

Perspectives



In the Body

IT'S THE NOTION THAT IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN "IN THE BODY" THAT INTRIGUES ME: "I know a person in Christ," wrote Paul, "who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (2 Cor 12:2-4).

The seer of Revelation was "in the spirit" (Rev 1:10) when he had his vision of Christ, but Paul claims that he, Paul, just may have been in the body. I hope so. The claim or desire to escape the body into spiritual experience or heavenly bliss is not surprising, but to be caught up to paradise "in the body" is both surprising and, I think, quite wonderful. It's humans God made, and it's humans God's after—and humans come with bodies.

Not so in the Greek myth. There, in that quintessential expression of body/soul dualism, the human "understands himself as the *same* as his 'soul' and 'other' than his 'body.'"¹ When Christianity moved into the Greek philosophical world, that unhappy dualism took root quickly, for it seemed to many to express the same thing as Paul's distinction between the "flesh" and the "spirit" and to recognize rightly that "I" am something more than a material thing. But they got Paul wrong, I think. To be sure, being in the body is a place of groaning, which makes him long to be "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8), but it is "in your body" that you glorify God (1 Cor 6:20). A beaten and broken man like Paul can certainly lament the frailty of the body, but no one who knows the great mystery of "sharing in the body of Christ" (1 Cor 10:16) can finally despise the body. For Paul, it is not at last the soul that "puts on immortality," but the body (1 Cor 15:54). And the body will forever provide cause for wonder, "for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal 6:17). Indeed, we carry "in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). The thorn in the flesh, this most troublesome experience of the body, far from something to be jettisoned, is that which allows Paul to understand firsthand the theology of the cross, that God's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).²

Now, as one gets older it becomes ever more painfully clear that (to rewrite Wordsworth) "the body is too much with us," but, still, the goal is not to escape the

¹Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967) 279.

²See Klaus Seybold and Ulrich Mueller, *Sickness and Healing*, trans. Douglas Stott (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) 178.

body but to redeem it. Here, Christian faith parts company with many of the offerings being made available out there in the marketplace of spirituality. It will never succumb to mere materialism, but neither will it ever stop celebrating the material: in the first place, because the body is God's good and glorious creation; in the second, because it is the place of God's surprising and incredible incarnation.

True, we can abuse our bodies and, perhaps worse, the neighbor's. True, when our present culture confuses body-image with self-image, it does great damage. True, our bodies betray us in a thousand ways. But things like abuse, eating disorders, and pornography—things of the body—are certainly much more “soul” problems than body problems. I am reminded daily, in the body personal and the body politic, of the profound “not-yet-ness” of the body; but the problem with the escape into the nonmaterial is the assumption that there is a “paradise,” accessible now, where there is no “not-yet-ness” of the soul. What would that be—that thing no longer subject to the dynamic interaction of soul and mind and spirit and body that marks created life? Surely not human. And surely not me.

Good news: God *did* make little green apples, and big red ones, too; and the crunch when you bite into one joins the noisy chorus of creation's praise of God. God made trees because he found them beautiful (Gen 2:9), wine to gladden the human heart (Ps 104:15), and kisses that are even sweeter (Song 4:10; 7:9). God gives us bodies, because God likes stuff. Loves it in fact, so much so that the word became flesh and dwelt among us—giving us the body of Christ to touch and to taste, and calling us to himself finally “in the body.” I will have to wait to find out what a “resurrection body” feels like, but I'm quite sure there will be feeling involved.

My call in the meantime? Glorify God in the body—that is, not only in words, but in everything I do, from kneading dough to satisfying need. My daughter the liturgical dancer can do more with her body than I ever dreamed of, much to the chagrin of those who want to maintain the old body/soul dualism, at least in church. Paul himself might be shocked, but God, who wants to turn everyone's mourning into dancing, is well pleased.

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