

A Reaction to Rev. Dr. Philip Moldenhauer's "Christ's Dust: The Body in Light of the Incarnation and Resurrection"

In a joke that perhaps only I find amusing, at past symposiums I have wondered aloud if maybe this time, one of the reactions to the essays could be delivered as a *physical* reaction, a *visceral* reaction, rather than a written one. The reactor could perform a pantomime of sorts alongside the essay's delivery, punctuated by the occasional "Hmm" with thumb and forefinger on chin or "Yeah!" accompanied by a fist pump. Today's second essay would provide the perfect excuse for producing such an embodied reaction. However, I have decided to spare you that kind of experience and to provide the usual, post-essay, verbal reaction instead.

Really, we don't need to perform a pantomime. After all, isn't what we are doing here today already a heightened embodied experience, with both cerebral and visceral aspects? Our essayist speaks and each of us reacts, with words expressed aloud to our neighbor, notes jotted down on paper, and thoughts that run through our heads. Minds interact with brain and voice and pen. Spoken words edify our souls. In play, too, are embodied emotions, whether in the form of the quick smile and short snort of air that accompany the satisfaction of gaining new insight or in the form of sweet tears (that welled up at least in my eyes) as we received assurance from our essayist that even the disembodiment of death has been sanctified and undone in our Lord Jesus.

I hear our essayist's problem statement as this: "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. The body is thought to be a thing that one has and that one needs to figure out what to do with" (5)—and, additionally, that the church has accommodated if not adopted this philosophy (7). His answer? "I contend that a Lutheran theology of the body begins with the human body of the incarnate Logos. . . . We may be only dust, but we are Christ's dust. In Christ we see it plainly: this dust can, by the power of God, rise from death to embodied life that will never end" (7–8).

Dr. Moldenhauer's essay is replete with stunning observations and turns of phrase. From the first part, His Glorious Embodiment, I'll list just a few that stood out to me: "the potter threw himself as clay upon the wheel" (10); "the incarnation is God's great 'yes' to what he made" (10); "these were not immaterial trials" (12); "Christ's resurrection . . . shows that there is continuity in the raising of the dead" (16); "the resurrection entails a qualitative change and not merely a quantitative extension of existence" (17); "the resurrection is God's exclamation point over our bodies" (18). I am resolved to include communion in the celebration of Ascension (18).

In part two, Our Glorified Embodiment, our essayist offers practical applications in terms of our stewardship of a body that is given and gifted (19–27), our employment of a body that is embodied for vocation (27–33), our care for a body that is subject to weakness and death (33–39), and the vindication of our body that in Christ is destined for glory (39–40). I gained personal

benefit from each one of his many insights and well-reasoned applications—from new ways to view illness and recovery (e.g., “recovery from illness points to the redemptive work of Christ that has undone sin and all its effects” [35]) to an articulation of reasons for my kids not to get tattoos (e.g., 24). I especially appreciate Pastor Moldenhauer’s approach, one of evangelical instruction and admonition that identifies and addresses real issues facing Christians (and all of society) today. I would guess that our essayist may have strong opinions on some matters, but he approaches them not with a hint of legalism but with the belief that truth informs practice.

What follow are four musings on embodiment as applied to the life of the church.

In reading this essay for the first time, I did not know whether we would be heading into the territory of “talking about AI.” AI’s promise of disembodied consciousness (unconsciousness?) is certainly one elephant in the room today. I believe our essayist has served us well, addressing the much larger question of vocational embodiment in such a way that we are teed up to respond to the great variety of questions that may arise in our modern digital age.

For example, our essayist raises the possibility of robot priests and chatbot confessionals, concluding that one explanation for why these are poor replacements is that “rich embodiment is the way it is meant to work” (33). I fully agree. I recall a dogmatics discussion from student days about whether a baptism performed by a robot would be valid. You can make an argument for it; word and water are there. You can also say, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” It would be unclear, even absurd, to baptize in this way when Christ has instructed humans to baptize.

Our essayist suggests the reign of science as a leading factor in the desire to unnaturally modify the body (20–24), and continual development of tools and technology as one driver of acedia, “the affliction of our time” (30). I wonder to what extent the particular tool of the *image* has played in both. From still water to mirrors ancient and modern to the photograph to the digital image, we are obsessed with our image of self—and are increasingly able to be obsessed. Do we teach and apply commandment 1.5, “You shall not make for yourself an image . . .”?

Finally, I appreciated the many issues discussed regarding the givenness and giftedness of the body through God’s work of creation and his gift of procreation. What a “wondrous activity of God” this is, as through us he “brings into being a life that will never end” (19–20)! And what a responsibility, when we hear how God punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him, but shows love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. Many thanks to our essayist for showing how Christ in his body has redeemed these bodies of dust so that we, along with the generations that came before and however many generations come after, may live with him in God’s eternal love!

For discussion: (1) While our people may not desire robot priests, what dangers arising from AI do we see looming? (2) To what extent do you see a reactionary movement growing—inside or outside the church—in the face of transhumanist tendencies in our culture?

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