

Psalm 139: 13-15 I will thank you [Lord] because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well. My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book; they were fashioned day by day, when as yet there was none of them. [76]

Introduction

Our psalm articulates the idea the psalmist is marvelously made. I've struggled at times to make such a bold statement. While I can say I've always considered the body to be brilliant artwork, I've not always been able to say it specifically about my body. It's only been as an adult I've come to marvel at my own creation: it's strength, it's twists and turns, it's bends and folds, it's looseness and firmness, it's life-marks left behind from life lived and being lived. The adoration being far from selfish and narcissistic; rather it affirms the creation I am in the story I was made into: as the one who came from others as marvelously made as I am and as the one from whom others came as marvelously made as I am.

I credit the shift in my thinking to the birth of my daughter. While I knew my body was important for my sons, I also knew they may not come under the same judgment because of their bodies as I did as a woman. In other words: I felt there was less pressure on me to care about what I thought about me. They, by being male, would have an ease in the world; very little closed to them because of their body. But when I held that beautiful little body of my daughter, writhing and screaming as she did, I felt an urgency to get myself straight. I knew I was strong; I knew I was intellectually capable. And I knew I lacked a certain confidence about my body. I held her and couldn't help but feel the need to protect her from destructive societal and generational opinions about the female body in all its stages and at all its ages. I'd do whatever it took to bear the brunt of patriarchy so she could walk easier in the world; I'd follow behind women before me who fought to make this place safer and freer for our daughters.

I wish I could tell you the church was my faithful partner in this battle against the powers of oppression. Sadly, most of my battles over my body are fought here, in the church. The church and her purity culture participated in the battle against women and men in turning men and women against each other. What was to be one community of humanity (ref. Gen 2:18 *ff*) was torn asunder into us and other. And both of their bodies would be the site of battle. She'd lose her body and be torn to pieces; he'd lose his soul and become a discarnate shell.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Or do you not perceive that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit in you which you have from God and not of your own? You were bought for a price; indeed, esteem God as glorious in your body (1 Cor 6:19-20; *translation mine*).

Paul's small treatise on the body in 1 Corinthians 6 demonstrates the body is important. The idea that the soul is merely residing in the body is more a result of platonic influence on

Christianity and less from Paul's theology of the body.¹ Too often this passage is used more for abstaining from "sin" to keep the soul clean rather than as a celebration of our earthy somatic experience in the world (individual and communal). Far from being aliens inhabiting *edgar suits*,² Paul makes it clear: your body (σωμα) is important because it's the site of cleaving to God by faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit that is the foundation of your baptism.³ Paul compares the union of the believer with Christ by the Spirit to an indissoluble union. It's this union that becomes strained when we partake in practices and behaviors misaligned with the Spirit in us.⁴ Thus, our union with Christ isn't strictly about our identity in Christ but how we live in the world, too.⁵

In short, the body and what you do with it is important. If it's not, then I must ask why then be baptized and take communion? If our life in Christ is strictly about our soul being saved from the fires of hell, then why tend to the body in such intentional ways? If the body isn't important as part of our human experience in the world, then why put so much energy into celebrating the advent of the incarnate divine child of Mary? If our bodies are pointless here, aren't we essentially saying the body of our Lord is pointless, too?

Everything about our religious life in the church is material so both our spiritual existence and our material existence experience God in our bodies. The event of justification by faith apart from works is not a doctrine by which we elevate the realm of the πνευμα (spirit) over and against the realm of the σωμα (body). It is in this event of justification the body and the spirit are brought into righteousness in union (with God and with ourselves and with each other). Thus, our actions in the world reflect the one who we are cleaved to and cleaves to us in the event of justification.⁶ As we do in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit there Christ is for others in the world.⁷ So, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 draws out the implications of our baptism of

¹ Anthony C. Thiselton *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* TNIGTC p. 462, "This supposed dualism of 'levels' is foreign to Pauline thought, but common place in those circles influenced by a popular form of quasi-Platonic thought."

² Reference to *Men in Black* (1). Edgar is the body the alien termites strip the substance out of and then use the discarded flesh as the "suit" in which they walk in.

³ Thiselton 458-9, "Paul rejects the quasi-gnostic dualistic notion that 'spiritual' issues are 'above' matters relating to the body. Quite the reverse is the case. Far from Pauline Christianity being what Nietzsche and the later Heidegger called 'Platonism for the people,' early Christian theology perceives the body as a temple sanctified by the Holy Spirit...united-as-one-entity with Christ...and a mode of being through which and in which the Christian self brings glory to God."

⁴ Thiselton 459, "As those who belong to Christ by redemptive purchase (6:20), Christians are to live out their bodily existence in union with Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, to the glory of God..."

⁵ Thiselton 458. "This section demonstrates...the inseparability of Christian identity and Christian lifestyle, or of theology and ethics."

⁶ Thiselton quoting Käsemann from *NT Questions of Today* 464. Quoting Käsemann "For Paul it is all important that the Christian life is not limited to interior piety and cultic acts...In the bodily obedience of the Christian...the lordship of Christ finds visible expression, and only when this visible expression takes personal shape in us does the whole thing become credible as Gospel message."

⁷ Thiselton 466 "Paul does indeed see the public, embodied life of Christ's people as the instantiation of the gospel which points to, and thereby identifies, Christ for the world."

water and spirit of Acts 19 linking us in solidarity in following Jesus out of the Jordan. Paul makes it clear: what we do in the world tells the world who we are and who's we are.⁸

Paul concludes with an exhortation to flee “fornication” or “idolatry”.⁹ Through idolatry we forfeit our dominion and we hand ourselves over to being dominated¹⁰ πνευμα και σωμα (spirit and body). As those who followed Jesus out of the Jordan in our baptism of water and the refining fire of Spirit, we are the temples of the Holy Spirit. This reference is intentionally material. Paul is making an intentional cultural and contextual connection between the temples housing gods or goddesses and the believer's *body* being the house of God.¹¹ And, to be clear, Paul has in mind *all* bodies being the site of divine union and residence. So, I'll ask again: if the body isn't important why make such a bold and rather crazy statement? If my body isn't important in this exchange, why would Paul spend time risking life and limb defending both resurrection of the body and the inclusion of gentile bodies in the body Israel along with Israelite bodies?

Conclusion

The body is important. Your body is important. It is through this body we experience the world and by which the world experiences us. Your body isn't merely a vehicle for the soul but intimately and materially bound up with it. It is through this body time surges and courses leaving behind reminders of endurance. It is in the body where the declaration of holy resides;

⁸ Thiselton 473 “It is precisely in how a person *reveals themselves as what they are in the bodily and everyday life* that what it means to be ‘in Christ’ emerges.”

⁹ “Idolatry” is an acceptable translation of the word α πορνεια. It does mean in the literal sense “fornication” but the metaphorical definition is “idolatry” or “promiscuity of *any kind*.” While I do think Paul is directly using the word for fornication in a literal way (considering his time and context), I don't think that it is a mistake to also include the metaphorical use of the word. I doubt that Paul would think it just fine to uphold violent systems just as long as you don't have sex with a prostitute, in other words. Thus, it is my opinion that the sex imagery is to emphasize how important the body is and that when we choose to partake in idolatrous ways with systems, ideologies, practices, dogmas, institutions it's as if you've physically linked yourself to that thing, like sex does between two people. Thus, we could say: those who participated in the coup against democracy to uphold white supremacy and patriarchy and oppression in the name of Christ, were promiscuous and strained their union with the Spirit while dragging their union with Christ through the mud; they voluntarily tore themselves (as limbs) from the body of Christ and *oned* (a reference to Julian of Norwich's conception of the union with God) with a prostitute (white supremacy, patriarchy, oppression, Trumpism). And thus, we can say: they sinned against fellow creatures and against God.

¹⁰ I'm using domination here playing off of the theme of the Greek word εξουσιασθησομαι (future passive indicative 1 person singular) meaning: I will be ruled over, I will be held under authority). I'd like to also point out that Paul employs the emphatic εγω here (Greek verbs come packed with their own personal pronoun endings) thus this is an emphasis for Paul: I / will not be held under authority...

¹¹ Thiselton 475, “The image of the god or goddess usually dominated the temple whether by size or by number (or both), and Paul declares that the very person of the Holy Spirit of God, by parity of reasoning, stands to the totality of the bodily, everyday life of the believer (σωμα) in the same relation of influence and molding of identity as the images of deities in pagan temples.”

you in your body are the holy temple of the holy spirit; thus to desecrate this temple of muscle and bone is more of an affront to God than desecrating this temple of stone and wood.¹²

The body is important. And not just white bodies, but brown bodies, black bodies, indigenous bodies, transbodies, lgbtqia+ bodies, big bodies, small bodies, old bodies, young bodies, and differently abled bodies. There are no “illegal” bodies, and poor bodies deserve as much health and rest as those who are wealthy. It is not our place to determine what bodies are good or what bodies are bad because all bodies are sacred, all bodies are the target of divine love in the world; it is not for us to harm other bodies, reject other bodies, oppress other bodies because of their body. We are exhorted by Paul in this pericope to take seriously our bodies in the world and how those bodies act in the world. We are exhorted to live in ourselves for others, to be substantial people in the world who are divinely loved and who love divinely. For it is by this divine love that other swill know we are those who followed Jesus out of the Jordan (John 13:35). And we cannot support systems and institutions, ideologies and dogmas that ask us to oppress bodies; to do so would be to yoke ourselves to and be dominated by that which is not Christ. To deny an other of the fullness of somatic liberty is a means by which we grieve the spirit in us, the divine spirit given to us by God. We must, with Martin Luther King Jr. live a life marked by “a kind of dangerous unselfishness” and ask not the question “what happens to me if I help this other [body]” but, “If I do not help this [body] what will happen to [them]?”¹³ Death for too long has stolen life from too many bodies; may our bodies participate in the revolt of life against death in the world.

¹² Thiselton 475, “The phrase *ου εχετε απο θεου* emphasizes both the transcendent source of the Holy Spirit who is Other and holy...and the gracious bestowal of the Holy Spirit as God’s free gift of love. Grace and judgment are held together: to desecrate the body is to violate God’s gift and to invite an unfavorable and awesome verdict on the part of God himself.”

¹³ Martin Luther King Jr. *I’ve been to the Mountaintop* April 3, 1968. This was his last sermon before being assassinated. h/t friend and colleague The Rev. Dr. Kate Hanch for calling my attention to this sermon and idea. <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop?fbclid=IwAR3IVIJ7Vt9E96hGDgSyo1NQiVfYHW4IOVTVVpmuGGjzkPnF2ITHCK91MWc>