



## CHAPTER ONE

# EARTHEN VESSELS

*"The Word became flesh."*

God took on a human body.

Though Christians have been dwelling on this fact for nearly 2,000 years, it remains among the most impenetrable mysteries of human existence. God, who spoke the world into existence and upholds the heavens by the word of his power, ate and slept as an infant. It was, as T. S. Eliot once put it, "the impossible union of spheres."

If ever there was a question about the goodness of the physical body, the incarnation of Jesus Christ definitively answered it. It was a singularly unique moment in time, an unrepeatable event that altered history so profoundly that we still measure time by our distance from it. God gave himself away to man, dwelling with him not as an angel or an alien, but as a creature formed from the transient weightlessness of dust. But the dust and the clay took on an unparalleled dignity and glory the moment God himself entered it. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The goodness of the physical body is inextricable from the

goodness of the world in which our bodies dwell. The creation is, in John Calvin's phrase, the "theater of God's glory." And when the final curtain closes on the play, we shall look back upon it and say with the one who formed the world that it is indeed "very good."

It is joy and goodness for which we have been made, and which God gives to his children in the things of the world. "Man is more himself, man is more manlike," my favorite author has put it, "when joy is the fundamental thing in him and grief the superficial."<sup>1</sup> The rare moments of transcendence that we are given remind us that the world is still good, and that it is a good *for us*: We can sit alone in an ancient church that has fallen silent and hear in the stillness the music of the heavens. We watch a sunset glisten on fall-colored leaves, and play Wiffle ball and other games amidst the frivolity of spring. Our firstborn child smiles at us for the very first time. These moments cause us to forget ourselves and embrace the world around us. We have been made to know and enjoy these things.

In the second chapter of John, Jesus attends a wedding that happens to be insufficiently stocked with wine—a capital offense in some quarters. He solves the problem as only he can—by filling six pots with water and then transforming it all into wine. There is deep significance in Jesus' action. The symbolism of six pots—designated for the Jewish rite of purification—points to the insufficiency of the old covenant. Jesus fulfills the new covenant with the new wine of his blood.

Deep stuff, that. But the more obvious and perhaps more important fact for our purposes is that Jesus enables the party to continue. In a stirring passage in his memoirs, evangelical pastor Adolph Saphir reminds us that God does something more than simply meet our bodily needs. God himself gives the superfluities out of the abundance of his love:

This is not a case of people starving, as when in the wilderness Jesus fed them, or of disease and suffering when He in love delivered them from it. This was simply a superfluity, a luxury; they had no wine, and what does this mean?—for it is a sign, and must signify something.

That God created man not merely that he should endure

existence, that he should drag through life, but that he should rejoice; that there should be a happiness, a festivity, a gladness within him; not only that he should be reconciled to his existence and have what is needful, but that he should feel within him a music, a rhythm; that he should be able to say, It is a joy to live, He hath crowned me with loving-kindness and tender mercies.

So that in one sense the world is not wrong when it seeks for the ornamental and the beautiful; it is an instinct of what is true, that God created us for brightness and glory.<sup>2</sup>

The divine irruption at the wedding of Cana is an unequivocal affirmation of the goodness of our embodied lives and the creation in which we live. The tapestry of the world is beautiful, and the fabric that composes it is goodness. And our lives, our existence, our bodies, will manifest all the glory and goodness that is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ when we see the creation as it is, given to us for our stewardship by the generous hand of God.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

### **THE TECHNOCRATIC BODY**

Few stories encapsulate the neuroses of our era like that of Brisa Johnson. In July 2010, she tweeted that she would undergo head-to-toe plastic surgery in order to look exactly like Kim Kardashian—a woman who has managed to become famous based on her looks—so that her husband would not leave her. It might be a comic tale if it were not so believable and so heartrendingly tragic. Whether she got the surgeries is unknown. But that the story itself is news means there’s hope yet for our world.

This is where self-expression, technological proficiency, and social fragmentation have led us. The iron law of our age is that our bodies are our own and we can choose to do with them as we please on the single condition that no one else is harmed. While we may think that the Kim Kardashian wannabe has psychological and

marital problems, her proposed solution is simply an extreme manifestation of one of the deepest intuitions of our culture. The combination of economic prosperity and media saturation has allowed us to industrialize personal beauty, giving the most physically mediocre among us the freedom and ability to refashion ourselves into a Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie. Where our grandfathers might have turned to prayer for self-fulfillment, many today prefer plastic surgery.

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel Bell noted that in modernism, art and the artistic impulse motivated our humanity. As he put it:

Traditional modernism sought to substitute for religion or morality an aesthetic justification of life; to create a work of art, to be a work of art—this alone provided meaning in man's effort to transcend himself.<sup>3</sup>

Our postmodern world, Bell argues, replaced this aesthetic justification with an instinctual one that treats “impulse and pleasure as life-affirming; all else is neurosis and death.” The postmodern shift, in other words, is away from the creation of beauty as the focus of what it means to be human toward the experience of pleasure itself.

That Bell's “instinctual justification” for life pervades the contemporary ethos is clearly true. Try arguing with your neighbor that they shouldn't do something that they find pleasurable—like taking certain banned substances—even when they do not “harm” anyone else. But the aesthetic justification has not totally disappeared. We simply take our freedom to “be a work of art” a bit more literally. The body becomes the canvas, the raw material we can refashion according to the standards of beauty given to us by Madison Avenue.

The end result is that the decisions we make about the body are almost always grounded in therapeutic reasons—what makes us feel fulfilled or complete or happy—rather than through determining whether there are any objective standards that should guide our decision-making. If a man wants to reshape his nose because he is desperate to get a woman, we might recommend therapy, but so long as he isn't hurting anyone else, we have no grounds

to say, “No, you shouldn’t do that.” After all, it will improve his self-image—and it might help his kissing.

The impulse that we own our bodies and can do with them as we please runs deep. It is one of our tacit, world-shaping beliefs that few of us ever bring to the surface, but nearly everyone affirms. At an open forum my church hosted on body modification, my wife took the premise to its logical conclusion: If a well-adjusted person chops off his arm because he thinks it looks better (or to make a political statement against the repressive nature of our contemporary standards of beauty), what’s wrong with that? No one could provide an answer.

The last guardrail against the total dismantling of any cultural morality that is grounded in goodness rather than in not harming others is health. We have become a nation of joggers in our desire to preserve a standard of physical health that the priests in the medical community have handed down to us from the mountain. And the bit about “priests” isn’t entirely cheeky. Young people often first learn about sexuality from doctors and trained professionals rather than from their parents—a transition (ironically) that began among the much-maligned Victorians. Apparently, the easiest way to overcome any awkwardness of speaking about sex is to sterilize it and outsource it to the professionals.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even here, the near-obsessive pursuit of physical health that marks our world means that we cannot simply *be* in the body. We cannot embrace it without qualification. It has become a project, a formless lump of clay waiting for us to sculpt it in our own image. It is, as sociologist Chris Shilling put it, an “unfinished entity which is shaped and ‘completed’ partly as a result of life-style choices.”<sup>5</sup>

Our bodies are no longer begotten, but are made, constructed by our own individual wills and by the institutions of society that tell us how to act. They are the primary place where we exert our power and domination, which is why we quarantine those who can no longer control their own bodily functions. Because we do not like the inconvenient, uncontrollable, spontaneous interruptions that sometimes characterize the very young and very old, we professionalize their care so we will not be bothered. We have

day-care facilities and nursing homes so the young (or middle-aged) can continue jogging.

This industrialized understanding of the body has led some theologians in the twentieth century—George Grant and Jacques Ellul, specifically—to describe our society as a “technological society.” Theologian Oliver O’Donovan explains:

What marks this culture out most importantly is not anything that it does, but what it thinks. It is not “technological” because its instruments of making are extraordinarily sophisticated (though that is evidently the case), *but because it thinks of everything it does as a form of instrumental making*. Politics . . . is talked of as “making a better world”; love is “building a successful relationship.” There is no place for simply *doing*.<sup>6</sup>

Whether for aesthetics or health, athletics or business, we treat the body as the raw material out of which we shape our own lives and histories. Our options are to conform to the pattern that has been handed down from Hollywood, or assert our individuality through the “free” expression of our autonomous selves. But even the assertion of our individuality is an inherently self-conscious task, as it inevitably takes shape against the backdrop of our rejection of standards of life that have been prepackaged and sold.

A world dominated by technique is an inherently anti-material world. It does not value the body, but always seeks to turn it into something else. As feminist thinker Susan Bordo writes, “In place of [the materiality of the body] we now have what I call cultural plastic. In place of God the watchmaker, we now have ourselves, the master sculptors of that plastic.”<sup>7</sup> Both sexual liberation and the obsessive demands of health have been sold to us under the guise that they affirm the body’s intrinsic goodness. But what we have bought simply cannot deliver. The joke is, unfortunately, on us—and it’s ultimately not very funny.

## A GOSPEL-SHAPED EMBODIED LIFE

Grace is not a technique.

It is not a magical quality that God dispenses like a candy machine, or the power for self-actualization or personal peace and affluence. It is not a lubricant to get the parts inside working properly. And it is not a three-step program for self-improvement. When we treat grace that way, we surrender to the spirit of our age by fashioning ourselves and our bodies through our own efforts. We don't use grace to shape ourselves—it shapes us into the image of the one who gives it.

The grace that God gives, though, is God himself. Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer writes that the gospel is “God’s self-giving in his Son through his Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> Salvation, the psalmist proclaims, is “from the Lord” (Psalm 3:8 NIV), but the one who comes to save is *the Lord himself*. Ephesians 2:1–10 announces that we have been “raised up with Christ,” that God will show us the riches of his grace “in Christ,” and that we have been “created in Christ Jesus” for good works. The grace that we receive through faith is nothing less than union with our Savior, Jesus Christ himself.<sup>9</sup>

Our “union with Christ” is the inauguration of a new form of life. When we hear and believe the good news that our sins have been washed away by the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ, the patterns and habits of our lives will never be left alone. That change in our status, wherein we transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God’s glorious light, transforms our horizons and reorients our lives. Where our relationships were once marked by the hostility of violence, envy, pride, and anger, our union with Christ opens the possibility for a new mode of being.

Though grace—the presence of God himself in our hearts and lives—is not a technique, it does have a shape. And it looks like Jesus. The love that Jesus’ disciples are known by takes the shape of a cross.<sup>10</sup> John writes in 1 John 3:16: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” John’s subtle move from the reality of God’s love for us to the nature of our love for others is not a departure from the gospel, but an affirmation that those who believe the gospel

need lives that are shaped by it. As Oliver O'Donovan puts it, "the church can be committed to ethics without moderating the tone of its voice as the bearer of glad tidings."<sup>11</sup>

Christ is not only the pattern for our lives—he is also the power. The union we have with Christ is a union through the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.<sup>12</sup> The sanctification of our lives and bodies is not disconnected from our salvation, but is the necessary consequence of our life in Christ.<sup>13</sup> The Holy Spirit is both Lord and giver of life—and the life that he gives is the life of conformity to Jesus.

The reduction of our lives and morality to a "technique" is at the root of the malaise within the evangelical world. Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton introduced the term *moralistic therapeutic deism* to describe the dominant religion among young people in America. It is deistic because its God is not present or active in the world. It is therapeutic because its benefits involve feeling "good, happy, secure, and at peace." And it is moralistic because it teaches that doing the right thing is central to having a "good and happy life." It is technique—the assertion of our wills on the world—applied to morality. As Smith and Denton write, "That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful."<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, a gospel-ethic of our embodied life is encompassed by the reality that our sins have been forgiven by the one who died for us, and that the proper response to our forgiveness is impossible except through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption . . . 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord' " (1 Corinthians 1:30–31).

Unfortunately, evangelicals sometimes suffer from an anemic understanding of how the gospel shapes our lives. We alternate between playing the legalist card when people attempt to draw lines about how Christians should or should not act, and playing the libertine card when others sanction their immoral actions with the gospel. We either have cheap grace or it doesn't exist at all.



A gospel-ethic, though, is a normative account of how our lives conform to the pattern of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that is discerned and freely enacted through the power of the Spirit's indwelling presence.<sup>15</sup>

What does this mean for most evangelicals? I would tentatively suggest that three popular ways in which evangelicals talk about ethics need reconsideration and clarification.

First, we need to guard against conflating our understanding of Christian freedom with our culture's premise that freedom is our absolute right to do whatever we want without harming others. I cringe every time I hear St. Augustine's dictum "Love God and do what you will" deployed as a rejection of our responsibility to consider the morality of our actions, or as a denial that as Christians we are obligated to act in certain ways. For Augustine, Christian liberty does not mean spontaneously doing whatever is in our hearts at any given moment—that is a version of Augustine that owes more to Romanticism than to the man himself. Rather, Christian liberty is a reflective, ordered response to the reality of God's love that requires careful discernment and prayer.<sup>16</sup> As O'Donovan puts it, in Christian freedom, "the Spirit forms and brings to expression *the appropriate pattern of free response to objective reality.*"<sup>17</sup>

Second—and I put this forward tentatively—I suspect we need to rethink whether conscience is an adequate guide for how we live in the body. As an evangelical, I grew up believing that our conscience is a moral appendage or organ that tells us how we should or should not act. Specifically, if my conscience did not trouble me and the action in consideration was not explicitly commanded or prohibited in Scripture, then I was "free" to move ahead. But if the conscience is a faculty like the mind or the heart, then it too is fallen—which means that it needs to be brought into conformity with Scripture, the authoritative witness to the reality of Christ's death and resurrection, and is insufficient as a guide to how we should love our neighbors as ourselves.

Third, having lives shaped by the redemption we have in Jesus means that our experiences—whether of our consciences or of the Holy Spirit or of our bodies—are an inadequate guide for determining how we should live in the body. We must listen to our

experiences and the experiences of others, as there is no other way to determine whether the gospel will affirm them or reveal them as sin. While the conditions and circumstances of our actions might affect which good we should pursue, they cannot answer that question for us. We must always evaluate our own circumstances and experiences in light of the authoritative Word of God.<sup>18</sup>

This would include the experiences that we have of God within the church. Communion, baptism, and other practices of the church are the proper, God-ordained responses to the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested to in Scripture. When we respond to God, we should do it in the ways he has set forth for us in his Word. The practices of baptism and Communion are at the heart of our spiritual formation and the church's communal life according to the pattern we have in Jesus. We are, after all, the body of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

## EARTHEN VESSELS

The psalmist tells us we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” We were knit together in our mothers’ womb by the delicate hands of God. Our bodies are not amorphous lumps that we shape and sculpt into our own self-image—they are divine gifts, given to us by God himself. The body opens the world to us and enables us to experience its goodness and beauty.

Of course, it does not always seem that way. We can't all run like Olympian Eric Liddell or play piano like my sister. Some of us cannot stand on our own two feet or feel the warmth of the sunshine. Some have genetic defects, while others have had their bodies broken through injuries or illness. Some bodies are marked by wounds of rejection; others by scars of self-loathing. Others have been distorted by anxiety or wrecked by the stress of self-aggrandizement. Some of us have chiseled away at our flesh out of a manic desire to maintain appearances, while others have simply quit trying. None of us is in heaven, despite our best efforts to appear otherwise.

“Do you not know,” the apostle Paul asks, “that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). *Do you not know?* It is a question that should haunt us, a question that should force

us to revisit every aspect of our lives and every fiber—literally—of our being. I suspect Paul asks it not only for rhetorical effect, but because it is so easy to forget in a world where our lives and our bodies have been altered by sin's presence.<sup>20</sup>

But our body is not simply a gift from God—it is the place where God himself dwells within his people. The physical body was the place of Jesus Christ's presence in the world. And when he was asked for a sign that would demonstrate his authority, he responded: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Jesus identifies his own body with the place of worship for the Jewish people, an astonishing association. And after he ascended into heaven, he sent the indwelling Holy Spirit until he returns again.

This is the paradox of the body: The body is a temple, but the temple is in ruins. The incarnation of Jesus affirms the body's original goodness. The death of Jesus reminds us of its need for redemption. And the resurrection of Jesus gives us hope for its restoration.

Our body is a temple, but the temple's beauty is not of our own making. As earthen vessels made from clay and dirt, our glory as humans is that we are free to give ourselves back in gratitude to the one who gave himself for us. Our treasure is what we manifest in and through our lives—that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. The God who made the universe, is the one "who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself."<sup>21</sup> And God transforms our bodies not through technique, the assertion of our own wills, but through giving us himself in the Holy Spirit.

This is the subversive message of Christianity in our late-modern world, which has pursued the gifts of God's created joys without acknowledging the giver: The body is good, but its goodness is not what we expect or anticipate, for it is a goodness that is revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Consider Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount: "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" The answer that Jesus presumes radically relativizes the body's very real demands. We live by bread, but we do not live by bread

alone—“but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”<sup>22</sup> The gifts of God, God himself, are no less necessary to our sustenance than physical nourishment.

When Jesus suggests that the body is more than clothing, he shifts from the necessary to the pleasurable, from that which is required for the body’s life to that which adorns the body as beautiful. He affirms that the beauty of our bodies is a direct concern of our Father in heaven, a concern that frees us from the anxious demands of style and image that have consumed our time and our money. The lilies of the field neither toil nor spin—they simply live before God for their allotted time, and have no aspirations to be roses. Will he not much more clothe you?

“Seek first the kingdom of God . . . and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33 NKJV, emphasis added). This is the message of a gospel-ethic. The gifts are given freely, but they are only ours to keep as long as we acknowledge and worship the Giver. Our seeking is a response to the reality of the presence of God in our lives. The presence of the kingdom invades our whole lives, reshaping our interactions with others and the world in the most basic and fundamental ways. The apostle Paul writes in one of the few times he mentions the kingdom: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>23</sup>

The kingdom is the sphere of the King’s authority. Dallas Willard writes, “A person is a ‘spiritual person’ to the degree that his or her life is correctly integrated into and dominated by God’s spiritual Kingdom.”<sup>24</sup> The temptation of our postmodern era is to pursue false standards of bodily “perfection” and to be consumed by the anxieties that stem from living in bodies that are marked by sin. But the freedom of the gospel is that we have been bought with a price and that our bodies are no longer ours. As the opening question to *The Heidelberg Catechism* puts it:

### **QUESTION:**

#### **What is thy only comfort in life and death?**

Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus

Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.<sup>25</sup>

*I am not my own.* The body is for love and for God, not for my own pleasure and not for my own pain. The body is not for me, but for another. The kingdom is not for eating and drinking, but for righteousness, peace, and joy that come from living within the realm of love. God gives himself for us that we might give ourselves to him. And as hymn writer Robert Grant knew, the God who demonstrated his love for us by taking on a body and dying on a cross will be firm and faithful until the end:

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,  
In thee do we trust, nor find thee to fail.  
Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end!  
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.<sup>26</sup>



## CHAPTER TWO

# EVANGELICAL INATTENTION AND THE SECULAR BODY

Donald Miller may have acknowledged the Crusades, but he forgot to mention Precious Moments.

In his provocative and enduringly popular book *Blue Like Jazz*, Miller describes a college ministry that set up a confessional booth with a twist: rather than hear the wrongs done in dorm rooms and frat houses, they would apologize for the grievances Christians have committed throughout history. Clever, yes, but also a missed opportunity. Someone needs to own up for those silly figurines.

Thankfully, their time has started to pass. For a few years, you couldn't walk into a Christian bookstore or a Hallmark store without being overwhelmed by their schmaltzy cuteness. At the company's peak, it was at least a \$200 million annual business. It grew so large that the owners ripped a page out of Disney's playbook, creating a "Precious Moments Inspirational Park."<sup>1</sup> The central line of figurines was, at least initially, explicit in its Christian background, featuring infants that had been (literally) angelized in various poses.

But it is a sanitized Christianity, a Christianity that has been domesticated into a religion of niceness and sentimentality. As a

result, it gets both infants and angels wrong. Angels in Scripture are messengers, intermediaries between God and men. But they rarely appear as the sort of soft approachable figures that Precious Moments twisted them into. The angel who guards the garden of Eden wields a flaming sword, and nearly every angel who appears in the New Testament has to remind folks not to be afraid.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, by turning infants into angels, they distort the inescapably messy reality of our humanness. It is a form of what author Chene Heady dubs “baby worship,” or the belief that babies are utterly free from sin and worthy of what almost approaches adoration.<sup>3</sup> Not only that, but overly sentimentalized Christianity depends on a vague minimizing of the less pleasant features of the body in favor of an angelic, disembodied faith. Children, as every parent knows, make far too much of a mess to ever be confused with angels.

Yet this vague and general spiritualization of our faith isn’t simply at the fringes of evangelicalism, but closer to the center. As I write this book, I routinely have conversations with people in evangelical churches that go something like this:

Them: “So what’s your book about?”

Me: “The body.”

Them: “You mean, like, the *physical* body?”

The line is often delivered with a slight rise of the eyebrows that betrays either incredulity or incomprehension, and sometimes a little of both. The pattern, which seems to exist among evangelicals of every age, was at first mildly irritating, but has become an endless source of fascination. What’s to say about the physical body? More than most evangelicals seem to realize. When we hear the words *the body*, our minds apparently meander over to Paul’s great metaphor and the countless sermons we have heard exhorting us to take up our janitorial crosses and assume our place as the pinky toe of Christ’s church. We are apparently more comfortable talking about the body of Christ than the body we walk around in.

## EVANGELICALS AND THEIR CRITICS

Over the past twenty years, evangelicals have balkanized into several different schools of thought, each of which has their own approach to theology, culture, and church practices. Despite the disagreements, though, almost everyone agrees on this point: Traditional evangelicalism has deeply Gnostic tendencies.

Gnosticism was a second-century movement that has persisted in various forms and places throughout church history. It limited knowledge (gnosis) to only a select few and was frequently associated with an attempt to flee the body for the realm of the “spiritual.” Theologian Michael Horton, who is Presbyterian, puts the critique this way:

It would seem that the critics of modern American religion are basically on target in describing the entire religious landscape, from New Age or liberal, to evangelical and Pentecostal, as essentially Gnostic. Regardless of the denomination, the American Religion is inward, deeply distrustful of institutions, mediated grace, the intellect, theology, creeds, and the demand to look outside of oneself for salvation. . . . If one is to be saved, one must accept the death of individualism, inwardness, emotional and experiential ladders of ecstasy, merit and speculation.

By contrast, Horton suggests that Christianity is a “crude, earthy religion.” Though Horton doesn’t expound upon evangelicalism’s distaste for the body here, he does suggest that certain strands that talk about the “salvation of the soul” are “quasi-Gnostic.”<sup>4</sup>

Gregg Allison, a professor of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in a recent paper accuses evangelicals of treating the body as a hindrance to our spiritual lives:

It is my contention that evangelicals at best express ambivalence toward the human body, and at worst manifest a disregard or contempt for it. Many people, often due to tragic experiences with the body (e.g., physical/sexual abuse), abhor their body, and many Christians, due to either poor or nonex-



istent teaching on human embodiment, consider their body to be, at best, a hindrance to spiritual maturity and, at worst, inherently evil or the ultimate source of sin.<sup>5</sup>

The giant of New Testament studies, N. T. Wright, concurs. In *Surprised by Hope*, an excellent book that is justly popular within younger evangelical circles, he criticizes the disembodied notion of “heaven” that he contends most evangelicals believe in. According to Wright, evangelicals are dangerously ignoring the Apostles’ Creed’s insistent affirmation that “we believe in the resurrection of the body.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Brian McLaren, the controversial emerging church advocate, aligns himself with this critique as well. In *A New Kind of Christian*, he writes, “Remember, modernity only wants abstract principles, universal concepts, and disembodied absolutes. So we take an expression like ‘the kingdom of God’ and try to give it meaning without any context. *Postmodern theology has to incarnate; we have to get back into the flesh and blood and sweat and dirt of the setting, because as I said, all truth is contextual.*”<sup>7</sup>

By my count, that’s a Presbyterian, a Baptist, a high-church Anglican, and a member of the emerging church movement all offering some variation on the theme that evangelicals have gone wrong in their understanding of the body. They disagree about the particulars and their preferred solutions, but the unanimity of their diagnosis is striking.

It’s not easy or prudent to challenge that many voices, especially when they are from as diverse communities as the four critics above.<sup>8</sup> But evangelicals also have a strong tendency to affirm the worst about ourselves, so we’re not very inclined to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. Is a generous reading of the “evangelical body” possible, or is it really as bad as all that?

### A LEGACY OF INATTENTION

Here’s the thesis that I want to tentatively put forward: Evangelical understandings of the body are more complex than they have sometimes been presented. Given how strong the critiques of evangelicalism sometimes are, we might expect to find outright

denunciations of the body within historical evangelicalism. But such remarks turn out to be very difficult to come by (to the point of being nonexistent). For example, while scathing remarks about alcohol, prostitution, and gambling are easy to find, there is little in the way of an outright rejection of sexuality per se.<sup>9</sup>

Consider preacher D. L. Moody. Moody was one of America's most famous preachers in the early 1900s and a central figure in one of evangelicalism's dominant strands: the revivalist movement. The revivalists have been (often justly) criticized for developing a theology that was inwardly focused and a piety that is wrapped up in spiritual experiences; all the sorts of things that generally accompany distaste for the physical body.

Moody, however, has a more nuanced view of the body than we might expect. Consider what he wrote before dying, a passage that his son would use to open his biography:

Someday you will read in the papers that D. L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now; I shall have gone up higher, that is all, out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal—a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned like unto His glorious body.<sup>10</sup>

It is as clear a statement about the hope of the resurrection as one could possibly hope for.

When it comes to the afterlife, N. T. Wright is correct that Moody's focus is on "heaven," which Moody thinks is "up there," and that it is a place where we will someday "go." But even though Moody reads John's description of "streets of gold" rather literally, heaven is not a glorious place because of the stones or the physical splendor but because of the presence of the triune God. Throughout his sermons, Moody is always focused on the center of theology—God. But the center doesn't consume everything else, and Moody never rejects the resurrection of the body. In fact, in his sermon on the resurrection of Jesus, he suggests that it and the cross are the "chief cornerstones of the religion of Jesus Christ." And that has serious implications for us as believers:

We shall come up from the grave, by and by, with a shout. "He is the first fruits;" he has gone into the vale, and will call us by and by. The voice of the Son of God shall wake up the slumbering dead! Jacob will leave his lameness, and Paul will leave his thorn in the flesh; and we shall come up resurrected bodies, and be forever with the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

Moody clearly isn't bashful speaking about the resurrection of the body, even though he emphasizes the presence of God in the afterlife rather than the resurrection of our physical bodies.

Those emphases have remained in evangelical waters, even down to elder statesman Billy Graham. In an essay for the *Washington Post*, Graham summarized the classic evangelical understanding of the afterlife. After confessing that Scripture is relatively silent about its specific features, Graham moves into the center: "But the most essential truth about Heaven is this: We will be in God's presence forever. And because we will be with God, no harm or evil can ever touch us again." Graham then expands this in the usual directions, namely the absence of war, suffering, and pain, and the presence of family and friends who have trusted in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Where evangelicals have directly engaged with the body, they have done so primarily through focusing on questions of physical healing and health. John Wesley, one of the originators of the evangelical movement, wrote a book on the methods of healing the body, a work that opens with an unflinching endorsement of the body's original goodness.<sup>13</sup> This emphasis on physical healing has been at the center of charismatic movements in the twentieth century. Yet emphasizing physical healing also carries risks; when it overwhelms our belief in the resurrection from the dead, it can easily slip into the sort of word of faith and prosperity gospel preaching that preys on the worst parts of the charismatic movement.

Additionally, in the early 1900s, social gospel proponents focused on building healthy bodies in order to reform society. There was significant overlap between social gospel advocates and those who argued for a "muscular Christianity," or a Chris-

tianity that emphasized the importance of manliness and sports to the Christian faith—a surprising relationship given the layout of contemporary evangelicalism. While I am no fan of the “social gospel,” it clearly has had a significant influence on the evangelical world.<sup>14</sup>

Here’s my hypothesis: Whatever attitude evangelicals currently have toward the body (and given my feelings about Precious Moments, you can guess I think not all is well), historical evangelicals aren’t as negative toward the body as we’re often told. There are, of course, problems lurking within the movement. Moody can easily slip into cringe-worthy language about separating from the world around us. But the reaction against these problems has sometimes presented historical evangelicalism in an uncharitable light, finding in their writings a disdain for the body that does not seem to hold up under scrutiny.<sup>15</sup>

The evangelical legacy with respect to the body seems to be more one of inattention than outright rejection or even a conscious ambivalence. If we are uncomfortable with the body, we are so tacitly. When we go on the record about the body, we do so in an orthodox fashion: God created the body as good, it is currently tainted by the presence of sin (but it is not the source of sin *per se*), and God is going to raise it up again on the last day. In our understanding of heaven and our theological anthropology, we have emphasized the presence of God, which is the right thing to emphasize. But too often we do not spell out the relationship between that presence and our earthen vessels, except when the brokenness of the body pushes it into our consciousness in unavoidable ways.

In that sense, evangelical attempts at understanding the body’s role in our spiritual lives seem to have been dominantly reactive rather than proactive. The emphasis on physical healing within the charismatic movement—which is, I think, the strand of evangelicalism that has most consistently focused on the body—certainly takes the body seriously. But it also narrows our attention to God’s power to heal the body, rather than God’s power to sanctify the body through reforming its habits and dispositions.

## EVANGELICAL RESPONSES TO MODERN MOVEMENTS

Over the past thirty years, evangelicals have largely continued to be inattentive to the role of the body in our lives. What makes this so surprising is that the dominant intellectual trends during this period have made the physical body their central focus. Many of the most popular intellectual movements have turned to the body in hopes that it would solve the social and philosophical problems of modernity. Unfortunately, these intellectual movements happen to be streams of thought that most conservative evangelicals have been appropriately wary of, which has meant that evangelicals had little to no reason to overcome their inattention to the body in order to meet the challenges.

### POSTMODERNISM

During the same period of time, evangelicals have been embroiled in a debate over what has come to be broadly described as postmodernism. The debate has centered on questions of what truth is and how we know it. But swim up the postmodern stream a little, and you'll find yourself in the midst of a strong current of thought that is focused on the body. Jean-Paul Sartre turned Descartes' famous line "I think, therefore I am" on its head, writing: "The body is what I immediately am . . . I am my body to the extent that I *am*."<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenologist, wrote several massive and important treatments on the body's role in perception.<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of postmodernism as a monolithic movement is, of course, a gross oversimplification. The movement is as diverse and difficult to pin down as any other cultural phenomenon. But the most famous definition of postmodernism is philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard's: It is an age characterized by "incredulity toward metanarratives." In other words, our understanding is limited by our finite perspectives. Or, as in the popular slogan, there is no longer a "god's-eye view."<sup>18</sup>

Many of the postmodern thinkers turned to the body to find a unifying story, a way of tying the world together into a coherent

whole. But that path has proven to be a dead end. As Sarah Coakley famously put the problem:

The question that seems to press in a postmodern age is this: if we can no longer count on any universal “grand narrative” to bear the burden of religious and philosophical needs for meaning-making, is it perhaps only resistant fleshliness that we can look to as an Archimedean point of stability—a seemingly unambiguous focus for longings, myths and quasi-religious hopes? Yet on closer reflection this too—the postmodern “body”—becomes subject to infinitely variable social constructions.<sup>19</sup>

The postmodern “body” has been destabilized. In fact, rather than even speaking of *the* body, we must speak of *bodies*, for the postmodern critique is that there can be no single narrative of embodied existence. Gay people have one experience of the body, females another, and white males a third. If postmodernism rejects the possibility of objective truth, it also rejects the possibility of an objective body.

Unfortunately, most evangelical responses to postmodernism have focused almost entirely on the nature of truth, but have ignored the challenge that it poses to our understanding of the body. This has caused us to miss out on potential insights and made us ill-equipped to offer a compelling alternative.

## FEMINISM

Judging by the amount of literature on the topic, no corner of Christianity has focused as much on the meaning of our bodies as those engaged in feminist theology—that is, those who are exploring the way our understanding of God both affects and is affected by the unique experience of women. Like every other movement, feminist theology is a moving target, and impossible to easily summarize without turning into a caricature. In its most problematic form, feminist theologians read Scripture through the experience of women, rather than the other way around.<sup>20</sup>

While feminist theology as a discipline has been largely limited to more mainline theological traditions, there are faint signs mainstream evangelicals are becoming more receptive to it. Wheaton professor Beth Felker Jones is one of the leading evangelically minded theologians working in the discipline. Her *Marks of His Wounds* is a careful treatment of the body from a feminist standpoint that includes generous readings of both Calvin and Augustine, but which does not mention the evangelical discussion on the question at all.<sup>21</sup>

Few issues have been as divisive in evangelicalism as the question of feminism. Yet more often than not, the discussion has focused only on questions of church polity, Scripture translations, whether there is submission in the Trinity, and the ever-present question of submission. Those are all vitally important questions. But as “hot button” issues, they have sometimes pushed the work being done on the more basic and fundamental question about the nature of the body to the background.<sup>22</sup> Conservative evangelicals face an important opportunity to clarify a theological account of the body in the context of male-female relationships, but it has largely stayed on the margins of the debate.

### PHILOSOPHICAL NATURALISM

Philosophical naturalism, or the idea that only physical things exist, dominated the second half of the twentieth century. While the idea is an ancient one, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution gave it new life in the mid-1800s. In part because of naturalist John Dewey’s influence on our educational system, philosophical naturalism’s reach has spread so far that it is now one of the most pervasive presuppositions of American life.<sup>23</sup>

Over the past thirty years, evangelical philosophers and theologians have offered strong critiques of the idea and articulated attractive alternatives.<sup>24</sup> Those alternatives have often included arguing for the existence of the soul against the position that humans are only our bodies. Yet this defensive position regarding the soul has in less careful hands sometimes obscured the importance of the body to our human flourishing.<sup>25</sup> As with postmodernism, this is

one front where evangelicals have deemphasized the body's role in response to a school of thought that overemphasized it.

### ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Between 1979 and 1984, Pope John Paul II spent his weekly radio addresses developing what we now call the *Theology of the Body*. The Pope was by no means the only theologian talking about the theology of the body at the time. But because of his position as the Pope and the depth of his treatment, it is undoubtedly the most well-known theological discussion of embodiment in the world.

While the *Theology of the Body* has played a significant role in Catholic discussions about sexuality—thanks in large part to the efforts of Christopher West, who has been the most prolific expositor of John Paul II's ideas—I suspect that evangelical disagreements with Catholicism have muted the book's impact in our community. Those theological disagreements are incredibly significant. Yet there is a surprising amount of overlap between the Pope's ideas in the *Theology of the Body* and evangelical theology.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, however, evangelical inattention to the Pope's massive work may be changing. Professor Craig Carter of Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto reported that many of his students were surprisingly receptive to the Pope's book, which he assigned as a text in a class on sexuality.<sup>27</sup> While writing this book, I heard from several friends with stories of how the *Theology of the Body* had impacted them. Neither of these examples prove a trend—but as younger evangelicals continue to search for resources to deepen their understanding of the body, I suspect many of them will make their way through the pope's massive work.

I want to be perfectly clear: I am neither a postmodernist, feminist, philosophical naturalist, nor a Catholic. But those streams of thought have raised important questions and produced valuable insights about the body that evangelicals need to attend to more carefully. At a minimum, if conservative evangelicals want to offer careful, gospel-centered responses to these various "isms," then we must overcome our inattention to the body and engage these communities on this ground in distinctly evangelical ways. It is not



enough to just show that how they think about human bodies is wrong. We must also show them a more excellent way of thinking about—and of living in—these human bodies.

### THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES UNDERCURRENT

While evangelical theologians have been largely inattentive to the body over the past thirty years, a small but influential groundswell of pastors and lay theologians has worked to reincorporate the body into the evangelical spiritual life.

The most influential voice in the movement belongs to Dallas Willard, who articulates in both *Spirit of the Disciplines* and *Renovation of the Heart* a robust and well-reasoned understanding of the human body and its importance for our spiritual lives. Willard bluntly made the case in *Renovation of the Heart*: “For good or evil, *the body lies right at the center of the spiritual life.*”<sup>28</sup> His contributions and Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* have slowly gained institutional support for their central teaching that the body and the spiritual disciplines are central to Christianity. From Biola University’s *Institute for Spiritual Formation to Renovare*, organizations devoted to recovering and teaching the historical spiritual disciplines have found audiences hungry for a deeper experience of their faith.

Not surprisingly, the wing of evangelicalism most sympathetic to postmodernism and feminism, the ever-elusive “emerging church,” has attempted not only to reintegrate the body into our Christian spirituality and practices but also to move the body closer to the very center of our theology. Like the “isms” above, generalizing about the emerging church is like driving a steamroller through a minefield. But once underway, it’s probably wise to simply proceed forward and hope for the best.

In addition to Brian McLaren, the most consistent advocate for the body’s role in Christian theology is Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis. He writes, “At Solomon’s Porch, the physical nature of the incarnation and resurrection spurs us to create practices in which our bodies help us to follow Jesus.”<sup>29</sup> For Pagitt, the life of faith is tied up with the body and its role in our lives, a position that he has implemented consistently in his writings.<sup>30</sup>

At the heart of this emphasis on the body is the notion that right belief is an extension of having right practices. As has been frequently noted, the emerging church movement has shifted the focus from orthodoxy to *orthopraxy*—or at least has sought to make them mutually dependent. In their understanding, Christianity is less about a normative system of beliefs regarding a historical person, communicated in the Bible and mediated and made effective by the Holy Spirit; instead, it is a system of practices that Christians do in order to bear witness to the historical person as communicated in the Bible. Tony Jones writes in *The New Christians*, “The emergent movement is robustly theological; the conviction is that theology and practice are inextricably related, and each invariably informs the other.”<sup>31</sup>

While there are good ways of reincorporating the body into Christian spirituality, other ways are fraught with danger. While I am thankful that many emerging church leaders have recognized the need to pay attention to our bodies, I’m less convinced their solution of intertwining theology with church practices is the best. For one, I suspect their understanding of the nature of the body is wrong, and because of that their theological method is mistaken—a claim I’ll unpack in the next chapter. But there is also an inherent ambiguity in church practices.<sup>32</sup> The act of taking Communion looks functionally the same in Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Episcopalian churches—but what is happening in those practices, according to those who receive it, is very different. In other words, everyone doing the same practices isn’t enough to nail down the meaning of them in the world.<sup>33</sup>

### **EVANGELICAL INATTENTION AND A TACIT SECULARISM**

In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul uses warfare imagery to describe the conflict that Christians have with the world. The analogy suggests that our relationship with the world must sometimes take a critical posture. Yet he underscores that Christians do not fight with the “weapons of the world,” but have the power of God to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” (v. 4). The verse is popular in circles devoted to Christian worldview training, and for good reason: Bad arguments and false understandings about the nature of reality enslave the person who believes them.

But more often than not, we don't know which lies and bad arguments we have formed our lives around.<sup>34</sup> After all, the ideas that are deepest in us are almost never learned in books, but are forged and engrained through the habitual patterns of life that make up our embodied existence—or what theologian James K. A. Smith refers to as “liturgies.” He writes, “Every liturgy constitutes a pedagogy that teaches us, in all sorts of precognitive ways, to be a certain kind of person . . . implicit in [liturgies] is an understanding of the world that is pre-theoretical, that is on a different register than ideas.”<sup>35</sup> And for Smith, it is specifically the body—rather than the mind or our conscious awareness—through which we integrate these pre-theoretical understandings into our lives.

It is my suggestion that Paul and the other writers of Scripture want us to “take captive” these “pre-theoretical understandings” that we gain through our embodied lives and bring them into conformity with the revelation of God in Scripture.<sup>36</sup> David writes in Psalm 51, “Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart” (v. 6). In Psalm 139, David confesses that God knows his inner workings better than he knows himself, and concludes by pleading with God to search him and try his thoughts. It is those preconscious depths that David asks to have God search out. It is an anthropology not so different from Paul's in Romans 8, where he suggests that the “Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,” and that he “intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:16, 26). The empowering presence of the Holy Spirit brings the tacit beliefs and dispositions of our hearts to the surface so that they can be brought into conformity with the love and truth of God.

To put a sharper edge on it, evangelical inattention to the body is not a virtue. If we are not attentive to the ways in which the habits, practices, and rhythms of our bodies are shaped by the world in which we live, then we will be susceptible to living according to false understandings of reality. If we do not cultivate a strong and thoughtful evangelical understanding of the body and enact practices that integrate this understanding into every part of our lives, then we will end up incorporating ideas and beliefs into our systems that are contrary to what we would consciously affirm.

Of course, discerning which practices and beliefs within evangelicalism are faithful to Scripture and which are driven by the culture is precisely the question. One man's syncretism is another man's baptism. Where emerging church proponents would argue that they have learned from the Bible and are attempting to express the truth in the language of postmodern thought, critics contend that they have been co-opted by ideas that undermine the truth of the Christian faith. The argument can be reversed, too. Emerging church advocates contend that traditional evangelicalism is captive to the trappings of individualism, consumerism, and modernism. Our tendency is to think that those whom we disagree with have fallen in with the "spirit of this age," while we have not.

But just because these are tricky waters to navigate does not mean we should ignore these questions altogether. We have a responsibility to receive with grace the tradition most of us were raised in, and a charitable reading of the evangelical movement should give priority to the conscious affirmations of the body's goodness. But we also need to acknowledge that the body currently does not stand at the center of our understanding of what it means to be human, but is at the edges, and as such we are more susceptible to tacitly adopting secular practices and habits. From what I can tell, when evangelicals talk about the body, we say all the right things—but we simply have not thought about the body enough to ensure that our account of its goodness takes its cues from Scripture rather than the broken world around us.

I am confident that we as evangelicals can recover a rich understanding of the body without shifting our emphases away from what has historically marked us as a movement. In his important book *The Deep Things of God*, theologian and friend Dr. Fred Sanders suggests that the four historical evangelical concerns of Bible, cross, conversion, and heaven can only be emphasized properly when they are placed against the broader backdrop of a robust Trinitarian theology. When we lose that backdrop, our theology becomes reductionistic. We simply shout those four emphases over and over, without understanding why they are important or how they fit together. As he puts it, "What is needed is not a change of emphasis

but a restoration of the background, of the big picture from which the emphasized elements have been selected."<sup>37</sup>

Sanders's solution to the problem is to recover the doctrine of the Trinity as the heartbeat of Christian theology and spirituality. While he contends that evangelicals are tacitly Trinitarian—that is, we have been brought into the inner life of the Father through the working of the Son by the Holy Spirit—we have forgotten our Trinitarian heritage, which has undermined the vibrancy of our faith and created a widespread sense of shallowness.

I agree that evangelicals need to recover the broad backdrop of Trinitarian theology. But if we are going to “take every thought captive,” we also need to recover a thorough understanding of what it means to be human and how the body fits into that. In the opening of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he argues that while the knowledge of God precedes the knowledge of ourselves, we cannot know who God is without reinterpreting what it means to be his creatures in light of that knowledge. The God of the universe is God with us, Immanuel. He is God for himself and with himself before the world began. But Calvin is right: Our knowledge of God is inseparable from knowing what it means that he is with *us*, from understanding what it means that we are made in his image.

This knowledge of our humanity is given to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ, which Scripture attests to. His historical life, death, and resurrection are the center of our theological reflection—not the body per se or our experience of the body in the church. Church practices are important for our formation in the life we have in Christ, but the pattern for that life is not taken from practices but from Scripture.

The gift of God in Jesus Christ is a gift for and to human bodies, and as evangelicals, we need to attend carefully to the ways in which the Holy Spirit shapes our flesh. In a world where the body's status is in question, we have an opportunity to proclaim that the God who saved our souls will also remake our bodies; that the body is nothing less than the place where God dwells on earth. It means moving the body to the center of our understanding of what it means to be human, but it is a move that is justified when we remember that the Word himself became flesh.