The Resurrection of the Flesh

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Christian theology has consistently failed by denigrating creation. Wendell Berry (1934–) accurately reports the popular perception of the Christian faith when he "often laments that Christianity has contributed to rather than hindered the contemporary flight from creatureliness."[1] While he is certainly correct that this is a contemporary problem, its roots in Christian theology are deep. Viewing the body, marriage, and normal social relationships negatively dates back to the early church. The Lutheran tradition provides the brightest ray of hope in this Christian theological darkness.

Perhaps the problem goes back to the translation of the Christian message from its native Aramaic into Greek, which was most effective for the mission to the gentiles. As Paul contended against the super apostles who were trying to convince his churches that circumcision was necessary, he found the distinction between the spirit (πνεῦμα) and the flesh (σὰρξ) to be quite useful (Gal 3:3). Circumcision, which Paul identified as a matter of the law, was an actual slicing of flesh. He opposed such fleshliness with the Holy Spirit, who gave himself to the Galatians by faith alone in the good news of Christ alone (Gal 3:2).

The Christian tradition has generally misunderstood Paul's distinction. He was distinguishing law, flesh, works, and sin on the one hand from spirit, gospel, faith, and righteousness on the other. Instead, many Christian theologians have used Paul's spirit versus flesh distinction anthropologically, dividing human beings into a higher or better part or parts over against the lesser lower part, namely the flesh. Depending on the theologian and which Greek philosopher he was relying on,[2] the higher part was defined as the soul (ψυχή), the mind (νοῦς), the spirit (πνεῦμα), or a combination of the former. The quest for Christian righteousness then became the attempt to discipline the flesh and avoid its temptations while the higher aspect(s) of human nature could give God his due.

Martin Luther (1483–1546), a rare exception in the history of Christian theology, instead understood that according to Paul's distinction between spirit and flesh, "the whole man is flesh."[3] Luther continued, "we know that in the whole human race are included body and soul with all their powers and works, all virtues and

vices, all wisdom and folly, all righteousness and unrighteousness. They are all flesh (*carnem*)."[4] For Luther, the spirit aspect of Paul's spirit versus flesh distinction was not the spirit, soul, or a higher aspect of human nature, but instead, the Holy Spirit who delivered Christ for sinners from outside of themselves in life-giving words.

However useful Paul's distinction was against the super apostles, and however well a few Christian theologians have understood it, thankfully, the word "flesh" is also used very positively in one of the most important verses in the New Testament. John the Evangelist describes the eternity and divinity of God's Son, his Word, and then proclaims, "the word became flesh (σάρξ), and dwelt among us." Christ has come down from heaven above in order to redeem human being, including the very flesh. Indeed, John emphasizes that there is nothing inherently sinful about created flesh. He does not claim that the Word became "human," but he claims that the Word of God became "flesh."

Christ fully assumed flesh but without sin. This proves that the "fleshiness" of humanity was not inherently sinful. Flesh became the opposite of spirit not because it was created material but because human creatures lost their faith in the living God (Genesis 3). As Genesis relates the story, Adam and Eve were not content to be flesh; they desired "to be like God."

John wrote his Gospel's famous prologue as a polemic against Cerinthus (fl. second half of the first century AD) an early Christian Gnostic. According to Irenaeus of Lyon (c.130–c.202) Cerinthus taught that the true God did not create the world. John countered Cerinthus' teaching with the double claim that Christ was the Word through whom the whole world was created and that this God Himself became a creature, specifically a bearer of human flesh.

The Apostles Creed also attacked Gnosticism. Although it did not assume its final form until the fifth century, much of its content had been composed during the second century at the height of the battle against Gnosticism. The Nicene Creed's (325/381) "resurrection of the dead (νεκρῶν)," was generally preferred in the East after the earliest centuries, perhaps because it was often used in scripture itself. The phrase "resurrection of the flesh" was probably first used by Ignatius of Antioch, who died sometime in the first half of the second century. He perhaps based this phrase on Luke 24:39, the only literal biblical connection between resurrection and flesh, where the resurrected Christ says, "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch and see; for a ghost does not have flesh (σάρκα) and bones as you see that I have."[5]

The Old Roman Creed, from around the middle of the second century, confessed the "resurrection of the flesh" in both its Latin (*carnis resurrectionem*) and Greek (σαρκὸς ἀνάστασιν) forms.[6] Tertullian also (c.155–c.220) used the phrase *resurrec-*

tionem carnis.[7] The Old Roman Creed eventually evolved into the Apostles Creed (Fifth Century), which entered Latin liturgies in the eighth century and maintained "the resurrection of the flesh."

This language was lost in many Western churches during the Reformation. Martin Luther thought that the Creed's reference to "flesh (German: Fleisch)" would only make people think of the butcher (Metzger), and he changed the "resurrection of the flesh" to the "resurrection of the body (Leib)."[8] Luther's enemy, King Henry VIII of England, without explanation, similarly changed the "resurrection of the flesh" into the "resurrection of the body."[9] Henry's change was ultimately more consequential than Luther's for English-speaking Lutherans, as American English-language hymnals have adopted a great deal of verbiage from England's *Book of Common Prayer*, which inherited "the resurrection of the body" when the Apostles Creed was included for the first time in the 1549 version in the confirmation service.[10]

Why was the term "resurrection of the flesh" adopted and what might we have lost when it was discarded from the Apostles Creed? Origen (c. 185-c. 253) provides an interesting case study. Origen and his spiritualizing school accepted the resurrection of the body, but this did not necessarily mean that he confessed the orthodox Christian faith in the resurrection of the body. For example, Origen held that "there are celestial bodies…even air, according to its nature, is called body."[11] The word "body" did not necessarily ensure orthodoxy.

There is no evidence that the language of "resurrection of the flesh" was used against Origen. Instead, the early forms of what became the Apostles Creed were composed during the church's struggle against Gnosticism. Gnostics were generally even more slippery than Origen when it came to bodies or matters of creation. For Gnostics, salvation was the salvation of the soul through its separation from the physical human body. Perhaps they could have justified faith in "the resurrection of the body" along the lines of Origen's statement, but "the resurrection of the flesh" was simply the antithesis of Gnostic faith. The confession of "the resurrection of the flesh" separated the catholic church from Gnostic interlopers.

Considering that America is inherently Gnostic,[12] teaching the resurrection of the flesh should be helpful in the current context. Gnosticism has recently achieved such heights that human beings have been told that they (their souls) were born in the wrong body and that their bodies need to be carved up for the sake of their mental health. This even becomes scientific medical dogma in Western nations. Here "the mind-body problem" has been taken to a new level.

Theologians have claimed an inherent tension between St. Paul's proclamation that the resurrected body will be a spiritual body on the one hand and the ancient church's and medieval Western church's claim of "the resurrection of the flesh,"

possibly including the Gospel of Luke, on the other.[13] However, flesh in the sense of John 1:14 and Luke 24:39 is not inherently opposed to the Spirit of God. Therefore, the transformed spiritual body of the resurrection can have a new type of flesh.

Nor should slippery slope arguments be allowed to scare the church away from "the resurrection of the flesh" by means of Augustine's (354–430) overly cellular view of the resurrection, that every particle of the body will be reassembled in the resurrection.[14] Claiming "the resurrection of the flesh" does not necessarily lead to such a view, which can simply be denied without giving up the greater claim.

Returning to Luther, even though he removed the word "flesh" from the Apostles Creed, he made the Christian church a much fleshlier place in the positive John 1:14 sense. Before the Reformation, the ideal Christian was celibate and removed from his or her biological family in a monastery, often engaged in extreme disciplines against the flesh. Only the celibate had vocations, callings from God. Luther instead made marriage the primary location of Christian vocation. And much like the early church cursing the Gnostics by confessing faith in "the resurrection of the flesh," Luther made sure everyone understood his point by claiming that God was pleased with parents washing diapers.[15]

All other Evangelicals, soon to be Protestants, followed Luther in his denunciation of monasticism and elevation of the estate of marriage. However, the non-Lutheran Protestants all had concerns about the connection between created bread and wine and Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. Most of the reformers had been humanists before the Reformation, and humanism was infused with neoplatonic philosophy. While Neoplatonism did not inherently have as negative of a view of material things as did Gnosticism, it had been part of the mixture in the early church that necessitated the profession of "the resurrection of the flesh."

For Neoplatonism, differentiation from the eternal "One" was the problem and returning to it was a sort of "salvation." This caused inherent tensions with the multiplicity of creation as early theologians attempted to Christianize Neoplatonism. In its pure form, it certainly did not believe in a resurrection of the body, as it saw death as the soul's escape from the body. Protestants highly influenced by late medieval Neoplatonism tended to have difficulties accepting the church's historic teaching that the communion elements were actually Christ's body and blood. Holy communion should be a spiritual communion, which they understood as inherently opposed to an oral and bodily communion.

On the other hand, Luther's doctrine of the real presence, which he saw as inherently connected to the early church's Christology and understanding of "the Word became flesh," arguably had a more positive view of creation than the Ro-

man church's Transubstantiation. According to Transubstantiation, the host could only become Christ's body by ceasing to be bread in everything but appearance. Luther's teaching of Christ's real presence allowed the bread, as bread, to bear the very body of Christ.

In conclusion, the essence of "the mind-body problem" is that everyone likes the mind and dislikes the body.[16] Luther's teaching of the incarnation and the real presence in the Lord's Supper provide the proper glory to Christ, body and all. His teaching on vocation, which comes from the freedom of (justification by) faith in Christ, allows Christians to view the world as God's good creation. Luther made human life in the biological family the center of Christian vocation in God's good creation.

In an era in which Gnostic presuppositions about human beings are ascendant, and in which these presuppositions are having catastrophic effects on human bodies, the church would do well to reemphasize the original version of the Apostles Creed and its resurrection of the flesh. The Lutheran theological tradition provides the strongest bulwark against Neoplatonism and negative views of creation and the body that have always played a significant role in the larger Christian tradition. The Lutheran teaching on the sacraments denies that the spiritual and the created are somehow antithetical.

The human body is a special aspect of creation as human beings have become sinners and the body will pay for this sin with death (Rom 6:23). However, those who trust in Christ can look forward to the resurrection of the body. The resurrected body will be a spiritual body (1 Cor 15), but a spiritual body is very much a body, a body of spiritual flesh (Luke 24:39).

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Notes

1. William G. Fredstrom, "Wendell Berry and Martin Luther on Creatureliness in a Technological Age," *Lutheran Quarterly* 39:1 (Spring 2024): 1-20, 2.
2. No doubt the Hebrews also had thoughts on these matters. Daniel Austin Napier's discussion of the "parts" of a human being in the Bible is thought provoking. However, his distinctions are too clean, do not make room for the plurality of texts within the Bible, and are too influenced by modern phenomenology and psychology. Daniel Austin Napier, *Soul Whisperer: Jesus' Way among the Philosophers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), 17-28. For a better analysis of the biblical concept of the soul, see Oswald Bayer, "The Soul as Answer," trans. Nicholas Hopman, *Lutheran Quarterly* 33:4 (Winter 2019): 399-412.

3. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 273.

4. Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Schriften*], 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 18:742.8; Rupp and Watson, *Luther*, 273.

5. George Robert Wynne, "The Resurrection of the Body," *The Irish Church Quarterly* 2, no. 5 (Jan. 1909): 27-41, 29.

6. Wynne, "Resurrection," 28.

7. Wynne, "Resurrection," 28.

8. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 439. Lutherans did not immediately or necessarily follow Luther's preference for "Leib." See Wynne, "Resurrection," 36.

9. Henry VII, *The Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for Any Christian Man* (London: Thomas Barthelet, 1543), Gii(v). It is an oversimplification to say that Henry changed the confession from "flesh" to "body." See Wynne, "Resurrection," 35-36, 38. However, his book is the source for the subsequent dominance of "body," where before the two terms were roughly used equally before, with various forms of *carne* and "flesh" the more ancient terms in England.

10. Wynne, "Resurrection," 39.

11. Translated by Wynne, "Resurrection," 31.

12. See, e.g., Peter M. Burfeind, *Gnostic America: A Reading of Contemporary American Culture and Religion According to Christianity's Oldest Heresy* (Union City, MI: Pax Domini Press, 2014).

13. E.g., Robert M. Grant, "The Resurrection of the Body," *The Journal of Religion* 28, no. 2 (April 1948): 120-130, 124; Wynne, "Resurrection," 31.

14. See Wynne, "Resurrection," 34.

15. E.g., *On the Estate of Marriage* (1522), LW 45:40.

16. This is true for Christian theology. There are many body idolaters (e.g., Romans 1) who prefer the body to the mind, but this is generally a case of open sin rather than bad theology. The sin of bad theology seems to always side with the mind or whatever is allegedly the better part of human beings over against the body.