Miller, 106, 117); Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 178–79, 192–94.

has access to the soul,” Jerome warns.¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa agrees, adding that taste in particular must be guarded as “the mother as it were of all forbidden enjoyment.”¹⁷ This connection between eating and lust was not just spiritual, but medical as well. Fasting was believed to reduce lust physiologically by preventing the buildup of bodily humors responsible for sexual desire.¹⁸ A fourth-century pseudo-Athanasiian treatise on virginity seamlessly blends the spiritual and the physiological in its praise of fasting: “it heals diseases, dries up the bodily fluids [humors], casts out demons, chases away wicked thoughts, makes the mind clearer, the heart pure, and the body sanctified.”¹⁹ A life of chastity required virgins to keep a tight rein on their bodies’ desires, and fasting was not just a beneficial but a necessary means to this end.²⁰

For the early Christian ascetics, both fasting and virginity were a way to tell the larger human story with their bodies. The ascetic life, especially virginity, was about “the beginning and the end, narrating what humans should have been, could have been, and who they will be again.”²¹ They were not simply turning down marriage or meals—they were professing their doctrines of creation, sin, redemption, and eschatology. So as we turn now to a critical evaluation of fourth-century asceticism, we will need to focus not only on ascetic practices themselves, but also on the doctrines that animate them. We begin by noting that the close relationship between ascetic theology and the divine economy is both a strength and a weakness in our early Christian

¹⁶ Jerome, *Against Jovinian* 2.8 (NPNF 2.6, 394); see also Methodius of Olympus, *Symposium*, 6.3 (Musurillo, 93).

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 21 (NPNF 2.5, 366–67). Gluttony, then, becomes “the mother of all vice.” Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 129–160.

¹⁸ Jerome, for instance, urges a young widow to avoid all foods that generate heat in the body so that she may preserve her commitment to chastity; he cites the second-century physician Galen in his prescriptions. Jerome, *Letter* 54.9–10 (NPNF 2.6, 105–106). Gregory of Nyssa also discusses the balance of humors in *On Virginity*, 22 (NPNF 2.5, 367). See the extensive discussion in Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 51–128.

¹⁹ Pseudo-Athanasius, *Discourse on Salvation to a Virgin*, 7 (Shaw, *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, 88).

²⁰ See, e.g., Jerome, *Letter* 22.11, 17 (NPNF 2.6, 26, 28); Jerome, *Against Jovinian*, 2.7 (NPNF 2.6, 394); Evagrius of Pontus, *Sententiae ad Virginem*, 40, cited in Elm, “Evagrius Ponticus’ *Sententiae ad Virginem*,” 103. The allusion to Plato’s charioteer is intentional, as the same metaphor is used by some early Christian authors to describe the goal of mastery over the body. See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 22 (NPNF 2.5, 368).

²¹ Amy Brown Hughes, “Virginity in the Christian Tradition,” in *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al., <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/VirginityintheChristianTradition>, 1.6.

sources. When these authors promoted fasting and virginity, their reasoning was explicitly based on where Christians are in redemptive history. In both their descriptions of and prescriptions for the body, including its gendered aspects, they recognized that humans' current experience of embodiment is different than it was in the garden or will be in the new Jerusalem. This approach is essential to any properly theological account of gendered life as it accounts for the way this life changes with the stages of humanity's story.²² Yet this approach is also a double-edged sword. To the extent that the stories upstream of fourth-century fasting and virginity—especially, for our purposes, stories about the sexed body—were true, the ascetic prescriptions that depended on them were good and helpful. Conversely, when these stories were wrong about God's design for human beings as male and female, asceticism went awry in practice as well.

We will begin by highlighting some positive themes. Where did early Christian asceticism tell good, true, and beautiful stories about the nature and purpose of the sexed body? First, and foundational to the whole concept of embodied spiritual disciplines, the fourth-century ascetics correctly identified human beings as unities of body and soul. They believed that the body was a gift from God—even if, as some thought, the body was not his original intent—and valued the body as a key locus of sanctification.²³ Yet the early Christian authors also recognized that both body and soul had been corrupted by sin. The desires of our body are unruly and threaten to lead us away from love of God and neighbor if left unchecked.²⁴ Thus the Christian disciplines her body not for discipline's sake, but as a means to loving communion with God and others. The

²² See Fellipe do Vale, *Gender as Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 16–22.

²³ See, e.g., Augustine, *The Usefulness of Fasting*, 4 (trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney, in *Saint Augustine (Volume 14): Treatises on Various Subjects*, edited by Roy J. Deferrari, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation [Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007], 408–411); Anthony the Great, *Letter 1*; Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 102–103; Brown, *The Body and Society*, 235–240.

²⁴ Augustine is, of course, excellent on this point: *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, 1.24–28 (ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. I/11, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* [Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1996], 120–122). See also Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 1 (NPNF 2.5, 343).

fourth-century literature on fasting and virginity is filled with warnings against physical practices detached from a sincere heart. The true fast, they insisted, is fasting from sin.²⁵ Virginity was less about purity of the body than purity of heart: “Let no one suppose that the prize of virginity is so insignificant and so easily won as [abstaining from marriage]; as if one little observance of the flesh could settle so vital a matter,” Gregory of Nyssa admonished. He who seeks true virginity must “manifest his purity equally in every relation of his life.”²⁶ Furthermore, a life of virginity was possible for both men and women, which meant that both could achieve the height of Christian virtue.²⁷ Finally, the early Christian ascetic literature acknowledged that human beings are finite creatures. As such, most authors discouraged both men and women from dangerous extremes in fasting, urging them to give their bodies the care they needed.²⁸

Yet not all the stories fourth-century asceticism told about human beings and their sexed bodies were true. A distorted doctrine of creation introduced several serious problems into ascetic theology and practice, problems whose negative effects were experienced disproportionately by women. Most fourth-century authors excluded the sexed body and sexual reproduction from God’s creation ideal for human beings. That is, they located humans’ differentiation into male and female at the wrong stage of the redemptive history: though Scripture makes clear that gendered embodiment was part of God’s good plan for human beings from the beginning (Gen

²⁵ For a useful review of this theme in the primary sources, see Herbert Musurillo, “The problem of ascetical fasting in the Greek patristic writers,” *Traditio* 12 (1956): 35–42.

²⁶ *On Virginity*, 18 (NPNF 2.5, 364). See also Elm, “Evagrius Ponticus’s *Sententiae ad Virginem*,” 105–106.

²⁷ Gasparro, “Asceticism and Anthropology,” 140–141; Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 164. That is, virginity allowed both men and women to live a life of “philosophy,” as the best form of human existence was called at the time. See Elizabeth Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations*, vol. 2, Studies in Women and Religion (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1982), 16–17; Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of St. Macrina* (trans. W. K. L. Clarke [London: SPCK, 1916]).

²⁸ John Cassian recalls reaching a point in fasting when he felt he “was in greater peril from the want of food and sleep than from struggling against sloth and gluttony.” *Conferences*, 1.2.16 (NPNF 2.11, 316). See also Pseudo-Athanasius, *Discourse on Salvation to a Virgin*, 8, 12 (Shaw, 89, 91); Elm, “Evagrius Ponticus’s *Sententiae ad Virginem*,” 104; Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975) Anthony 13 (pp. 3–4).

1:26–31, 2:18–25), most patristic theologians identified the sexed body not with the goodness of creation but with the brokenness of the fall.²⁹ As a result, they saw sexual desire and activity as at best suspicious and at worst inevitably tainted by sin, even within a Christian marriage.³⁰ This view made married Christians second-class moral citizens in the fourth-century church community,³¹ excluding them from the most virtuous life. Women were particularly disadvantaged when it came to achieving the moral ideal of virginity: they were often betrothed at young ages, and it was difficult for them to survive without a man's social and financial provision.³² It is no coincidence that the fourth century church's famous female ascetics—such as Melania, Macrina, Olympias, Paula, and Theosebia—all came from families with spectacular wealth, giving them ample financial and social resources to support themselves.³³ Thus while the ideal Christian life was in theory available to both men and women, in practice it was much more difficult for women, especially poor women, to join the highest tier of Christian virtue.³⁴

The early Christians' exclusion of sexual difference from past and future paradise also tended to problematize the female body far more than the male body. On the one hand, these authors were committed to virginity as the ideal human state. On the other hand, however, they also believed that part of God's provision of procreation to preserve the now-mortal human race

²⁹ Augustine is an important exception here.

³⁰ E.g., John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 19.1, 27.3 (Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 112, 114); Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 18.1–2 (NPNF 2.5, 407–408; see also Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 107–108); cf. Van Eijk, "Marriage and virginity, death and immortality," 226–29. Jerome insisted that "virginity is natural while wedlock only follows guilt" (*Letter 22.19*, in NPNF 2.6, 29) and even went so far as to state that "even the blood of martyrdom was barely able to wipe away 'the dirt of marriage' from a Christian." Brown, *The Body and Society*, 397, citing Jerome, *Against Jovinian*, 1.26.

³¹ I owe this term to Christina Van Dyke, "Manly Meat and Gendered Eating: Correcting Imbalance and Seeking Virtue," in *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments on the Ethics of Eating* (2016), 45–47.

³² Some female virgins tried to get around this problem by forming celibate households with male virgins, a practice condemned by church leadership. Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 117–118; Elm, *Virgins of God*, 50.

³³ Elm, *Virgins of God*, 180–181.

³⁴ Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, vi, notes that "there was within patristic Christianity an elevation of status for celibate women, but not for married ones."

was God's implanting sexual desire in human nature.³⁵ Virginity, then, was both morally superior and biologically difficult; it required waging a constant war against appetites rooted deep in one's being.³⁶ This tension created a strong sense of danger around the sexed body: it was a powerful source of temptation, an ever-present threat to purity. While both male and female virgins were advised to avoid interacting with the opposite sex as much as possible, far more fear surrounded the female body. The imbalance was partially theological—Basil of Ancyra, for instance, wrote that God had placed the power of sexual attraction in the female body to give her power over the male, compensating for her subordination to him³⁷—and partially practical: female asceticism in the fourth century, like female life in general, was more associated with the household, where many virgin women were secluded from social contact under the vigilant protection of their fathers.³⁸ Meanwhile, the fear of female bodies was strong enough to drive male monks into the desert.³⁹ At the root of this approach to persons of the opposite sex was a false narrative about sexual desire and its origins that portrayed it as something to fear, fight, and suppress. Its rotten fruit was objectification of women and alienation between the sexes—quite the opposite of the dignity Jesus himself showed women (e.g., Mk 5:25–34; Lk 7:36–50; Jn 8:1–11) and the unity to which his male and female followers have been called (Gal 3:28).

Finally, the fourth-century ambivalence about the body led to an unhelpful emphasis on transcending the body as the goal of Christian life. Again, this began with a faulty doctrine of creation: many theologians of this era had a false conception of the image of God that excluded

³⁵ Thus the close connection between marriage and the passions in so many patristic authors. See above, n. 11.

³⁶ See, e.g., John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 13.2, 27.1 (Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 107, 113); Brown, *The Body and Society*, 376–77.

³⁷ Basil of Ancyra, *On the True Purity of Virginity*, 3, cited in Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 84–85.

³⁸ Or wealthy widows, as in Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 263–66; Elm, *Virgins of God*, 34.

³⁹ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Daniel 2, Sisoes 3 (Ward, 51, 213); Brown, *The Body and Society*, 241–250.

the body.⁴⁰ The body may have been a useful tool for sanctifying the soul, but it was a decidedly inferior aspect of the human person.⁴¹ Their story of redemption was one in which human beings were liberated from the desires of the body, if not from the body itself.⁴² This is not Scripture's story, which teaches that God always intended embodiment, including its desires, to be the highest form of human life (Gen 2:7) and will glorify embodiment at the resurrection (1 Cor 15).⁴³ Instead, fourth-century asceticism's redemption story was animated more by a Platonic concept of ascent—liberating the soul from the materiality dragging it down.⁴⁴ Moreover, this story was unequally gendered: for women, the goal of asceticism was to transcend the *sexed* body, an emphasis not present to nearly the same degree for men.⁴⁵ Through strict ascetic discipline, especially fasting, a woman could mortify her body to such a degree that it was no longer recognizably female.⁴⁶ She could become “male in spirit.”⁴⁷ Such goals rest, of course, on

⁴⁰ E.g., Gregory of Nyssa (*On the Making of Man*, 16.2, 9, in NPNF 2.5, 404–405; cf. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 104) and Evagrius of Pontus (Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 200–203). John Chrysostom identified the *imago Dei* with governing authority and argued that it was held by men more than by women. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, 5–6.

⁴¹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 235–240, offers a helpful discussion of this tension in ascetic thought.

⁴² Evagrius of Pontus, for example, believed humans' ultimate salvation would involve their return to “nakedness,” by which he thought Scripture meant a disembodied, intellectual state. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 202–203.

⁴³ Jones, *Marks of His Wounds*, esp. 87–114. Augustine's approach to desire is helpful here: human desires, including embodied desires, are good, but they have been disordered by sin; thus the ideal human state (to which asceticism points) is one in which desire is not erased, but rightly ordered. *Teaching Christianity*, 27–28.

⁴⁴ Both Methodius (*Symposium*, 8.1, in Musurillo, 105–106) and Gregory of Nyssa (*On Virginity*, 2, in NPNF 2.5, 345) describe virginity as “wings” by which the soul can ascend to heavenly things, an image drawn from Plato. When Basil of Ancyra (*On the True Purity of Virginity*, 9, in Musurillo, “The Problem with Ascetical Fasting,” 14) and Augustine (*The Usefulness of Fasting*, 2, in Muldowney, 406) encourage fasting, they refer to the way food weighs down the body and the body weighs down the soul, hindering its ascent. Cf. Van Eijk, “Marriage and virginity, death and immortality,” 223–23; Musurillo, “The Problem with Ascetical Fasting,” 13–15; Gasparro, “Asceticism and Anthropology,” 137.

⁴⁵ Hughes, “Virginity in the Christian Tradition,” 2.1.

⁴⁶ “Although clothed in the female body, they have by means of asceticism beaten off the shape engendered from it for the sake of the soul, and have made themselves appear like men through excellence.” Basil of Ancyra, *On the True Purity of Virginity* 51, trans. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 237. Hagiographies of female ascetics frequently praised them for having male characteristics or for being unrecognizable as women. See, e.g., *The Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot*, trans. Benedict Baker, <http://www.vitae-patrum.org.uk/page46.html>; Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of St. Macrina*; John Anson, “The female transvestite in early monasticism: The origin and development of a motif,” *Viator* 5 (1974): 1–32; Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 220–53.

⁴⁷ A phrase John Chrysostom used in praise of female martyrs and virgins he admired (as well as “acting like men”). Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, 15–19.

the false and destructive assumption men are superior to women—an assumption firmly rejected by the Christian story, in which male and female have always been equal before God (Gen 1:27).

Asceticism has never been about the body alone. Virginity, fasting, and other embodied spiritual disciplines are always downstream of a larger narrative about the world and the place of human beings, including their bodies, within it. The leaders of the fourth-century church recognized this, explicitly identifying the ascetic life as an embodied proclamation of the divine story of creation, redemption, and eschatological consummation. The twenty-first century church would do well to learn from their approach. Early Christian asceticism is a valuable reminder of how much embodied practices depend on the theological stories we tell—and, therefore, of how important it is to get these stories right if we are to reveal the life of Christ well in our bodies.

To conclude, then, let us consider what it might look like for Christians to tell the true story of redemption in their gendered bodies through the practices of fasting and virginity. First, we profess that sexual difference is good: we were created male and female (Gen 1:27), and our sexed bodies will be preserved when God restores all things at the resurrection. What will be removed is the sin that has alienated us from our bodies, created discord between the sexes, and disordered the good desires of our bodies (Gen 3:16; Jas 4:1–4). In the meantime, fasting is a useful discipline for mastering those unruly desires of our flesh which prevent us from living in a way consistent with the Christian story about embodied life (1 Tim 4:8; 1 Cor 6:12, 9:26–27; Phil 3:13–19).⁴⁸ Fasting is also a way for us to whet our appetites for the wedding supper of the Lamb, as the church mourns the absence of her Bridegroom and proclaims that he is returning

⁴⁸ As Augustine puts it, “it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys.” *The Usefulness of Fasting*, 5 (Muldowney, 411).

soon (Rev 19:9, 21:1–9; Mt 9:15).⁴⁹ Yet we should also be wary of drifting into rival stories about our gendered bodies when we fast: we do not abstain from food to increase the market value of our bodies, a profoundly unbiblical narrative targeting women in particular.⁵⁰ Virginity, meanwhile, has no inherent advantage over marriage in virtue, or vice versa: a Christian’s moral standing is defined by her identity in Christ (1 Cor 7:17–40). We can affirm the fourth-century warning that marriage does not eliminate sexual sin, yet the created goodness of marriage and procreation (Gen 1:28, 2:18–25) means that marriage can be as good and obedient a vocation for the sexed body and its desires as virginity. Whether their gift is singleness or marriage, Christians are called to faithfulness, fruitfulness,⁵¹ and self-sacrifice that reveal the life-giving love of Christ for his people (Phil 2:3–11, 2 Tim 2:13). And for all Christians, marital status is secondary to their place in their first family: the church (Lk 14:26, Mk 3:33–34, Mt 19:29), the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25–32). He is coming soon to seat us—in glorified, gendered bodies healed of the wounds inflicted by disordered desires (Rev 19:7–9, 21:1–5; 1 Cor 15:35–57)⁵²—at the great wedding supper of the Lamb, where at last we will feast, in body and soul, and be filled.

⁴⁹ As such, it is inappropriate to fast on Sundays and other feast days set aside for celebration, as early Christians recognized. I develop these points on fasting more fully in “To Hunger for Fullness of Life: Fasting as an Embodied Rehearsal of Scripture” ST7505 paper, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, 2022.

⁵⁰ See Jia Tolentino, “Always Be Optimizing,” in *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (New York: Random House, 2019), 63–94.

⁵¹ In this we can agree with the fourth-century church that childbearing is not the only and not even the primary way Christians are called to be fruitful (see, e.g., Augustine, *On Holy Virginity*, 2, in NPNF 1.3, 417) without following them in devaluing the fruitfulness of marriage. Van Eijk, “Marriage and virginity, death and immortality,” 227, 234.

⁵² Though not, perhaps, from the marks of these wounds. Jones, *Marks of His Wounds*, 110–114.