

CHRIST'S DUST

THE BODY IN LIGHT OF THE INCARNATION AND RESURRECTION

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INTRODUCTION

My father always said when someone dies the body is just a suit of old clothes the spirit doesn't want anymore. But there we were, half killing ourselves to find a grave, and as cautious as we could be about where we put our feet.

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

Memento mori

The first man I buried after my ordination had been a tail gunner on a B-17. My last visits with him were in a VA bed where he was reliving the war. His hands gripped an imaginary gun. He would “see” enemy aircraft, call them out, and provide the sounds of machine gun fire. It took guardrails, straps, and attentive nurses to keep him from falling out of bed. The nurses, of course, preferred to send him off into a morphine coma. It made their job easier.

Such a case makes you wonder about things. If the real me is mind and the body is just this thing I have that is mine to control and do with as I wish, then what is left of me when the mind has gone rogue? “My body, my choice” sounds plausible enough, until the ability to choose gives out. But, then, what to do with the body? Wouldn't it be better for mind to exercise one final choice over body before cognitive function is lost, aided by an expert to make sure death comes peacefully and painlessly? Medical assistance in dying is not only about avoiding prolonged decline or painful suffering. It is also a declaration of autonomy, and a scripting that maximizes the performative value you can get out of your body. Even the destruction of yourself can be useful if you are trying to make a point.

The second man I buried died at the very moment I took his hand in mine and asked the Lord to send his angels to come and carry him to Abram's side. My prayer was answered, but only partway: the angels didn't take the body with them to Father Abraham's bosom. Obi-Wan and Yoda vanished and left empty cloaks to pile up on the ground, but in this galaxy the body just stays in its clothing right there in bed and takes on the look of death. Nowhere is that look more pro-

nounced than in the sunken hole that was once a mouth but now is devoid of breath/spirit.¹

It is difficult to ignore thoughts about the body when you are in a room with a dead one. It makes you question the orthodox truth you confess. Can these bones live? Are our truths about the resurrection just things we say to comfort and console? It also confronts you with hard realities about your own mortality: whatever you are today, a tomorrow will soon come when you are the one lying in a bed facing limits that cannot be overcome. Most of all, though, it presents you with an immediate problem. You have to do something with that body, and a garbage bag in a dumpster will not do. People who say, “Do whatever you want with me when I’m dead, because I won’t be there,” do not act that way with the bodies of their kin. By their actions they reveal the deep sense we have that the human body is still mysteriously significant even when dead.²

I buried both of these men. I intoned the solemn words of the committal over their caskets. I watched as they were lowered into gaping holes in the earth, one on an autumn day in Washington Cemetery, the other in Forest Hill Cemetery on a moody day in May.³ We returned dust to dust, but we did so with reverence and faith that this dust would rise and live again. Their graves are marked. Their bodies are there. You can go and find them.

Nestorian anthropology

The sense we have that the body is sacred matters, but ignoring it has been a long-standing tradition. Philosophy and science offer two basic options that both wind up minimizing the importance of the body: either walk with Socrates and the transhumanists down the road that leads to a firm and final parting of soul

¹ The word families gathered around נָפֶשׁ, רוּחַ, and πνεῦμα are a sort of Rorschach test for how modern you are. Whereas the ancients found no sharp differentiation between the breath and the spirit of the person, it is difficult for us to conceive of these words, when connected with the body, as meaning anything beyond air that has been processed by the lungs. Even a purely scientific account of breathing is staggering, however: “Every time you breathe, you exhale some 25 sextillion (that’s 2.5×10^{22}) molecules of oxygen—so many that with a day’s breathing you will in all likelihood inhale at least one molecule from the breaths of every person who has ever lived. And every person who lives from now until the sun burns out will from time to time breathe in a bit of you.” See Bill Bryson, *The Body: A Guide for Occupants* (New York: Anchor, 2019), 212.

² Desecrating a corpse only “works” because everyone understands the significance of the corpse. If it were truly trash, then no one would be revulsed by acts that treated it as such.

³ Washington Cemetery is in the Town of Portland, Wisconsin; Forest Hill Cemetery is in Madison and includes the graves of many Wisconsin dignitaries and notables.

from body⁴ or stand beside a corpse with the committed materialists and say it is just animal flesh that came out of the primordial stew, and consciousness, mind, personality and memory are merely “emergent” biological properties with no real significance whatsoever.⁵

The materialist position is untenable to live out with metaphysical or moral consistency. However, materialism does lend a level of acceptability to the idea that the body is like any other resource of the earth, and thus open to human manipulation and control. After all, the body can be studied, put under the microscope, chemically analyzed, and so on. Enough understanding of bodily function can be gained from these studies to devise clever interventions that run the gamut from helpful (antibiotics, laproscopic surgery) to atrocious (pills that cause abortion, mutilation via gender reassignment surgery) and everything in between.

Biology nudges us to think about the body as if it were a machine or an assembly of parts, and technological successes proclaim that we have, to an impressive extent, gained mastery over it. When that materialism is combined with the understanding that the real me is in my mind, you wind up with thinking about the body that runs along these lines: the body is the means by which the soul expresses itself and its individuality. In order to do so, it must be treated with plasticity and malleability. In Mary Harrington’s memorable phrase, we think of our bodies as Meat Legos, free to be arranged and rearranged however the mind wishes.⁶

Is this a new Gnosticism?⁷ I understand why the claim is made: there does seem to be an elevation of the spiritual over the physical, at least in the sense that the

⁴ Through the speech of Socrates in dialogue with Simmias, Plato expresses the thought that death is liberation for the soul because the body is evil and draws one away from the practice of philosophy:

“So long as we have the body, and the soul is contaminated by such an evil, we shall never attain completely what we desire, that is, the truth. For the body keeps us constantly busy by reason of its need of sustenance; and moreover, if diseases come upon it they hinder our pursuit of the truth. And the body fills us with passions and desires and fears, and all sorts of fancies and foolishness, so that, as they say, it really and truly makes it impossible for us to think at all.” (*Phaedo* 66b–c)

See discussion of transhumanism in Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 38–42.

⁵ The word *emergent* is used to denote what remains inexplicable or incapable of being understood. David Bentley Hart demolishes the argument that “mind” could possibly arise from mere biological, natural, or material causes. See David Bentley Hart, *All Things Are Full of Gods* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024).

⁶ Mary Harrington, *Feminism Against Progress* (Washington, D.C: Regnery, 2023), 17.

⁷ Harrington titles one of her chapters “Meat Lego Gnosticism.”

seat of personhood is thought to exist in the realm of mind and spirit. For my part, however, I think that borrowing a rough analog from the christological controversies provides a better description.⁸ We are living through an age of Nestorian anthropology, in which the human feels deeply the bifurcation of body and soul, with the result that the body remains at some distance from the self.⁹ The body is thought to be a thing that one has and that one needs to figure out what to do with.

The quest to bridge this Nestorian divide by instrumentalizing the body is succinctly named at the pinnacle of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, self-actualization.¹⁰ The word breaks apart into a soul/body divide, in which the body is needed for the actualizing part, since the immaterial self cannot make any imprint on the world apart from it. So, instead of despising the body in genuine Socratic or Gnostic fashion, the body's importance for self-expression rises to a level of idolatrous attention, not all of which is low level hedonistic pursuit.¹¹ The girls in my catechism class talk about their skin care routines, and I know a few young men who seem like they would be easy marks for the looksmaxxing community.¹² Tattoo

⁸ Because both christology and anthropology include unions beyond comprehension, it is possible to see rough parallels between the christological controversies over the personal union of Christ and our own anthropological misunderstandings of how body and soul are joined. Emphasis on rough.

⁹ The shift in understanding that is indicated by the move from "soul" to "self" is significant, but outside the scope of exploration here.

¹⁰ To be fair to Abraham Maslow, late in life he revised his hierarchy and added self-transcendence above self-actualization. But that is forgotten in the popular adaptation of his work.

¹¹ Bryan Johnson, cofounder of *Don't Die*, has given more attention to his body than anyone else, amassing an incredible data set of 1.5 billion bioindicators in his quest to hang on long enough so that his hopes for AI to overcome death might be realized. His explanation why he pays so much attention to his body is revealing:

"[I]t was clear to me that we basically needed to build a new philosophy, a new value system, new ethics, new morals, new incentive systems. My co-founder and I, Kate Tolo, decided to make this a project, and we said: We will make my body the philosophy. ... A new archetype needs to exist that represents the quest to try to continue existence in this physical body through the means of science and technology, and there wasn't an archetype that filled that role. ... We are performance artists trying to convey a new philosophy. Bryan Johnson is the first Don't Die Homo sapien prototype—the first Homo sapien that tried to incorporate that." Ross Douthat, host, *Interesting Times*, podcast, "Bryan Johnson's Blueprint for a 150-Year Life: Is It Worth It?," produced by Sophia Alvarez Boyd, *The New York Times*, August 13, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/13/opinion/interesting-times-bryan-johnson.html>.

¹² Looksmaxxing refers to the desire for male beauty that impels some young men to take measures that range from slight to extreme in their pursuit of the ideal look. For a primer, listen to Natalie Kitroeff, host, *The Daily*, podcast, "Injections, Bone Hammering and the Pursuit of Peak Male Beauty," in *The Daily*, produced by Lisa Tobin and Theo Balcomb, *The New York Times*, March 22, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/22/podcasts/the-daily/clavicular-looksmaxxing-men.html>.

artists have never had so much skin canvas to work on. Some pursue hard paths to altering the body, like intense exercise, but just as many take the easy way out: surgery, steroids, and GLP-1s all promise swift bodily change with minimal effort.

Beneath all of this attention, though, there remains an inherent distrust of the body. The body is not helpful in actualizing the self once it gives out in illness, suffering, and death. Transhumanists are truth-tellers in this way. They openly despise the body for its weakness and think a mechanical replacement for it will be the ticket out of a life doomed to futility.¹³ But they are not the only ones to radically swing away from the body when it betrays signs of weakness and failure. In a Nestorian anthropology, one should expect wide vacillations between idolizing the body and despising it. The same person who exerts tremendous effort to shape, sculpt, and beautify the body will simultaneously plan and pay to make it disappear from sight as quickly as possible after death by burning, grinding, and pulverizing it into cremains to be scattered to the four winds. That entire sleeve of tattoos, painstakingly acquired, is destined to burn. The remains will be sprinkled in a mountain lake, without thought that they may wind up in a backpacker's water bottle downstream.

But it is ok. It wasn't really me, after all. It was just a body.

The church and the body

A contention worth considering is that what happens with the body at the beginning and end of life reveals what we think about the body in general.¹⁴ The shift from burial to cremation must be indicative of something. Likewise, the significant changes that have come into being in regard to the beginning of life must also reflect an altered understanding of embodied human life. The birth control pill is arguably the most disruptive technological innovation of the past century.¹⁵ Mechanical reproduction, complete with genetic screening and modification, seems

¹³ Transhumanist desire to encapsulate consciousness within a machine is as scientific and materialist a solution as possible, and what marks this line of thinking as not quite Gnostic or Socratic in flavor.

¹⁴ "The stakes are high here. I am persuaded that in this, our moment in history, we are going through one of those periodic upheavals in the way we care (or don't) for the dead that are inevitable signs of an upheaval in the ways we care (or don't) for the living. To put it bluntly, a society that has forgotten how to honor the bodies of those who have departed is more inclined to neglect, even torture, the bodies of those still living. A society that has no firm hope for where the dead are going is also unsure how to take the hands of its children and lead them toward a hopeful future." Thomas Long, *Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁵ Harrington, *Feminism*, 64.

likely to continue its meteoric rise in popularity.¹⁶ It may be too late for many to be able to conceive of the thought that children are begotten, not made.¹⁷

These questions seem important: Could the anemic treatment that matters like contraception and cremation have received in our preaching and teaching be a reflection of how much we have accommodated and adopted a Nestorian anthropology ourselves? Have we given the impression that church is the place where one goes to fix up the soul, but fertility experts, doctors, podcasts, fitness coaches, and funeral homes are where to turn for matters that concern the body? With what frequency do we give godly instruction on matters of the body (apart from avoiding sex before marriage)?

It would not be the first time Christians have punted on the body. Paul had to call out the Corinthians on their spiritualizing tendencies that led to libertine bodily behavior. Misunderstanding the Pauline *σάρξ* to mean that the body in itself is evil, tainted, and bad led to the distorted ascetic practices that the Reformation criticized and disrupted. Many of us seem to have grown up with the idea that heaven will be floating around on the clouds in an angelic-like spirit form.¹⁸

We can do better than that. The time is ripe for us to think carefully about embodied life and bodily ethics that rhyme with the kingdom of God and to preach and teach the full richness of our anthropology. With the amount of confusion over what it means to be human and how to live in our embodiment, there are many who are looking for the answers that we have, if we are prepared to deliver them. We need not hide the body-positivity of a gospel which proclaims that God numbers the very hairs upon your head (Matt 10:30).

I contend that a Lutheran theology of the body begins with the human body of the incarnate Logos. Christ, in his incarnation, embodied life, death, and bodily resurrection, has given us more than sufficient proof of how much God loves the human body. He did not leave us to suffer forever beneath the threat of death, that is, the threat of separation of body and soul that is a result of sin. He bridges the divide by dealing with the root cause, sin, in the body of his Son upon the cross (1 Pet 2:24). That, in turn, opens up for us a way to live in the body that does not

¹⁶ For *mechanical reproduction* see Carl Trueman, *The Desecration of Man* (New York: Sentinel, 2026), 119.

¹⁷ From the title by Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, first published in 1984; republished 2022.

¹⁸ Jonathan Mumme, "Theologizing the Body between Two Resurrections," *Logia* 34, no. 4 (2025)–32.

fall into the trap of despising or idolizing the body but rather confesses the truth we hold and the hope we live by. We may be only dust, but we are Christ's dust.¹⁹ In Christ we see it plainly: this dust can, by the power of God, rise from death to embodied life that will never end.

¹⁹ I borrow the phrase "Christ's dust" from a sermon preached at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Madison, by Caleb Bassett.

HIS GLORIOUS EMBODIMENT

*If our blessed Lord and Maker
Hated men,
Would He then
Be of flesh partaker?*

Paul Gerhardt, *All My Heart This Night Rejoices*

Remember that he is dust

The Creator in action, like a potter at a wheel, lovingly scooped up the materials of the earth and shaped the dust into a body, Adam. Out of earth he drew up the crown of his creation.²⁰ He situated the man in such a way that everything bespoke perfect attention to the body: in the woman who was taken out of man and together with whom he would undertake the bodily work of being fruitful and multiplying, in the garden that provided for their bodily needs but also needed them to tend it, in the capacity enabled by the body to exercise dominion over the creation as sub-creators themselves, in the sensory experience of the beauty and glory of what was made, and in the gift of a seventh day of rest that demonstrated they were made for embodied delight—for worship—and not merely for labor.

The Fall made bodily life a burden but also multiplied God's providential care for the body. He covered bodily shame with leather and graciously barred the man and the woman from consigning themselves to ματαιότης, that is, to the future the techno-optimists hope to pull off, by eating of the Tree of Life.²¹ Most significantly, he promised that redemption would come through the body when he spoke of the offspring of the woman. He gave the serpent this dust to eat: that every child born of woman would be threat to him, a reminder of his doom. Childbirth was painful to the woman, but terrifying to the serpent who perceived in it the possibility that his head-crusher was entering the world.

²⁰ Bryson relates various accountings for the cost of the materials that compose a human that spans from \$168 to \$151,578.46. Bryson, *Body*, 1-4. However you do the math, the major elements of the body are water and carbon.

²¹ Mumme, "Theologizing the Body," 30. Trapping consciousness inside a machine so as to perpetuate existence, if possible, would still trap the person in the brokenness of creation under sin, and that would be futility indeed.

When the time fully came and the promise was kept, the potter threw himself as clay upon the wheel. The Scriptures speak of Jesus coming down to earth from heaven (John 3:13). That is proper and right since he is the Son of God and he was incarnate of the Holy Spirit in the virgin's womb. But the incarnation means it is also proper to say that he grew up from the dust of the earth. He is not ashamed to claim the title "Son of Man." He received his body like we do, drawn up from the materials of this world.

That this is possible in the first place is due to the wondrous capacity God placed within women. Mary's body, which was nurtured by the soil of Nazareth and the crops and livestock that fed her, could in turn give bodily life of this same kind to Jesus. Dust, sunshine, and rain flowed through the umbilical cord to curdle the human body of Jesus like cheese (Job 10:10) and to knit his bones together in the hidden place (Ps 139:13). Jesus had a belly button.

Therefore, the incarnation is God's great "yes" to what he made. It testifies that the material of creation is not of itself inherently sinful, for Jesus is perfect and sinless yet takes a body of dust as his own. He willingly entered the embodied existence that he had shaped in the beginning, including the dependency and limitation that is baked into it.

Note first that Jesus did not spurn the dependency of embodied life. In his early days, he needed Mary for nourishment²² and Joseph for protection.²³ When he was twelve years old, he needed to keep his body in his Father's house where the teachers were located who could answer his questions and assist his growth in wisdom. His growth in stature would not have happened had earth and weather, crops and animals not nurtured growing limbs. Flax had to grow and hands had to process, spin, weave, and sew it into the tunic that he wore and for which lots were cast by the soldiers who crucified him. Just a handful of examples like these

²² Gerald Manley Hopkins vividly depicts Mary's role in his poem *The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe*:

Of her who not only
Gave God's infinity
Dwindled to infancy
Welcome in womb and breast,
Birth, milk, and all the rest

²³ "Joseph ... is preeminently an empty vessel. A father who ... did no begetting, a simple carpenter who understood almost nothing and who died before he could understand more, he ranks now above prophets and kings precisely because, in his own emptiness, he carried, kissed, clothed, and cared for the one who emptied himself for our sakes." Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 207–8.

are enough to demonstrate that his was not a life of total self-sufficiency but of deep need and dependency. Like us, Jesus lived by the wonderful web God weaves out of providence and vocation.

Second, Jesus lived within the bodily limitation of time during his state of exinanition. The silent periods of his life are vast; we know only the tiniest sliver about his first thirty years. But he did not hit fast forward through those three decades; he lived and experienced them in his body like we do. He was subject to the passage of time and the slow processes of growth and aging. It is a staggering thought that our God entered our world and for most of his life worked with his hands in obscurity. It is another staggering thought to consider that the incarnate Christ spent about a third of his time on this earth sleeping, embracing the profound limitation of needing to rest.²⁴

With a few notable exceptions, like walking on water, Jesus also lived within the confines of space and place. The Son of Man did not have a lasting place to call home on this earth, but he did make his bodily abode in specific places, one at a time: Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth, and Capernaum all served the purpose. He traveled at the snail's pace of three or four miles per hour on foot and perhaps a bit faster by boat or hoof, but never remotely close to the ease and speed with which we travel. His body knew the earth from which it was drawn with the long familiarity of years spent wandering the countryside of one's homeland.

The incarnation, therefore, makes it clear that having a body is not a bad thing, nor are the limitations and dependencies that come with embodiment problems that must be resented and fought against tooth and nail. It is good for us to remember that he is dust.

Dust that shimmers and shines with glory

No one who met the incarnate Lord accused him of being so heavenly minded he was of no earthly good. The accusations, in fact, ran to the contrary: there were some who thought he enjoyed bodily goods like food and drink too much and others who took issue with his penchant for extending a healing touch on the Sabbath. Jesus consistently showed up for others. The fullness and richness of his embodied life demonstrates that a body of dust, limited and dependent as it is, can shimmer with divine glory.

²⁴ Sleep is necessary, but exactly why and what it does remains mysterious. See Bryson, *Body*, 260–262.

Jesus showed up at the start of his saving work with the muck and sand of the Jordan riverbed squishing between his toes. In the beginning the earth was formed out of water and through water (2 Pet 3:5), and the embodied salvation of mankind emerged out of the water as well. The Son of Man stepped into the water to take as his own the cumulative sins humanity has left behind in baptismal waters. He received that baptism, the one that was fitting to fulfill all righteousness, in the dust of his body.

Immediately thereafter Jesus was led out into the wilderness to face temptation. Fill your stomach, cast yourself down, bend the knee and worship: these were not immaterial trials. The tempter aimed his assault at the body, calling for physical actions and movements and not merely the adoption of spiritual thoughts or attitudes. The victory Jesus won was accomplished by the Word of God—and by the bodily renunciation of sin and physical denial of self that followed from that divine Word.

That he refused the bread of iniquity in the desert does not imply that Jesus forsook the joys of the table altogether or all of the time. His caloric regimen covered the full spectrum between a forty day fast in the wilderness and a lavish dinner party at the house of Zacchaeus, and many memorable events in the life of Christ are tied to eating and drinking. He attended the wedding feast at Cana and supplied somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of the finest wine. He accepted the invitations to dinner that came his way. He liked to take the role of host, and whenever he had the chance, he handled the food, lifted it up to heaven and gave thanks for such providential gifts that support bodily life. Twice he filled empty stomachs with bread and fish wondrously multiplied in remote locations. His presence at a table was the setting at which he/his body was anointed for burial.²⁵ And, of course, at the Passover table he instituted the eating and drinking of his body and blood as the lasting means of his bodily presence among us.

Jesus was primarily known as a teacher and a healer, vocational work that he carried out by means of his body. His preaching was in the ordinary manner of human speech, by passing air from his lungs over his vocal folds and shaping the words with his throat, palate, tongue, and teeth. He lacked the advantages we have of electronic amplification or audio-visual recording and broadcasting, which meant it was necessary for him to be present in person in synagogue or boat, close

²⁵ In Mark's account, Jesus says that she prepared *his body* for burial (Mark 14:8), while in Matthew it is more straightforward, "She prepared *me* for burial" (Matt 26:12). Jesus does not distance himself from his body in the slightest.

enough to be within earshot of those who heard him. The Good Shepherd lived in proximity to his sheep, near enough that they could recognize his voice.

When Jesus spoke, his words were powerful. Just a word was sufficient to heal the official's son, calm the wind and waves, drive out demons, and call Lazarus from his tomb. More often than not, though, his ministry was haptic as well. He combined words with touch, daring to reach out and touch the untouchable lepers. He spit and mixed mud with his saliva, and then anointed the eyes of the blind man. He raised the daughter of Jairus by hand and turned around the funeral procession in Nain with a touch upon the coffin. He took the little children in his arms to bless them. He wrapped a towel around his waist and brought the wash water to the feet of his disciples in the upper room. Everywhere he went, Jesus was initiating wholesome touch.

Those bodily touches show that the inbreaking of the kingdom of God extends to the whole person, body and soul. Why is it the case that, wherever Jesus went, bodies were healed? The signs are multivalent. They show that he is true God and has divine power and authority over creation. But they also indicate the nature of his work, that he came to undo the effects of sin, including the bodily agony and suffering that result from it. And they point ahead to the full restoration of every body that is to come on the day of his return. Where Jesus is, there is life, and that life is rich and full. He overthrows the reign of sin so that bodily life may flourish.

Those who have eyes to see can perceive the shimmers of divine glory that manifested themselves in these deeds of the Christ. First, there is the glory of embracing the goodness that remains in creation (even though it is groaning beneath the weight of sin) and promising its total restoration in the undoing of sin: "I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Then there is also the vocational glory of pouring out one's life for others: "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). By his bodily presence and actions Jesus showed both.

The five who were blessed to be present with him on the Mount of Transfiguration saw even more. They saw the dust of this earth shine with divine glory when his divinity was clearly and definitively revealed on the mountaintop. Even Jesus's clothing—flax or wool, perhaps, but either way grown of the earth and harvested, spun, and woven by human hands—was shining. The Transfiguration is not a stripping away of the material to reveal the spiritual, but rather the manifestation of divine glory in the body, demonstrating the supreme spiritual value Jesus be-

stows upon the human body.²⁶ The whole fullness of the deity dwells *bodily* in Christ (Col 2:9).

Jesus shone with glory that was his own, and in that way his Transfiguration is unique to him. But he extends to us the redemption, healing, and glory that he brought about through his embodiment. We carry his death in the body so that the life of Jesus can also be manifested in our bodies (2 Cor 4:10). He makes these dusty bodies of ours to reflect his glory (2 Cor 3:18), to become his dwelling (1 Cor 6:19), and to serve as the instruments of righteousness and love by which all will know that we are his disciples (Rom 6:13, John 13:35).

Our bodies may well be limited and dependent, but they are not unimportant, and they are definitely not confining prisons. God has given them to us so that we can embrace the goodness of creation in the richness and fullness of embodied life and so that we, too, can give our lives in vocational service to others. And if the glory of God can be reflected in part in these ways, one should not forget that a day is coming when our bodies will also be seen in the greater light of the glory that Christ has prepared for this dust of ours when he raises it from the dead.

Taking the humanity into God

The most shocking incarnational reality is that Jesus received a body that was subject to the effects of sin even though he had no sin to call his own. Like us, he suffered and staggered through life that is shot through with brokenness. He knew the daily burdens of life, such as growing weary, hungry and thirsty. He bore our sicknesses and carried our pains.²⁷ His body could be wounded by scourge and rod, and he could bleed. It was possible for him to give up his spirit and breath no more.

Jesus drank the full cup of suffering, but he did so steering the careful path between avoiding pain at all costs and actively seeking it out.²⁸ Jesus was not a pleasure seeker, but neither was he a masochist or a Stoic. Even though it was our sin and not his own, he accepted it and bore its cost in his body and life. And it hurt.

²⁶ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of the Body*, tr. Michael Donley (Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 46.

²⁷ The aspect of illness in Isa 53:3–4 is obscured by translations. The vocables are *חָלָה*, illness, and *כָּאֵב*, pain.

²⁸ His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is so perfectly emblematic of this: he asks for the suffering to be removed (not seeking it), yet he submits to the suffering if it is his Father's will (not avoiding it).

How one treats the suffering of Christ serves to ferret out little bits of Nestorian anthropology that crop up in our teaching here and there. One will occasionally run across a sentiment like this, “Sure, the whips and nails hurt, but the *real suffering* was being forsaken by the Father.”²⁹ This rests upon the assumption that there is a clear divide between soul and body, and that really painful and difficult suffering occurs only within the soul without involving the body.

The four Gospel accounts of Christ’s suffering and death echo all of Scripture, making it clear that suffering affects the person wholly, and that divine wrath is not limited to the soul only—after all, God is the one who can kill both soul and body in the hell of fire (Matt 10:28). So, when one considers the suffering that Jesus endured, one need not make light of the physical toll it took upon him. He was confined, mocked, beaten, and made to go without sleep, and all of that before he was marched up the hill, nailed to the cross, and left to drown above water.

The seven words from the cross show a suffering person, who felt the physical pain in his body as much as he suffered under the anguish of soul that anyone in that position would experience. The words range broadly across the whole of human experience, from demonstrating love for enemies to filial duty to the agony of thirst to deep lamentation. The suffering of the cross was intense in every way, and Jesus felt it all.

When Jesus died, he bore that last great punishment of sin. He knew and experienced the end, the finality of the breath/spirit leaving the body, body and soul being separated, as has been the doom of humanity since the Fall. So fully did Jesus join us in our human experience that there is no suffering one might endure, not even death, that he did not also share.

Death cast Jesus back into the web of dependency. His followers took upon themselves the unpleasant but necessary task of providing reverent care for him in death. As the light began to fade that Friday afternoon, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus hefted his dead weight, the accumulated dust of the Son of God and Son of Man that now lay cold, limp, and heavy in their arms. They covered his nakedness and laid him to rest on a stone shelf while the women looked on and

²⁹ I think you are only qualified to say this after you have been crucified yourself. Someone who finds the language in Bernard of Clairvaux’s great hymn of the passion to be embarrassingly physical (“Now from your cheeks has vanished/their color once so fair”) or who criticizes Mel Gibson’s depiction of the crucifixion as being too gory is not in danger of overemphasizing the bodily, physical suffering of Christ.

made their plans to complete the burial after the Sabbath was past. The body of Jesus filled a grave, a place that was marked so that those who mourned would know where to find him.

But he did not stay dead. The lifeless body lay in the earth only briefly, and then rose again. The resurrection of Christ shows the power of God, that though body and soul may separate in death, God can put them together again. When the angels rolled the stone away, the tomb was already empty. The same body which had hung on the cross rose and left that tomb, and to make sure there was no mistaking it, that body even retained the marks of nails and spear.

Christ's resurrection, therefore, shows that there is continuity in the raising of the dead. Your body, the one that lives right now, is the same one that will be raised. Will there be scars? Maybe.³⁰ I am inclined to think that there are some marks received on this earth that will be brought into the resurrection.³¹ If they do, they will certainly no longer be a source of grief, for there will be no more mourning or crying or tears.

But the resurrection is not a return to life as it is experienced now, only with the timeline stretched out to eternity. The bodies that are raised will be transformed, no longer perishable and mortal but imperishable and immortal. This transformation is mysterious. From our present vantage, it is difficult to understand what it means to go from a ψυχικός body to a πνευματικός body (1 Cor 15:44), for the only life we know is weighed down by sin and death. The resurrection of Christ gives us the tiniest glimpse of life on the other side, of the glory that is in store for us.

Consider the bodily transformation that is evident in the resurrected body of our Lord. While it is the same person and the same body, significant changes have occurred. It is Jesus, yet he can be mistaken for a gardener. He can take bread in his hands to break it; he can disappear in an instant to reappear in Jerusalem. He has flesh and bones and eats fish, but he can also show up behind locked doors. He can expel air from his resurrected lungs to breathe upon the men in front of him;

³⁰ On the one hand, the blind see, the crippled walk, etc. On the other hand, are there some scars that, if removed, would make it hard for me to be me?

³¹ "Just as the resurrected Christ bears the marks of his wounds—his 'history' with the Roman Empire—so the new self in Christ is the resurrection of a self with a past. The 'I' is saved only if *this* me with *this* bodily history rises to new life. If all that I've lived through was simply erased by grace, then 'I' am lost rather than redeemed." James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022), 64.

when they are eating the breakfast he prepared over the fire he kindled on the seashore, they are still afraid to ask if it is really him.

Jesus is the firstfruits, so to some degree our resurrection will follow the pattern of his. But it is difficult to say how far our bodies will mirror his glorified body, since he remains the unique Son of God in the flesh. Will there be eating and drinking in heaven? That seems likely. Will we be able to show up behind locked doors like he did? Maybe, maybe not. What can be said with certainty is that the resurrection entails a qualitative change and not merely a quantitative extension of existence.

It is instructive to note that Jesus spent at least as much time in the forty days preparing his disciples to go with the means of grace as he did demonstrating that it was really he and that he had indeed risen in the body. When he breathed on the apostles, he bestowed on them the Spirit and instructed them to absolve sins with authority. He commissioned them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, and he sent them out to preach and baptize. He is recognized in the breaking of the bread, and in his command to “do this in remembrance of me.”

He made all these arrangements so that the work of his Church would be focused upon the means of grace, the places where creation and divine grace flow together in a grand confluence to forgive sins and give life and salvation in Christ. They are so physical and tangible, made to be bodily received. Preaching enters the ear. Baptism washes the forehead. The absolution is forgiveness that can be felt in the hair.³² The sacrament is taken on the lips and tongue.

By these means, Jesus has promised to remain bodily present wherever two or three gather together in his name. The Ascension is not the locking away of the

³² The rite calls for the minister to place his hand upon the head of the penitent as he speaks the absolution. This is neatly captured in the unpublished poem *Confession, Absolution, Forgiveness* by Rachel Greve:

confession:
another step and
again my foot slips

absolution:
the touch of God
in my hair

forgiveness:
forgetting to cast
the first stone

body of Christ in some glass case in the sky where it remains remote and far removed from us. If anything, the opposite is true. His body is now more widely accessible, since all who eat and drink receive his true body and blood in the sacrament.³³ This bodily interaction results in such a close union between believers and Christ that the Church *is* the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph 1:23).

On the day of his return, we will hear his voice and rise—our bodies, yet transformed and glorified. Our resurrected future will not be entirely as Christ’s is, for his human nature has been joined to the divine nature by virtue of the personal union.³⁴ But that does not detract from the fact that the resurrection is God’s exclamation point over our bodies.³⁵ That gives us a good path to follow, one in which we neither seek out suffering nor think that the primary goal of bodily life is to avoid pain at all costs. We know that these bodies of ours are doomed, and that one day the breath/spirit will leave them. But our bodily life is not merely living towards a grave. It is also living towards an embodied future. Our humanity, too, will be taken up into the full life that God has in store for us.³⁶

³³ “Let me state this as sharply and paradoxically as I can: Jesus deals with us more physically and spiritually now than before his ascension.” John Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2021), 77.

³⁴ In Christ, the divine perfections are communicated to the human nature and this elevates his humanity. This *genus maiestaticum* indicates that human nature can receive such glorious gifts, but it does not prove that such a kind of glorification awaits us. Nevertheless, his resurrection and ascension must say something about our bodies and our future—at least that the dead can be raised to bodily life.

³⁵ I buried a newspaper editor who would faithfully edit out exclamation points in church newsletter articles because, according to him, “The only time an exclamation point is called for is when Jesus returns.”

³⁶ The Athanasian Creed describes the personal union in the remarkable phrase “taking the humanity into God.”

OUR GLORIFIED EMBODIMENT

Much of the modern resistance to chastity comes from men's belief that they 'own' their bodies—those vast and perilous estates, pulsating with the energy that made the worlds, in which they find themselves without their consent and from which they are ejected at the pleasure of Another!

C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

If the man from heaven is, and ever remains, the Son of Man incarnate, enmeshed in the corporality that is also ours, then the dustliness of our embodiment cannot be belittling. Life and being, in the body, are gifts from a gracious God. In grace he weaves our embodiment into his providential and vocational webs, vesting our lives with divine purpose and value. He has even redemptively joined our dust to the dust of his Son so as to glorify us and bring these bodies into the age to come. So generous is the goodness of God that bodies sown in dishonor and weakness, as ours are now, can still be received with thanksgiving, employed for his glory, and entrusted in suffering and death to his almighty hands.

The givenness and giftedness of the body

The explanation to the First Article teaches that life in the body is a gift with a givenness to it. The ongoing creative activity of God at work: “I believe that God created me ... and that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities.”³⁷ God continues to draw the dust of the earth up into human bodies. The difference between the initial creation of man and his creative activity now is that, in our case, it is carried out mediately and vocationally. Husband and wife give themselves to one another in love, and the overflow of love is, sometimes, the generation of new life. It goes beyond words to ponder that, in the conception of a child, husband and wife procreate: they are swept up in the mighty creative activity of God who, through them, brings into being a life that will never end.

³⁷ Luther's Catechism (Milwaukee: NPH, 2017), 4.

Under the reign of science and in the age of the quantified, the lustre of this wondrous activity of God has worn off. Procreation has degraded to reproduction.³⁸ It has become tenable to suggest that the body one receives in utero is merely the result of natural causes that, at this point, are well understood. The industrial revolution made the predominant metaphor for the human the machine, so that the development of a child could be thought of like the production of a product on an assembly line. Some vestiges of this metaphor remain potent in pregnancy. For example, a mother's dietary inputs will have downstream effect in the output of her womb.³⁹

The information age makes the predominant metaphor for the person the computer, so the development of the child in the womb is thought to be more akin to programming. You need the right code: Y chromosome for male child, this specific gene for blonde hair, that one for athletic prowess, and so on. If you have bad code, the logical thought is that you should modify it.

These statements are not incorrect or factually mistaken. They name and describe processes that actually happen. But they are incomplete and inadequate in their accounting. By removing the creative hand of God, they reduce the body to a product that is developed and made. Here lie the roots of Nestorian anthropology. Because the development of the body is, to some degree, within the grasp of human understanding, it begins to be treated as distinct and less than the still-inconceivable mysteries of mind and soul. What we can understand, we can control. What we control, we think we own. What we own, we feel free to do with as we wish. The body fits this bill.

Ownership and production of a body places a burden upon parents to do everything right so as to get the best possible product in the end when their child is born. Prospective parents today face choices before and during a pregnancy that would have been inconceivable not long ago. Genetic screening prior to trying to conceive is offered as normal health care and a prudent course of action, without consideration of the iatrogenic harm involved.⁴⁰ The phrase, "sex is for fun; IVF is

³⁸ Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians, Fourth Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 11–29.

³⁹ The prohibition on drinking alcohol during pregnancy manifests in extreme: I frequently encounter mothers who request dealcoholized wine for the Lord's Supper, afraid that the teaspoon of weak wine in the individual cup will be enough to do harm to their unborn child.

⁴⁰ *Iatrogenic* is a term that describes unintentional adverse effects that arise from medical treatment. It is not necessarily helpful—only anxiety producing—to know one is a carrier of a rare genetic disorder that is highly unlikely to be passed on, for example.

for babies” touches on another decision to make: will conception and implantation take place in the natural way or in a laboratory?⁴¹ The laboratory promises better results by more control. More control is certainly there: routine IVF includes the practice of sorting embryos and forcing parents into the role of decision makers.⁴² And of course, standard advice today remains to abort “defective” children.⁴³

It is important to recognize that the presence of a technological capability affects everyone, even those who would not think of employing the technology themselves. That seems to apply in this instance. Even someone who would never think of genetically tinkering with the conception of a child has, to some degree, been shaped by the capacity to do so. Children are thought of less as gifts of God and more as things of one’s own making. Gilbert Meilaender described it as the difficulty moderns have in remembering that children are begotten, not made, and warned that this will inevitably reduce parental ability to recognize their children as equals.⁴⁴

Christians will want to recognize the givenness of the body, that God is the one who made me and gave me this frame. He is ultimately responsible for who and what I am. Some of that does indeed come about mediately through things like

⁴¹ Quote from the founder of Orchid, Noor Siddiqui, mentioned in an interview with Ross Douthat. Orchid is a company that promises to produce healthier babies by offering whole genome screening. Douthat, *Interesting Times*, “The Next Parenting Trend Starts Before Conception”, produced by Katherine Sullivan, Andrea Betanzos, Sophia Alvarez Boyd and Victoria Chamberlin, *The New York Times*, August 7, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/07/opinion/genetics-children-noor-siddiqui.html>.

⁴² Even if nothing else, the clinic will ask the parents to select healthy embryos and to choose the gender of the embryo to be implanted. For example, Bari Weiss describes how she and her partner selected an embryo in a mall:

“It’s no secret that in a relationship where there is not a man, you need to use IVF, which is how my wife and I have children. When you go, this is standard practice. You go to the embryo place. There’s a lot of these new ones. Ours was in a mall. They basically say to you, they grade the embryos, okay? They say it’s an A embryo, a B embryo, and a C embryo, and you can make decisions about whether or not you want a boy or a girl, but basically they’re like, you put in the A embryo. It’s the healthiest embryo. You have the best chance.” Bari Weiss, host, *Honestly*, podcast, “Is Designing Babies Unethical—or a Moral Imperative?”, produced by Rafaela Siewert and Candace Mittel Kahn, *The Free Press*, December 2, 2025, <https://www.thefp.com/p/is-designing-babies-unethical-a-d7d>.

⁴³ A tragic example of “victory over suffering” at abominable cost is outlined in an article about how little support remains for the very few parents who carry babies with Downs to term in places like Denmark. See Sarah Zhang, “The Last Children of Down Syndrome,” *Atlantic*, December 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/12/the-last-children-of-down-syndrome/616928/>.

⁴⁴ Meilaender, *Bioethics*, 16–17.

chromosomes and genes, and parental choices do matter to some extent, like avoiding alcohol during pregnancy. We need not deny that, but we do want to subordinate the scientific accounting of the generation of life to the richer scriptural picture. It is more wholesome to think that I am as I am because of my God's loving hand than to be left wondering if I could have been different had my parents made other choices. Parents, too, benefit from this. In a lovely way, embracing the givenness of embodiment frees them from the burden of trying to engineer their child and feeling profound pressure to get every decision right. The end goal they are striving for is not to build a flawless product, but to receive the gift of a person.⁴⁵

The question of where Christians can comfortably draw the line on using some of these technologies or interventions is a challenging one. There is no "natural" state to which an easy return can be made. Wholesale rejection of all interventions, cast as faith in "letting God decide," scrubs out the agency given in Eden, puts God to the test, and overlooks the many benefits that science and technology have brought into existence.⁴⁶

On the other hand, uncritical adoption of every new development can launch someone down paths they will later regret. There has to be openness to the countercultural conclusion that some technological "advancements" promise good, and may even deliver it, but at a dehumanizing or dangerous cost.⁴⁷

The distinction between dominion and domination is helpful in delineating a careful approach to making decisions in regard to which technologies Christians might in good conscience use. Dominion refers to the Creator's endowment of gifts and abilities that would allow humankind to develop and shape creation. Adam and

⁴⁵ A person who, due to sin, will inevitably be flawed and given to suffering, weakness, and death.

⁴⁶ Proponents of approaches like this fall prey to mistaken nostalgia for a golden age prior to some technological development they feel was particularly harmful, something like processed foods, pharmaceuticals, or western medicine. They fail to perceive that technological developments have always been taking place and shaping the children that are born, since God's ongoing creative activity is carried out mediately through the very humans who develop the technologies, change their diets, relocate, etc.

⁴⁷ Consider the increasing appeal of these proposals: 1) to develop crosses between human and animals; 2) to modify human nature in such a way as to transcend current limits and weaknesses; 3) to create "bodyoids"—human bodies without brains—that could serve as repositories of organs for transplants.

Eve were given a garden to tend, not a wilderness to preserve.⁴⁸ This dominion, however, was to be exercised in keeping with divine design.⁴⁹ The entrance of sin meant that humankind's technological advancements could now trample over that design to ungodly ends. The Tower of Babel stands as the warning. When the Lord came down, he did not minimize the ability of mankind; he said that anything humans set their minds to, they would be able to do (Gen 11:6). He did oppose their work, however, because it was undertaken to glorify man and his ability, and to place man's future firmly under man's control.⁵⁰ Babel demonstrates what happens when dominion crosses the line and becomes domination.

Christians can approach genetic screening and reproductive technologies with these thoughts in mind. In addition to asking important questions about what will happen to all of the embryos that will be created, it is also important to ask, "Is this keeping me in line with God's design? Is creation being treated with reverence and respect? Am I stewarding creation or putting myself in the position of lord and master? How will this course of action affect the way that I relate to my child? What do my actions communicate to others about my God, myself, and my view of life?"

Accepting the givenness of the body challenges everyone to receive their body in its weaknesses, dependencies, and limitations. This is no easy task, for everyone has something about their body that they wish were different. Recognizing the feeling you have when you contemplate what you wish were different about your body can help you to develop a level of sympathy for those who struggle deeply with body image or gender dysphoria. Sin has not made it easy to accept the body as it is given.

Nor are we bound to do nothing. Within limits, it is appropriate to develop and modify our embodiment. It follows the same dominion-domination pattern. A healthy approach that practices dominion recognizes the divine design that can be labeled "good health" in broad terms, and aims the body towards that end. What

⁴⁸ R. J. Snell, *Acedia and Its Discontents: Metaphysical Boredom in an Empire of Desire* (Kettering: Angelico, 2015), 38.

⁴⁹ "We have, then, three tests of good work: (1) Does it respect the integrity of things, including the integrity of the worker? (2) Does it contribute to the capacity of the created order, including the human person, for dynamic development and intelligent progress? (3) Does the work suit the feasting halls of New Jerusalem or the gluttonous meals of Babylon?" Snell, *Acedia*, 55.

⁵⁰ The recent papal encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* contrasts the account of Babel with Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. One project was undertaken to glorify man. The other was to carry out the will of God and bring life, order, and earthly blessings to the people of the city.

that looks like will be different for each person, since there many factors affecting the body that remain outside our control and since each of us has our own unique, God-given body. The goal is to nourish and care for the body one has been given as best one can, while wholeheartedly entrusting oneself and one's future to God.

At the same time, we will have to be judicious in determining where care that seeks to develop and modify the body crosses the line into domination. There is no question about rejecting the mutilation of gender reassignment surgery or the transhumanist effort to disembody consciousness. Things get more difficult in the middle. I've taken steroids to overcome a systemic reaction to poison ivy, but I do not think that taking steroids to grow bigger biceps fits well into my embrace of the givenness of my body.

There are reasons to be cautious about why and how one might go about modifying the body. Often the reason for wanting to change is not to glorify God or serve neighbor, but to conform to cultural idolatries of an idealized body. Taking steroids may be able to pump muscles up, but not in the healthiest way. GLP-1s are useful for a person who struggles with obesity, but I question whether using them is the wisest course of action for people without weight issues who are seeking a particular body shape and size that society deems desirable.⁵¹ The body cannot be treated as if it is entirely plastic and rearrangeable if it is indeed given by God.

Nor should we think of the body as if it is merely an assembly of parts, like the African tale of God creating the wildebeest.⁵² God does not choose parts for your body from various bins; he creates you from the raw material of sperm and egg and umbilical nourishment, and he knits you together as a unified whole, a person consisting of body and soul, eyes, ears, and all your members, your mind and your abilities. You cannot separate your body out from you.

Scripturally, you cannot even act as if the members of your body are insignificant or interchangeable. They all carry vast meaning. The scriptural testimony is rich in pointing out how the body that God knits together in the womb is deeply invested with spiritual significance. The heart is not merely a pump, but the seat of man's

⁵¹ Anecdotal evidence suggests to me that it is more common than one would think for forty-something moms who are not obese to hit the pills in hopes of achieving an idealized body shape.

⁵² As I have heard it told, the story goes that, when God was done with his creative work, he had leftover body parts that he combined to make the wildebeest.

inner life. The kidneys play a role, as do the bowels. Eyes cause sin; guilt is felt in the bones.⁵³

If the members of the body are tied up with the soul or the unity of the person in this way, then the body is clearly not an assembly of parts. This brings with it yet another point at which we might ask about what limits we need to simply respect and where we might want to draw lines around certain interventions that may be able to do some bodily good but at too great a cost. There are reasons to be hesitant about organ donation.

There has been a warm reception of organ donation among Christians because it is packaged as “gifts of the body”—a way to love and serve others, even in tragedy and death.⁵⁴ That is indeed a self-sacrificial, Christlike thought, and it should not be minimized. The impulse is the right one, and it seems to me to be one that can and should be encouraged as it pertains to those gifts of the body that can be given by a living donor: blood, bone marrow, kidneys. The giver of such gifts is capable of freely and willingly choosing to give them for love of neighbor and remain alive.

Some organs, though, cannot be donated while the person remains alive. For those, there are added considerations. First, the manner in which organs are “harvested” raises alarm. The body has to be kept alive—heart beating, lungs breathing—in order for the organs to be useable. Organ donation rests upon the medical definition of death as cessation of brain activity, a definition that was generated to make the process morally acceptable and that has serious scientific as well as theological inadequacies.⁵⁵ It is hard not to think that the act of harvesting the organs is, in some way, taking control over the person’s final moments and turning them into a gruesome spectacle.

⁵³ Mumme, *Theologizing*, 30. Bryson relates the scientific confirmation of the biblical testimony: bones produce osteocalcin, which bolsters memory and buoys spirits. *Body*, 165.

⁵⁴ Meilaender, *Bioethics*, 105–123.

⁵⁵ “Advocates for the brain-death criterion argue that death is the disintegration of the unified organism, and the brain is responsible for maintaining organismic unity. ... But these arguments do not withstand scrutiny. The brain modulates the coordinated activity of the other organs; it does not create that coordinated activity. That is accomplished by the organic formal unity of the body as a whole—which modern science, with its reductionistic analysis of the body into component parts, fails to discern. ... Pregnant mothers can even gestate babies after brain death, sometimes for months. Consider the contradictions and manifest absurdities in this headline: ‘Brain-dead Virginia woman dies after giving birth.’” Aaron Kheriaty, “Zombie Bioethics,” *First Things*, September 29, 2025, <https://firstthings.com/zombie-bioethics>.

Second, the integrity of the person and body matters. What happens in an organ donation is what would be called “desecrating a corpse” if it were done by an enemy after death. Keeping the body intact bears witness to its unity as knit together by the Creator. At the very least, someone who chooses not to donate organs should not be told they are being selfish. They may choose to offer the wholeness of their body as a testimony to its importance and to their future hope of resurrection.

Third, whenever bodies become parts and products, the possibility of exploitation, abuse, and pressure is likely to grow. Medical assistance in dying jives nicely with organ donation, but we could hardly be content with a world in which suicide is promoted and encouraged by detailing how it will benefit others.⁵⁶

Finally, there are some gifts of the body that I simply cannot give. Because I am married, I cannot give my body sexually to another woman. A father may not choose to end his life in order to donate his heart to his child. Maintaining healthy respect for the limitations God has designed with embodiment is the counterargument to the logic of “because we can, we must.”⁵⁷

These reasons should make us cautious about organ donation. The Lord will be able to put all bodies back together again in the resurrection, and I can picture hearts zooming out of transplantees to find their rightful home in the chests of donors. But perhaps it would be good for us to consider the message our actions proclaim. Do they testify to the God-given nature of our embodiment, including some limits and weaknesses that we are better off accepting instead of trying to overrun? Do they encourage thinking of the body as a pile of parts that are in our ownership instead of a unified integrity that does not belong to us in the first place? Do they demonstrate that the only way our lives are truly and eternally saved is through death and resurrection?

We do not own our bodies. They are given to us. Some of the things we do not like about our bodies are no doubt given by God to teach us acceptance and patience, weakness and warts and all. Even the simplest dependencies of the body,

⁵⁶ Leon Kass referred to organ donation as “a noble form of cannibalism.” Meilaender, *Bioethics*, 113.

⁵⁷ A logical argument that one encounters runs like this: Because we can do *x* to save a life, we must proceed with *x*, and anyone who voices a concern about *x* is responsible for causing harm that could have been prevented. I heard an advocate for the rapid development of artificial intelligence employ this line of reasoning to argue that anyone who slowed down technological advancement in this field would be guilty of murder.

the need we have for others as well as for the fruits of the earth, are bodily reminders that we owe our entire existence to God.

I have a collapsed sternum, *pectus excavatum*. My friends in high school said it was where my soul was supposed to be. My abdominal muscles are also mis-formed. I get a four-and-a-half pack instead of a six-pack. The effect on my life, by God's grace, is mostly cosmetic. They help me understand, however, the deep longing that we can feel for our bodies to be different, better, more glorious than they are. They also help me see how tempting the various interventions can be. If we can fix this, why not?

One good reason is that the body has not only a givenness but also a giftedness to it. The First Article mentions the gratuity⁵⁸ of our existence: "All this God does only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, not because I have earned or deserved it."⁵⁹ Gift giving is spoiled if the receiver feels compelled to point out all the flaws in the gift, or sets about to radically alter the nature of the gift. That is doubly true when the gift you have received is from a good and merciful Father. He has given you the body that he wants you to have. You can embrace the giftedness of your body, including its specific weaknesses and dependencies. Learning to live within dependency and limitation is learning to live a life of thanksgiving to the gracious Creator.

Vocational embodiment

Those who criticized the Lord Jesus for being a glutton and drunkard assumed that his rich embrace of life in creation was aimed at self-gratification. They failed to recognize that Jesus turned embodied life inside out. He lived for others, not for himself, with his body leading the way in his eating and traveling and healing and blessing and teaching. When Jairus was at his wit's end about his daughter's illness, Jesus walked with him to his house. When Zacchaeus was filled with joy upon being found by his Lord, Jesus shared the table with him. When the crowds

⁵⁸ "To say that creation is *ex nihilo* is to say that God was not constrained in any way in the creation of the world. God did not have to overcome recalcitrant matter or do battle with an evil force or principle. There was no other force with which God needed to negotiate or contend. That creatures exist is only because God wants them to. ...The moment anything comes into being, it is the material manifestation of a divine intention that expresses how good it is for it to be. Each creature, we can say, is God's love variously made visible, tactile, auditory, fragrant, and nutritious." Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 165–166.

For similar thoughts from Luther on *creatio ex nihilo*, see Charles Cortright, "Poor Maggot-Sack that I Am': The Human Body in the Theology of Martin Luther," PhD diss., (Marquette University, 2011), 58.

⁵⁹ Catechism, 4.

were harrassed and helpless, Jesus withdrew his PTO request and went back to work serving them. He showed up, and it filled his life with a richness of experience that runs deeper than the superficiality of living for self alone.

Today, the tireless pursuit of autonomy has resulted in just such a superficial world. Talk of self-care and setting boundaries and the general inward turn that results from an obsession with mental health all center around the autonomous individual who must be on guard against any imposition by another. Relationships are viewed suspiciously and maintained on a self-serving, contractual basis. Even the determined, given relationships of immediate family fall prey to the tireless pursuit of independence. This pursuit promises to make people happy, but it fails to deliver. The autonomous life appears rich and full on the surface but is vacuous and empty below.

When God gives and gifts embodied life, he gives it to us so that we can turn our lives inside out. Martin Luther described it as living in love in neighbor.⁶⁰ This is the proper way to orient oneself bodily. The body that is given me is not for myself alone nor to do with as I please. It is given so that by it and through it I might love and serve my neighbors. Counterintuitive though it seems, giving oneself in bodily service to one's neighbor is the path that actually leads to a rich and full life and a joyful embrace of all God's gifts in creation. He has designed us for vocational embodiment.

In the home

The first and most obvious vocational layer of embodiment exists within the web of family relationships. As noted, God gives the gift of a body through the bodies of father and mother. The child is born into sheer dependency, and the providential hand of God is at work in the mother who nurses the child and the father who changes baby's diaper. Viewed vocationally, these are high and holy works. Christians are rightly concerned, therefore, with the preservation of marriage and a proper treatment of sexuality within it, which has become all the more difficult because of a technology that distances oneself from the body: contraception.

The introduction of the birth control pill marks a shift in which medicine moved from trying to restore to health to intervening in the normal function of the human body. Here again, the availability of the technology has altered everyone's mindset. Prior to contraception, sex could not be uncoupled from its procreative purpose. The ability to limit conception makes it plausible to contend that sex is

⁶⁰ Luther lays this out delightfully in the 1520 treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian*.

for recreation or pleasure. At the very least it elevates the unitive purpose of the sexual union to the foremost position.⁶¹ It switched the default position from “fertile” to “sterile.”⁶² A newly married couple now assumes that it is up to them to decide when to flip that switch to open up the potential of having a child.

When it occurs among us, standard teaching about contraception centers around method and motivation. The method is indeed important, as Christians will want to avoid any means that terminates life.⁶³ That is straightforward. The more difficult task is to dig into the reasoning and uncover the assumptions about contraception that have been absorbed from the ambient culture. It will take some work to set forth a vocational view of embodiment, impressing that the body is for living in love in neighbor. In marriage, this assumes that the default position is an openness to having children because children are gifts from God and because God gives the bodies of husband and wife to one another for this very purpose.

Legalistically declaring that contraception is off limits brings with it its own set of difficulties.⁶⁴ In my mind, the ideal would be to shift people away from a mindset in which a married couple asks, “When should we stop using contraception?” to one in which the question is, “Would there be a good reason for us to say no to a child at this point in time?” The shift is towards a default of openness to receiving the gifts God gives through the one-flesh union, with a hearty recognition that a quiver full of children is a blessing from the Lord (Ps 127:5).

Encouraging the young to pursue marriage and to desire children is essential to the teaching of the church, and such topics call for explicit, direct, and repetitive emphasis today. It is worth pointing out that God intends to enrich life through such familial vocations. A life filled with relationships like husband and wife, par-

⁶¹ This position is taken up in part in David Vandrunen, *Bioethics and the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009). Vandrunen argues that the fulfillment of the protevangelium in the birth of Christ changes the nature of child bearing for Christians and, to some degree, subordinates it from its importance prior to the incarnation.

⁶² Louise Perry describes this as the fabrication of a new kind of creature, the “temporarily sterile female.” Her take on the sexual revolution and the harm it has done to women is worth pondering, and available in her book, Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).

⁶³ Greater investigative work is probably needed as many do not understand what exactly happens with the pills that are being used.

⁶⁴ The Roman Catholic position allows for “natural” family planning, which essentially recognizes some technologies as acceptable while drawing seemingly arbitrary lines around others.

ent and child, brother and sister, is a full life, not one where a person is in danger of winding up bowling alone.⁶⁵

At work

Life is also enriched and filled by physical activity that serves the neighbor: by work. God gave mankind work that would engage them fully in mind and body even before the Fall. Jesus worked with his hands, first as the carpenter's son and then as the healer. Paul preached the gospel, but he also sewed tents. Meaning, purpose, and value are not found in idleness or indulgence but in work—another manifestation of vocational embodiment.

The nature of work is in a state of constant flux. Humans have continuously developed tools to extend their capacities and transcend their limitations. These tools bring benefits but also alter the nature of life in ways that are not necessarily or entirely benevolent.⁶⁶ There is no doubt that Americans love bigger and better and have achieved unparalleled technological achievements. The increased capacities and transcended limits have not delivered more fulfilling work for all, however. College graduates who booed talk of artificial intelligence at graduation ceremonies in the spring of 2026 reflect a mood of pessimism about the future of meaningful labor.

R. J. Snell makes a compelling argument that *acedia* is the affliction of our time, which he defines as abhorrence at what God has given to man in the world and in his life, and which he sees as expressing itself especially in the contemporary relation to work.⁶⁷ This is evident first in the drive to not have to work, either working for vacation/the weekend or pursuing the vision of retirement as freedom to do whatever one wants. People willingly pursue being idle rather than being well.⁶⁸ The goal of life for the Christian is not to have total mastery over one's schedule nor to eat, drink, and be merry, but to pour oneself out in service to oth-

⁶⁵ The title of a book by Robert Putnam published in 2000. At the same time, we will want to be sensitive to those who are contentedly single and not give the impression that they are missing out or incomplete. Being united to Christ and embracing the church as family are more than enough to fill a life to the full.

⁶⁶ I came of age in southern Minnesota and saw firsthand the emptying of the countryside and the hollowing out of the railroad towns. Large farm machinery made it possible for a single farmer to farm 5,000 or even 10,000 acres—land that once supported a large number of large families. Corn is so cheap and plentiful it can be turned into fuel, but community and careful attention to the land has grown scarce: an example of the tradeoffs brought by tools.

⁶⁷ Snell, *Acedia*, 12–13.

⁶⁸ Snell, *Acedia*, 73.

ers, to bind oneself to the needs of others and let them guide schedule and activity. Retirement need not be thought of as the time when one indulges self but rather as a vocational shift away from one role towards others that God has prepared in advance for the retiree.⁶⁹

Someone who is working faces significant challenges in finding roles that provide the embodied richness and goodness of giving oneself to love and serve the neighbor. Snell notes that the making of shabby products deforms the workers who make them.⁷⁰ It can be difficult in the modern knowledge economy to connect the work one is doing with the real benefit it brings to neighbor.

One answer to the crisis of the knowledge worker is to leave the field of mind-only work and choose a hands-on career.⁷¹ Another is to follow the advice that those who work with the mind should Sabbath with the hands.⁷² Better than either is to find the path of love and connect the giftedness of one's particular body and mind with the needs of others that can be filled. Ideally, work is received as a gift from God, who determines the times and places for every life (Acts 17:26) and uniquely equips each person in such a way that they might live the inside-out vocational life.

Farming has been called “the cultivation of better people.”⁷³ The idea is that work that is well done—in the case of farming, Edenic tending of the garden, responsible husbandry of animals, and the production of a range of necessities for bodily life—enriches the worker as well by drawing that person outside of self into the grand design of the Creator. I would like to think that the pastoral vocation offers a similarly thick experience of life and cultivation of the person. The pastor is invited to share in weeping (middle of the night calls from the suicidal) and rejoicing (invitations to graduation parties). A pastor who shows up in the body for both enjoys a breadth of life experience that is not so common in a highly special-

⁶⁹ From my vantage, those who retire well get this, and are thoughtful in shifting into roles such as caring for grandchildren, serving in the congregation, volunteering in the community, and participating in groups or clubs.

⁷⁰ Snell, *Acedia*, 44.

⁷¹ Matthew Crawford is an example of an intellectual who chose to open a motorcycle repair shop. See Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

⁷² The famous quote by Abraham Heschel: “If you work with your hands, Sabbath with your mind. If you work with your mind, Sabbath with your hands.”

⁷³ An oft-quoted line from *One Straw Revolution* by Masanobu Fukuoka.

ized and compartmentalized world, and learns firsthand that the life of vocational embodiment is particularly rich and full.

In the church

Where the Gospel goes, the Spirit calls and gathers. That gathering brings people together around Christ. The glory of the local congregation is that it is, well, local: confined to one place at a specific time so that the people who gather together there can know and be known to one another. It affords another venue where the richness of vocational embodiment is experienced and lived.

Although much could be said on this topic, three brief observations will have to suffice here. First, embrace the size and structure of our congregations, because the context allows meaningful bonds to exist between pastor and people. It does not hurt to remind the people in the pews that televangelists and online preachers cannot know them or care for them in the same way that their own pastor knows them and prays with them. Lonely and disconnected people are starving for face-to-face interaction, and anything a pastor can do to strengthen the bonds of his relationship with members is going to help. That might mean regularly visiting members at their homes, going out to lunch, or inviting people to share a meal at the pastor's house. Tear down your barns and build a bigger table.⁷⁴ Jesus knew that this is a rich and full way to live, and pastors are wise to lean into it as well.

Second, embrace the body in worship. Lutherans know how to order worship around the means of grace in such a way that those who gather have bodily roles to play: sitting, standing, singing, and so on. Remind those who tell you they didn't get anything out of the sermon that the service is about more than the transmission of information. The bodily actions assist in forming the hearts and minds of God's people. For example: standing for the reading of the Gospel indicates that Jesus keeps his promise and is present where two or three gather in his name (Matt 18:20), so we stand because he is present in the room with us. It may

⁷⁴ The entire poem by Joshua Luke Smith, *Sunflowers in Babylon*, is well worth listening to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsiB9uCMZ68>.

even be a good time to teach people to make the sign of the cross in remembrance of Holy Baptism.⁷⁵

Third, do not neglect the ministerial cause of salvation. The Lord has given pastors the vocational embodiment of being the voice and hands that bring the means of grace to his people. I do not think that we are in any real danger of being replaced by robot priests, but we should be prepared to explain why our vocation is not replaceable by machine.⁷⁶

Chatbot confessionals, likewise, cannot genuinely satisfy because there is no shared humanity or faith. The means God gave, such as preaching, absolving, baptizing, and distributing, are embodied means that flow from the hands of one to another. That rich embodiment is the way it is meant to work.

Living for self is a dead end. Autonomy generates emptiness. Vocational embodiment, on the other hand, leads to a flourishing life. God gave you a body so that, with it, you could love and serve your neighbor. As you do, you manifest the glory of God and you participate in the richness of all that he made—and all that he made you for.

When from the dust of death I rise

I believe in the resurrection *of the body* is a teaching so strong and rich in embodiment that it caused the Athenians to sneer (Acts 17:32). They could not imagine that anyone would want material existence given back to them, for they rightly understood that the body remains a specific locus where suffering and weakness collect.

⁷⁵ “People often end up at my Anglican Church when they are no longer sure how to pray. Suffering, aridity, or simply the slog of normal life has brought them to a place where emotional or intellectual ardor alone is not enough to sustain them. They don’t have the energy to conjure up a particular internal experience in their Sunday worship service. But they want to continue to follow Jesus. They know they cannot command their hearts, but they can command their arms, and they would like to be told what to do with them. They would like to be taught how to worship with their bodies. In the liturgy, we make the sign of the cross, we lift up our hands to receive a blessing, we pass the peace, we receive Communion, we pray prayers that we’ve been given. However I may feel about prayer on any given Sunday, I kneel. I bend my knees. And if my heart will not submit to God, my body leads the way.” Tish Harrison Warren, *What Grows in Weary Lands* (New York: Convergent, 2026), 34–35.

⁷⁶ For amusing and disturbing examples, see Paul Kingsnorth’s blog post “Neon God” at <https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/the-neon-god>. It is worth reasoning through test cases. For example, a robot perform the motions of a baptism, including audibly projecting the proper trinitarian formula. Lacking personhood means that the words the robot would “speak” would be conjured by sophisticated statistics. That makes the comparison in this instance not to Donatism (Does the unbelief of the officiant invalidate the sacrament?); it is more akin to an LDS baptism, which is not valid even if it uses the trinitarian formula because the words have been vested with different meaning.

Experiencing the weakness of the body is especially frustrating for those who maintain a Nestorian anthropology that draws a hard distinction between soul and body, since it hinders the expression of oneself and stands as a reminder of how little control one can actually maintain over life. Add to that the ease that is expected in modern life, and the result is brittleness and impatience in the face of suffering. Bodily ailments do not often come with quick, easy resolutions, so avoiding suffering in the first place is a major goal for many people.⁷⁷ More than a few would prefer to kill the body rather than be subject to a prolonged decline. Like the Athenians, those who advocate medical assistance in dying could hardly be expected to do anything but sneer at the thought of the body being given back to them.

Jesus took on a body that was subject to the effects of sin, and by his bodily suffering brought about the redemption of the world. This transforms the Christian view of suffering. Since it is rooted in sin, Christians do not anticipate that life in this world will be free from pain, weakness, or death. Rather, they recognize that suffering now is something that must be endured until the last enemy is destroyed and glory is revealed in the resurrection. Suffering can be endured, because it has been brought into God's redemptive purposes. Through suffering, God teaches his people to trust in him, await his salvation with patience, develop the character that proceeds from patient endurance, and live in hope of the resurrection (Rom 5:3–4).

If the body is the specific locus where much suffering and weakness collect, then it must also be the place where God accomplishes much of his work. In God's economy, bodily suffering produces spiritual fruit.

Bodily mortification of the flesh

Because it is common to all, illness stands out as a particular affliction of the body that has the potential to bring profound spiritual benefit. Every sickness is a reminder of mortality, that this body is still beset by sin's effects and will not be per-

⁷⁷ Frustratingly, controlling the experience of pain remains an elusive goal. The tools at our disposal to deal with pain are blunt, often handing us two less-than-ideal options, either to have to endure the pain in a sound mind that will be able to recognize and experience it in all its severity or to relieve the pain by dulling the mind or even temporarily removing consciousness.

fectly whole until Jesus returns.⁷⁸ Likewise, every recovery from illness points to the redemptive work of Christ that has undone sin and all its effects. A vocational thought fits in here as well: Jesus heals the body, and often he does so mediately through the skill of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and the like.

In order to gain such benefit from illness, one must know how to receive and experience it.⁷⁹ The church has the perspective of caring for the whole person that is often lacking in the medical professions. It can be useful to remind people that illness is generally evil and bad, but it is not the greatest evil that could beset a person—that would be to be cut off from God. Likewise, health is something that is generally good and desirable, but it is not the ultimate good—that is to be united to God, redeemed in Christ. Viewing suffering in this way teaches one to ask God for the higher gift, to give what will be spiritually best, and not only for quick bodily healing.⁸⁰

It should be obvious that it is best to carry out such instruction when a person is well. The sickbed is not the time for lengthy lectures or berating speeches. Pastoral sensitivity to the difficulty of suffering calls for consolation, prayer, and the peace of Christ's gifts in Word and sacrament, the means by which patients are made to patiently endure.

The experience of sickness is bodily mortification of the flesh that is imposed upon us outside of our control. We do not choose to come down with a disease. There is room within the theology of the body to also consider the spiritual benefit of personally chosen and imposed bodily mortification of the flesh, the prime example of which is the practice of fasting.

⁷⁸ "Sickness—like sleep, and like night itself—is another token of our mortality. The church has long spoken about sickness as 'death's handmaid,' a practice drill for our inevitable decay. It is an unwanted reminder, however large or small, of our creaturely limits, our susceptibility to harm, our future undoing." Tish Harrison Warren, *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2021), 94.

⁷⁹ "We come to know God when our ability to perform, to measure up, to achieve, fails us. Sickness dares us to embrace our belovedness, precisely because it undoes any illusion we have of our own invincibility and merit." Warren, *Prayer*, 96.

See also Jean-Claude Larchet, *The Theology of Illness*, tr. John and Michael Breck (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

⁸⁰ It is proper to pray for healing. Yet it raises alarms in my mind that nearly all of the prayer requests that I receive center on illness. How come no one asks me to pray that they might defeat temptation or grow in godliness and holiness?

The distortion of ascetic practices in the western church resulted in the Reformation-era criticism of them.⁸¹ Lutherans have been hesitant to encourage fasting because it has been perceived as “too Catholic” or something that is done to merit God’s favor. Nevertheless, Jesus did not say “if” but “when,” as in, “when you fast ...” (Matt 6:16), and his concern seemed to be that those who were fasting were seeking to earn favor before men, not God. Likewise, a careful reading of the Lutheran Confessions will note that one of their chief concerns with fasting was that consciences were being bound by fasts imposed from above under threat of divine penalty.⁸²

It is worth thinking through the reasons for fasting that do not fall into the category of currying divine favor. Freely choosing to fast can reveal coping mechanisms, the little idolatries of the heart that are wrapped up in a morning cup of coffee, or looking forward to the daily lunchbreak, or an afterhours cocktail, or creature comforts of this sort, none of which are sinful and bad in themselves, but which, nevertheless, can slowly chip away at storing up treasures in places where moth and rust cannot destroy.

Fasting is also a way to develop self-control, and thus break the power of sin. The church fathers thought that mastering the stomach was a step on the road to mastering the sex drive, and there is something to that. The idea is to practice on the more attainable goal in order to build up strength for the more difficult one. Preaching against fornication, pornography, and masturbation can be accompanied by encouragement to fasting as a way in which to engage the body in the fight against temptation.

But the best reason to fast is that Jesus himself fasted. Therefore, when we fast, we enter into the life of Christ. We empty ourselves to feel our deep need. We try—and fail—to put sin out of our lives, and so we learn anew what it means that we cannot save ourselves. Our emptiness, our inabilities, our lack all serve to point us to the One who truly can and does meet our every need, the One who alone can satisfy us in every way, the One who gave his life as satisfaction for

⁸¹ “It must be admitted that, by allowing distorted forms of ascetism and moralism to develop in its midst, Western Christianity bears a heavy responsibility for the depreciation and even rejection of the body that our culture has known in the past and, as a consequence, for the backlash to which this has given rise.” Larchet, *Theology of the Body*, 10–11.

⁸² AC XXVI is especially concerned with how the Gospel can be obscured by imagining that distinctions of foods can merit divine favor. AC XXVIII notes the binding of consciences when rules are imposed by bishops.

ours. Fasting teaches us that we do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

God employs bodily suffering to mortify the flesh. To know that God is at work to bring about spiritual blessings through what we suffer does not provide immediate alleviation of the pain, but it does give context in which patience, endurance, character, and hope can, by the Spirit's aid, grow and flourish.

Care of the dead

Death brings the frailty of mortal flesh and blood front-and-center, where it is impossible for it to be ignored. The limits, dependencies, and susceptibilities of the body that have been sensed and experienced long before draw to a culmination when the last breath is taken. Our bodies are truly dust, and, inevitably, to dust they shall return.

How the body is treated when someone dies communicates what someone believes about life, death, and the resurrection. We know, instinctively, that there is something deeply wrong about desecrating a dead body. "It is never 'just body,' not even when the soul has ceased to animate it."⁸³ Christians treat the bodies of those who have died with reverence, honoring the body as the work of the Creator who gave it, as the place of personal presence, as a temple of the Holy Spirit, and as the seed that will be sown into the earth in the sure hope that it will spring to life at the resurrection.

This means, first of all, that the body of the deceased belongs at the funeral. The goal of a funeral is not to therapeutically seek closure nor to celebrate a life.⁸⁴ Think of a funeral rather as walking the last mile with a saint and handing back to the Lord the person he gave to us in this life.⁸⁵ In so doing, we call to mind that even now we are gathered with all the dead in Christ into one holy Christian

⁸³ Gilbert Meilaender, "Broken Bodies Redeemed," <https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=20-01-030-f>.

⁸⁴ "Celebrations of life are as futile as they are strange—for if you set out to underline the devastation wrought by a death, you could hardly do better than to recollect the joy and laughter the deceased brought to the lives of others. Bankruptcy is not made more bearable by memories of all the money once enjoyed and now lost." Trueman, *Desecration*, 170.

⁸⁵ Long, *Accompany Them*, 72. I know that the soul is with Jesus in paradise at the time of death. But the body still has to travel to its final resting place, and for us that body remains the place of personal presence: "Dad's buried over there, under that tree." Thomas Long helped me appreciate why it feels proper and correct to hold the funeral in the church by observing that, just as the faithful member came to church week in and week out, so at the time of death we bring him or her to church one last time.

church, and we look forward to the joyous reunion that will take place on the Last Day. If this is what the funeral is meant to accomplish, then the saint needs to be there for the journey.

The disposition of the body also matters, for it communicates what one believes about the body and its future. Historically, Christians have preferred—not commanded, but preferred—burial in the ground over cremation.⁸⁶ Burial has been favored first of all because God’s “very good” was spoken over the body at creation. The practice of burning the body originated, and still persists, among belief systems that consider the material world to be evil. Cremation was viewed as a way to set the spirit free from the encumbrance and limitation of the body.

The symbols and pictures of death that are used in the Scriptures have also led Christians to favor burial.⁸⁷ Jesus calls death a “sleep,” and it is a better witness to the promise of the resurrection to lay the “sleeping” body to rest than it is to burn and then grind the remaining bits of bones and teeth into “ashes.”⁸⁸ Likewise, Paul refers to death as sowing a seed in the ground, another picture that is better captured in burial than in burning.

Paul also tells us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. The body is more than a mere container for the soul; it is the place of God’s dwelling, and the use of the body belongs not to us but to him. We are to use our bodies to display God’s glory, and Christians have long felt that the intentional destruction of a body does not communicate this very well.

Among Christians, the move towards cremation seems to be driven primarily by considerations of cost and convenience. Cremation is thought to be cheaper than burial, and eases logistics like when the funeral will be held.⁸⁹ Gently leading

⁸⁶ Since we are not always in control over what happens to the bodies of the deceased, it is a comfort to conscience that the Lord has not given us a command about what to do with the body after death. In the majority of cases, however, we do have to make a decision of what to do with the body of a loved one who has died.

⁸⁷ In Scripture, there are many examples of burials, but the few references to burning tend to be negative: Achan, for example, is punished not only by stoning but also by cremation. Hell is described as a place of destruction by fire.

⁸⁸ They are not ashes. If you listen carefully to funeral directors, they say “remains” or “cremains.”

⁸⁹ The church need not be beholden to the funeral-industrial complex. Burial does not require embalming or a very expensive casket, and a simple burial may not be as expensive as one would think. See Kent Burrenson and Beth Hoeltke, *Lay Me in God’s Good Earth: A Christian Approach to Death and Burial* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2024).

people to see that there are greater considerations to mind, such as giving a clear testimony to the resurrection of the body and leaving the return to dust in God's hands, can help to reclaim a preference for burial that may very well be increasingly noticeable in the world.⁹⁰

Finally, we remember our dead and assert the meaning and value of a person's life by situating them in graves or resting places. It is wise to choose a permanent location as a resting place for the body or cremated remains and to mark that spot in such a way that those who come after will be able to find it. Memory is deeply tied to location. A physical spot on this earth provides firmer grounding in the comfort of knowing that a loved one is not dead and gone forever, but is resting in anticipation of being awakened on the Last Day.

Spreading, dividing, or keeping ashes can give a number of poor impressions, and also serves to weaken the ties that keep memory alive. For those who are going to be cremated, a good rule of thumb would be to treat the cremated remains in the same way in which a body would be treated.

Even though it will only take a few generations before memory fades to names and dates, we have the great comfort that the Lord never forgets. Our eternal future does not depend upon perfect disposition of the body or faithful remembrance by the living, but upon the unfailing faithfulness of God. On the Last Day Christ will remember. He will call us by name, and he will have no trouble finding us, wherever our bodies ultimately wind up.

Glorified embodiment

The only life we know is embodied. The only way we experience the world is embodied. These bodies of ours are wondrous gifts from the Creator. Every time you savor the smell of coffee or feel gentle autumn sunshine on your face or hear the voice of your beloved or drift into peaceful sleep, you have reason to stand in awe and wonder at your embodiment. God made you from dust. That is remarkable handiwork indeed.

In divine wisdom, our bodies are also subject to the doom that fell in Eden. Much of what we know of life and experience in the world is the hindrance, suffering,

⁹⁰ A man I met at a street festival in the summer of 2026 told me of his daughter-in-law's father, a Christian pastor in Thailand. When he visited the pastor's house, he was shocked to find that the living room was lined with caskets. He explained to me that, since cremation is nearly universal in Thailand, it was hard to get caskets for Christian burials. Thus the reason why the pastor bought them in bulk and maintained a supply for his congregation.

and frustration of bodies that are not as they should be. Every illness, injury, hunger or thirst you experience is a bodily reminder that something has gone terribly wrong. It cries out for something to be done, for salvation. To devise ways on our own to transcend these limitations or remove these problems it to treat symptoms without being able to remove the cause. Removing the cause requires more than what we could come up with on our own. It required Christ to come and join himself to us, sharing in our dusty embodiment, bearing our sins, suffering, dying, and rising again.

God reaches out to join our dust to the dust of Christ. The glorious baptismal reality of Romans 6 declares that we have already been joined to Jesus in his death to sin and resurrection to new life. Having been co-crucified with Christ, we co-live with him and will, one day, join him in the resurrection of the body to the new and glorified existence where sin and its consequences will be utterly and entirely removed. All of which is given to us to be received bodily, through the washing of water over the brow, combined with that Word which has such power it called the universe into existence. A pastor's hands should tremble a bit at the feel of water in the fingers at the font. Marvelous, tomb-rending work is taking place.

What our bodies will be like hereafter is unknowable, but it will be good. Our future is a glorified embodiment where we will experience richness and fullness of life in the body that will inspire everlasting praise. This dust, in Christ, is headed for eternity.

RECAPITULATION

A theology of the body in light on the incarnation and resurrection could be summed up in a set of contrasting statements:

1. In contrast to thinking of the body as a product of nature, Christians confess that the body is created and given by God and therefore belongs to him.
2. In contrast to viewing material embodiment as evil, Christians affirm the goodness of creation and matter while acknowledging its corruption by sin.
3. In contrast to reducing the body to a rearrangeable assembly of parts owned by a mind, Christians affirm the unity of the person and the integrity of a body designed and gifted by God.
4. In contrast to finding every limitation of the body to be problematic, Christians respect divine limits inherent in God's creation of the body and work within the bounds of God-given dominion.
5. In contrast to the drive to bodily autonomy and self-sufficiency, Christians embrace the dependence required by the body as essential for flourishing in God's world.
6. In contrast to instrumentalizing the body for self-expression, Christians instrumentalize the body for vocational service to others.
7. In contrast to avoiding pain at all costs, Christians endure suffering with patience, endurance, and hope.
8. In contrast to seeing the body as dust that will disappear, Christians believe that the body of dust will be raised to everlasting life in the resurrection.

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