

“The Limits that Make Us: Embodiment, Creatureliness, and the Life to Come”

by

Amelia Alice Stuckey

Date: May 1, 2025

Approved:

Sarah Jean Barton, 1st Reader

Jerusha Matsen Neal, 2nd Reader

William H. Willimon, D. Min. Director

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2025

ABSTRACT

“The Limits that Make Us: Embodiment, Creatureliness, and the Life to Come”

by

Amelia Alice Stuckey

Date: May 1, 2025

Approved:

Sarah Jean Barton, 1st Reader

Jerusha Matsen Neal, 2nd Reader

William H. Willimon, D. Min. Director

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2025

Copyright by
Amelia Alice Stuckey
2025

Abstract

Embodiment and Incarnation lie at the heart of the Christian faith. Despite living in a culture that appears fixated on bodies, the intellectual tradition inherited by modern Reformed congregations perpetuates a mind-body dualism that, in failing to proclaim the radical goodness of bodies and the formative reality of embodiment, harms the bodies it seeks to redeem. In “The Limits that Make Us,” I explore the affirmation of the resurrection of the body in the Apostles’ Creed in hopes that doing so can help return Christians to the sanctity of their bodies. I mean to encourage those who sit in the church’s pews to locate radical hope in the Incarnate God and in their own God-formed bodies, which are honored, redeemed, and assumed in the life everlasting.

My primary source for this thesis is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Creation and Fall*, a theological commentary on Genesis 1-3. Bonhoeffer delivered the lectures from 1932-1933, as the Nazis, fueled by myths of the *Übermensch* and full of disdain for the Judaic faith, rose to power in Germany. The lectures construct an anthropology based on creatureliness, and affirm the goodness of materiality and limitation, each of which is a key theme in the thesis. I also rely on Mayra Rivera’s *The Touch of Transcendence* and Kenda Dean’s *Almost Christian*. The work is theological in scope, aimed to serve mainline congregations and to encourage preachers and church leaders to proclaim with joy the unity of bodies, the goodness of limitations, and the radical hope of bodily resurrection.

*For Mary Jane and Heyward Stuckey, my parents, who gave me life
and showed me the world;
and for Jen, my wife, who has helped me come alive.*

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction: The Absent Body, A Perpetual Project	11
0.1 Our End at Our Beginning.....	11
0.2 The Purpose of this Text: Pastoring, Absent Bodies, and Bodiless Theology	14
0.3 A Note on Context: Privilege, Place, and Absence	17
0.4 The Language of the Body	19
0.5 Organizing Principles.....	22
0.6 The Structure of the Text.....	26
Chapter 1 Heretics and Histories: Christianity’s Ongoing Negotiations with the Body.....	30
1.1 Philosophical Dualism: The Platonic Legacy.....	31
1.2 Embracing Religious Dualism: The Rise of Gnostic Christianity	36
1.3 Establishing Orthodoxy: The Surprising Protest at the Heart of the Apostles’ Creed	39
1.4 A Wordy Reformation: the Church’s Platonic Regression and (dis)incarnate word.....	44
1.5 The Cartesian Assertion: Descartes and the Subject	47
1.6 Forgotten Carnality.....	49
Chapter 2 Post/Modernity and Western Disregard for the Body: Absence, Construction, and Modern Gnosticism.....	51
2.1 Lived Dualism and the Absent Body	52

2.2 The Formation of the Body in Society: Dualisms, Domination, and their Cultural Responders.....	54
2.3 The Cumulative Impact: “Absent” Theology, Modern Gnosticism, and the Spiritualized Church.....	60
2.4 A Counter-Factual Excursus The Dys-Appearing Gaze: Absent Bodies Brought to Presence	66
2.5 Looking Ahead.....	69
Chapter 3 Embodied (Limited) Creatureliness as a Gift: Bonhoeffer’s Theological Anthropology.....	71
3.1 On the Context of Creation and Fall	74
3.2 Revelation: Bodies by Faith	76
3.3 Beginning at our Beginning: God the Maker	77
3.4 The Grace of Boundaries.....	82
3.5 According to Our Likeness: Humanity’s Fleshy Image	86
3.6 Embodied Lessons from the Incarnation.....	92
Chapter 4 Incarnation after the Fall: The Revelatory (Dangerous) Potential of Life Together	98
4.1 The Fall: Confrontation and the Experience of Oneness.....	101
4.2 God’s Preservation: Another Tree in our Midst.....	107
4.3 Life from the (renewed) Center: Preservation, Transcendence, and Relationships of Difference.....	110
4.4 Difference and Freedom-For	115
4.5 Grasp, Touch, and the Potential for Life Together.....	117
Chapter Five Bodies at Work: Ethics in an Embodied Church	120
5.1 The State of the Church: Near-Christianity and the Hope of the Creed.....	121

5.2 The Task of Discipleship: God, Neighbor, and Self	127
5.3 Christian Discipleship: Flesh Discernibly Different.....	135
5.4 Aliveness, Joy, and the Hope of Life to Come	137
Epilogue If, Then (A Sermon for Westminster)	140
6.1: Works Consulted (If, Then)	150
Bibliography	151
Biography	157

Acknowledgements

Nothing comes into being without a myriad of others: the people, places, myths, and relationships that form and reform us throughout our days. This work is no exception. For the people of Westminster Presbyterian in Greenville, SC, who looked at me with bafflement when I persisted lecturing about resurrection and who have celebrated me along the way, I am immensely grateful. Your inquiring openness and gentle questioning have been a gift to me in these years of life together. Especially to my colleagues, Ben, Mary Kathleen, Lauren, and Nick, who encouraged me, extended me grace to attend classes, and (unknowingly) signed up to be a practice team for all my exaggerated musings and over-excited ideas, thank you. I would have had neither the time nor the space without y'all.

Seven Oaks Presbyterian, with its seemingly endless supply of patient Sunday School teachers and youth leaders, first formed me and taught me the outline of Reformed faith. Amidst near-constant chatter in our denomination and culture about the limits of our welcome, Seven Oaks ensured for me and so many that church was indeed a place where we could be known, loved, and celebrated. Like Westminster, they lived into the call to be the Body, and in so doing empowered me in my life and my vocation.

There are a myriad of teachers — Peter Hobbie at Presbyterian College, Yolanda Pierce and Dan Migliore at Princeton Seminary — who transformed my thinking and cracked open my mind. A work about resurrection and embodiment would be futile without them. But I am most grateful for the patient, encouraging, and quietly corrective work of Sarah Barton who has, throughout this process, made me feel less a fraud, and

who has made sure that a Presbyterian can find a home at a place like Duke. My endless thanks to her and to Jerusha Neal for shepherding this work to its present end.

To Virginia and Larkin, and your sons Henry and Harrison: we love you tremendously and are grateful that in this wide world we have found such dear friends. Thank you for your constant support, the endless supply of groceries, and your spirit of welcome and celebration. These acknowledgements would be woefully incomplete without offering gratitude for my family, who put up with countless stacks of papers and books and who allowed me to defer car lines and to turn on a blazing bright screen at ball parks and dinner tables. Thank you, Brigham, Tatum, and Pierce. You are indeed God's own, and you are celebrated and loved in your endless uniqueness this and every day. I cannot wait to see where God will take you and know that you will carry all that is good from our home into the world.

Finally, to Jen and my parents, Mary Jane and Heyward, thank you. Words are inadequate to the task, but nothing else could suffice. I have been gifted beyond measure, and I am truly grateful.

“I believe ... in the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.”
— *The Apostles' Creed*

Introduction: The Absent Body, A Perpetual Project

0.1 Our End at Our Beginning

A word begs response. What is proclaimed must be answered. And often, at least in traditional Christian services of worship, the answer comes by way of an ancient, ecumenical text. Each Sunday, in congregations across the world, the preacher stands, prays that her words might be enlivened by God's Spirit, and moves thorough the text of the sermon. After her final *amen*, the preacher's call is answered by the people. Having heard the word, the congregation rises and, by way of affirmation, recites in unison the ancient language of the Apostles' Creed. It is a physical act that unites congregations across time and place, and, by sheer virtue of repetition, functions to teach the contours of the Christian faith to those who sit in the pews.

Rattled at a predictable pace, the once-contested words form an ideological benchmark for modern orthodoxy:¹

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.”²

¹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Press, 2014), 62.

² The Office of the General Assembly, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: 2016), 7.

Unlike the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed shies away from metaphysical categories of being, essence, begetting, and proceeding. With surprising brevity, the scandalous message of the Incarnation is affirmed alongside the act of creation, and the Spirit is attended to as one who enlivens and preserves the church in this life and in the world to come. Given the Creed's relative simplicity and overwhelming familiarity, it is easy to gloss its uneasy promises: that God the Father is the origin of all being, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was among creation as a body, and that bodies in creation will, like flesh of the Son, be gifted resurrection "and the life everlasting."

To claim that the Almighty God is both "Father" and "Maker" is to affirm that the God Christians worship wrought matter ("heaven and earth") from nothing and stands in relationship with that matter. The Maker is not as a disembodied Idea, as in Plato.³ Instead, God exists among creation as a parent does with a child. Further, the distinctive characteristic "Maker" implicates *all* which has been created. The world in its vast expanse has, by some mystery, been "made." The stardust of the cosmos and the living beings among whom humans dwell are preserved and upheld by the one who is both Almighty and Father. Human beings share creatureliness with the cosmos, despite existing in a unique, familial relationship with the Creator.

The first clause of the Creed serves to tell Christians something of the character of God and, derivatively, the character of all creation.⁴ Its claim is not neutral. God makes

³ In "Heretics and Histories" we will briefly turn to Platonic Forms (Ideas) to explore transcendence. For now, it is enough to note that the eternal reality of the universe in Platonic ideas is a disembodied, impersonal realm with which all earthly spirits are in relationship. The materiality, personhood, and intimacy of the Maker in Christian and Jewish thinking is a stark contrast to the perfection of forms in Platonism and Gnosticism.

⁴ Migliore, 105.

space in God's self for that which is other. God chooses to create and sustain relationships of difference. God's Almightyness, affirmed alongside God's act in creation, is a reminder that creation was not necessary to God. Instead, creation is a free gift drawn from the excess of the divine life.⁵ From its beginnings, the Creed proclaims the peculiar characteristics of the God whom Christians worship, an oddness further developed in the second clause, which makes a bold claim for fleshiness of the Incarnate deity.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dwelt among creation as a body, a claim intensified by verbs that suggest the fundamental carnality of the *Incarnation*. Jesus was "conceived ... born ... suffered .. crucified, died, and was buried." Each human in their own turn shares Jesus' fate: conception, birth, pathos, and death. But each human also shares something beyond that "tragic lot."⁶ Jesus Christ shares in human embodiment, and humanity, according to the third clause of the Creed, shares in his resurrection. Flesh belongs to humanity here and "in the life everlasting." The bodies through which humans come into being and by which we make meaning of our lives will, by some great mystery, remain in the life everlasting. The stark affirmation of "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" gives new meaning to the Creed; it is, indeed, the central tenant that enlivens all which has preceded it.⁷ Belief in the resurrection is motivation for a discernibly Christian ethic and the foundational promise of God's reign — the "sure

⁵ Migliore, 104.

⁶ In a familiar adage that unknowingly echoes the language of the Creed, American novelist Thomas Wolfe is said to have commented that "Man is born to live, to suffer, and to die, and what befalls him is a tragic lot."

⁷ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Resurrection," in *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim, The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 193.

and certain hope” which pastors proclaim at gravesides and in commendations.⁸

Resurrection tells us that bodies, the precise creatureliness of creation, matter. Easter faith is thoroughly incarnational.

0.2 The Purpose of this Text: Pastoring, Absent Bodies, and Bodiless Theology

Three concerns lie at the heart of the current work: the consequences of humanity’s peculiar createdness, the bodies of the Son of God and of human beings, and the promise of resurrection. My reason for undertaking this project is simple: I have worked in Presbyterian congregations for over a decade and have recited the Creed alongside my congregation hundreds of times. As the primary educator in my congregation, I have taught the Creed to inquiring adults, paying close attention to each claim. Without fail, whenever I teach the Creed, I observe a sense of confusion and discomfort when conversations about bodily resurrection arise. Parishioners seem scandalized by a central aspect of Christian faith: that the promise of the resurrected body is not only for the Son of God, but for all bodies. Perhaps more surprising, in attending to the pastoral needs of the congregation I have noticed a tendency to devalue the body as if it is secondary aspect of being, a dispensable dressing lesser than the inner “true” self. Surely the observations are related. My “normative” mainline congregants, who rise each week to proclaim that they are creatures of the Creator and that their bodies will find their *telos* in life everlasting, are baffled by embodiment in *this* life. Their amorphous,

⁸ Gaffin, boldly proclaims that “Resurrection is at once the foundation of Christian faith and the focus of Christian Hope” (Gaffin, Jr., 193). His conclusion echoes the Pauline affirmation that without resurrection, faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:4). The “sure and certain hope” is drawn from Thomas Cramner’s *Book of Common Prayer*, which, in various editions, is still widely used in funerals by pastors within and beyond the Anglican tradition.

spiritualizing theologies are closer to Gnosticism than orthodoxy. They do not quarrel, for instance, with the idea of an eternal “Heaven,” but the promise of an *embodied* everlasting is troublesome. Because they do not have adequate theological language for their carnality in the present, they are ill-equipped to understand the gift of embodied resurrection that Jesus’ risen body foretells.

In more ways than one, the crisis of malformed orthodoxy points to a problem for Christian formation. The Creed is a starting point for making sense of our creatureliness, and it is ubiquitous in mainline Christian contexts. The familiar truths — God’s creation, Christ’s body, and the hoped-for-resurrection — are, despite their near-constant repetition, forgotten amidst the lived experience of being bodies. After all, human bodies are complicated and often contradictory. Bodies made in God’s experience pain and are acted upon by forces seen and unseen. They grieve us and cause us discomfort; their limitations scandalize our sense of freedom. In times of distress, when otherwise-overlooked bodies announce themselves, individuals are quick to forget experiences of ecstasy or normalcy. Christians have not been raised up with a coherent theological anthropology that makes room for such contradiction, and though they are surrounded by the fleshy affirmations of canon and Creed, they have not been encouraged to glean meaning from the stories of creation. As often happens, where there is a theological void, secular spiritualism has crept in, echoing the dualism of metaphysics instead of the goodness of creation. It is well past the time for church leaders to proclaim a word that empowers Christians to embrace their embodied creatureliness in all its complexity.

“The Limits that Make Us: Embodiment, Creatureliness, and the Life to Come” is a project that seeks to acknowledge and explore the implications of embodiment for

Christian formation. Here we will reclaim what it means to be a creature and what human flesh can tell us about the presence of God and the hope of Christian faith. Throughout the project, I will return to the promise of the Creed with a sustained focus on creatureliness, embodiment, and resurrection. Though I will refer to the Creedal affirmations and the Scriptural witness, this project is not primarily historical or exegetical. As a pastor and educator, my intention is to provide a framework for similarly flummoxed colleagues and the faithful folks who sit in my pews to consider the goodness of their bodies, the bodies of the concrete others they encounter, and the theological claims that embodiment presupposes. My interlocutors are biblical and systematic theologians, primary among them Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mayra Rivera. Relying on *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer's theological exposition of Genesis 1-3, I will engage the concepts of creatureliness, *imago Dei* (the image of God), and limitation. I will then turn to Rivera's work in *The Touch of Transcendence* to explore the horizon of divine-human relationships. With Rivera I will question the traditional deistic interpretation of transcendence in favor of a relational view that acknowledges the presence and history of the other as a natural limit to the subject's autonomy and will. My proposal throughout "The Limits that Make Us" is that we reimagine the body and its limits as a gift, and that we come to understand the *imago* not as some kernel of wisdom, but in the power of relationships across difference. Behind each claim and animating my proposal is a theological truth central to Christian faith: Christ was raised, and by some absurd gift of God, we will be too.

0.3 A Note on Context: Privilege, Place, and Absence

Considering my sustained focus on embodiment and the ways in which human beings are shaped by individual histories, including the places we occupy and the people with whom we are in relationship, it is important to acknowledge my own “positionality.” Hillary McBride, whose primary work as a psychologist and researcher has focused on embodiment, defines positionality as

“the various factors that constitute a person’s identity, such as race, sexuality, ability, status, and more. It also describes how a person’s identity both influences and potentially biases how they see the world.”⁹

I am not a disinterested observer in the work of embodiment. As noted above, I came to the project concerned that the normatively-coded parishioners with whom I worked were often unaware of the gifts and possibilities of their flesh. That lack of awareness is consequential for the larger “Body” of Christ (the church) and within our society. Undoubtedly, part of my interest comes also from the experience of being a body-out-of-place. I am a gay woman who was formed in an era suspicious of gay bodies. I am also steeped in the Reformed tradition and write as a Reformed pastor, a position afforded to me because of educational opportunity. That I have time to write, the gift of a vocation, and am able participate in a system that provides a safety net is also worth noting. Even as I proclaim the power of limitation, I am afforded much more freedom and security than any number of other marginalized individuals in American society.

Insofar as it insulates those it affects, privilege sits at the root of this project.

Philosopher and M.D. Drew Leder developed the theory of “absent” bodies to account for

⁹ Hillary McBride, *The Wisdom of Your Body: Finding Healing, Wholeness, and Connection through Embodied Living* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2021), 214.

the ways in which bodies recede from subjective perception, both in their inner (recessive) functioning and by virtue of outwardly-directed (ecstatic) senses. The capacity to forget embodiment bespeaks a certain privilege. When individuals are not forced by the societal gaze to consider their flesh — whether by virtue of race, gender, or some other factor — they are able to function as if their bodies are of little significance. Trained to ignore their carnality, individuals find themselves lacking meaningful articulations of the body's theological significance. Absent bodies gestate an absent theology, informed more by spiritual metaphysics than enfleshed experience. Given their immaterial disembodied abstractions — a focus on sin and salvation apart from ethics and communion with God apart from discipleship — it is not surprising that absent theology tends to exacerbate problematic mind/soul-body dualisms. Consider Leder's example of the typified absent body,

“Western society is typified by a certain ‘disembodied’ style of life. Our shelters protect us from direct corporeal engagement with the world, our relative prosperity alleviating, for many of us, immediate physical need and distress. Via machines we are disinvested of work that once belonged to the muscles.”¹⁰

Leder's observation is salient — much of life in the West has become “disembodied.” But he misses a critical point. Not all in Western society have shelters, and only those who find themselves tethered to desks and lecterns are truly divested from physical labor. Leder fails to acknowledge that absence is cultivated in systems of privilege. Consider my own example. Any number of gay individuals will have come to adulthood amidst near-constant chatter about the “crisis” of the gay body. The repetition forces awareness:

¹⁰ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3.

that the gaze of society on bodies coded as non-normative does not allow a posture of “absence” to fully develop. Those, like me, who exist as bearers of difference within totalizing structures are often acutely aware of their bodies. That awareness is frequently mired in shame or disdain, disallowing any conception of sacredness to develop.¹¹ By bringing attention to the goodness of difference and celebrating the gift of embodiment, I hope to join a conversation whose aim is the flourishing of the community rather than the maintenance of a fallen status quo.

This project brings creatureliness forward as a key theological category, and, in so doing, reimagines what it means to affirm that we, and those around us, are gifted freedom, limitation, and the *imago*. We repeat the claims of Scripture and Creed above the discordant clamor of a broken system in hopes that the repetition brings clarity. By returning Christians to their bodies, my hope is that we can begin to have more constructive conversations about belonging to the covenant community and respecting the alteriority of those others with whom we are in relationship. Acknowledging our bodies and our unique histories means acknowledging our privilege and working to ensure that it is welded in cruciform discipleship.

0.4 The Language of the Body

Before I proceed it is crucial to offer a clarifying statement on the language I will use throughout the thesis. For the purpose of this text, “flesh” and “body” will be used interchangeably. Much attention has been paid to the Greek cognates that designate our

¹¹ For more on the experience of shame, see Matthew Todd, *Pride: The Story of the LGBTQ Equality Movement*. London: Welbeck, 2021.

embodiment, especially related to Paul's usage of "σῶμα" ("soma," body) and "σὰρξ" ("sarx," flesh). It is all-too-easy to begin allegorizing usage, as if soma/body is universally good while flesh/sarx denotes perishable mortality. The same readers who harp on the flesh and its pursuits in Galatians 5 too often forget that John proclaims that the Word became "sarx." Scripture is drawn from a deep well of witnesses, each of whom uses language for their own ends (and in the case of Paul, use the same language differently). I will leave the Greek to New Testament scholars, opting instead for an embrace of "flesh" and "body" as relative synonyms.

In *Christian Flesh*, his masterful reflection on embodied discipleship, Paul Griffiths argues, rather surprisingly, that only "flesh" captures the complexity of a living human. He grants "bodies" extension in space, but disallows their vitality. By Griffiths's reckoning, dead flesh is a body, just as an author's collected works are nonvital bodies. Living, breathing persons are not "bodies." Lacking vitality, they also lack value. Flesh, on the other hand, "is living body."¹² I will rely on Griffiths's analysis of the unique calling on "Christian flesh" while quarreling with his singular usage of "flesh." Bodies too are vital: matter created and extended in time and space, constitutive of flesh, will, and viscera, living among other bodies who both form and are formed by one another. Within this work, flesh and body will refer to the God-breathed person endowed with the *imago* and pronounced "very good."

Insisting that the human body is essential to the human being does not mean that we are reduced to our bodies. While it is true that our bodies cannot be separated from

¹² Paul J. Griffiths, *Christian Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 2.

some essential Form within or beyond us, it is also true that we are bearers of the divine breath. Our being is grounded in our flesh. But we are also — critically — constituted by the gift of God’s Spirit and God’s image. We are “haptic” matter that is God-breathed.¹³ Human bodies share in the enlivening breath gifted by the Spirit at creation. When I speak of bodies — the flesh, will, and viscera that makes us — “Spirit-flesh,” an idea developed by Rivera to unite the material of the individual body with the Spirit-endowed essence shared among humanity, is in view. Against any anthropology that promotes soul-mind/body dualisms, Rivera uses the term “Spirit-flesh” to signify the universal, God-breathed gift of embodiment, noting that “the hyphen marks a boundary of distinction that does not tend to separation.”¹⁴ Body and Spirit are different, but they coexist as gifts of God.

Embodiment, as it is used in this thesis, implies all that constitutes a body: creatureliness and Spirit-flesh, environment, biological factors, and social meaning. While creatureliness, the creative and generative intentions of God in bringing dust to being, is both our beginning and our *telos*, we cannot ignore the myriad ways in which humans are formed within natural and social environments. To speak of embodiment is to acknowledge the histories of a particular Spirit-flesh, including the cultural norms that form the person, the variable security in which she comes to being, and the ancestral stories by which her families and immediate relationships make meaning of life. I will further explore human formation in Chapters Two and Three of the thesis. It is enough

¹³ Griffiths, 8.

¹⁴ Mayra Rivera, “Unsettling Bodies,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 119–23, 12. “Spirit-flesh” captures the gift of the body — it is not the sole possession of an individual, but is always God’s Spirit shared among humans.

now to note that human bodies are first given meaning in their shared creatureliness and only secondarily formed in robust environments and among diverse others.

“Embodiment” will be used interchangeably alongside flesh, Spirit-flesh, carnality, and body. To speak of “the body” is to speak of God’s will in creation, human (in)action in the Garden and beyond its center, biological realities, and social formation. Where it appears, “Incarnation” will almost exclusively refer to the event of God’s taking on flesh. When referring to the Word of God in the Incarnation I will use the definitive article alongside a capital “I” to signify the proper noun and indicate that I am speaking of God’s becoming a creature in the person of Jesus Christ, who is affirmed as fully human and fully divine.

0.5 Organizing Principles

The body in academic discourse belongs to no one. It is a place of reflection for the philosopher, the center of action for the ethicist, a site of knowledge for the existentialist, and a place of creativity, crisis, and redemption for the theologian. To study embodiment is a lifelong and multidisciplinary task. Of course the body also irreducibly belongs to *me*, the subject who experiences herself as body moving across time and through space. Because of the body’s deep range of meanings across the arts, humanities, and sciences, this work cannot be comprehensive. But at every point I will seek to be faithful to the experience of living within the boundaries of creatureliness and flesh. Though I will refer to the work of humanists and philosophers, my purpose is always ecclesial, focusing on the needs of the church. Undergirding the thesis are four foundational themes: 1) we are bodies, created by God and called “good;” 2) the limits inherent to flesh — our physical boundedness — are constitutive, not diminutive

(humans are made greater by the flesh that serves as a human boundary); 3) humans relate as bodies to the Creator; and 4) though human beings are created as individuals, each human belongs to a greater whole, without which she could not come into being. Before outlining the structure of this project I will briefly attend to each theme.

The flesh that constitutes our being acts as a boundary. Humans are vulnerable to mutations, disease, and age; individual bodies are bound to a time and space that constricts possibility. The bodies that constitute the basis of human self-reflection can also prompt a disillusion of self, often linked to aging, illness, grief, and pain. Still, the limits inherent to the human body are not in each case negative. In the beginning God created humans within a boundary, not only in relationship to the divine (humans are not God, indeed we are *lesser* than God), but in relationship to the concrete others with whom humans share time and place. Thus, the will of God for human flourishing and the reality of the other *act as a boundary* to human freedom. Reflecting on “disability” as a limit, theologian Deborah Creamer asserts that “‘disability’ is actually more normal than any other state of embodiment.”¹⁵ Creamer beautifully illustrates the nature of human limitation in her “limits model” approach. Noting that “ability” exists on a continuum, that some who are identified as “disabled” may not identify as such, and that all people will experience some “disabling” reality in their lives, Creamer focuses on the ways in which limitation functions to draw us closer to God. Relying on Creamer’s observation, I

¹⁵ Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, AAR: Academy Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32. I will hasten to add, with Creamer, that while limits are universal and can be meaningful, not all limits are intrinsically good (Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 109). Where there are structural barriers to full inclusion we should indeed strive to “overcome” limits. Our creatureliness, however, is not an expression of oppressive power acting on concrete bodies. We cannot, and should not strive to, overcome our bodies.

will claim that limitations are universal and serve to orient humans to our shared center and the vulnerabilities of shared flesh. Limits reveal opportunities to work for the flourishing of the community, enabling creative possibilities for living with difference.¹⁶

Not only are limitations fundamental to our being, humans relate as bodies to God. Human beings are creatures of the Creator, those who are made in relationship with the God who is Maker. The prophet Jeremiah picks up on God's role as an artisan in creation when he casts God as the potter and the people as God's clay. Paul returns to the image in Romans. Both suggest that God not only forms the clay but works to re-form that which is no longer connected to its center. We do not relate to God as disembodied spirits or souls. God actively works among humanity in the complexity of flesh, not bypassing carnality but re-casting it until creation adequately reflects the divine glory in all of its living. God accompanies us and corrects us *in* our embodiment.

Further, attending to human flesh as it has been created reveals something of the character of the God who is Maker. In the well-worn opening to the *Institutes*, French Reformer John Calvin links knowledge of God to knowledge of self, "Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God. Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."¹⁷ Human beings can only know themselves as embodied in relationship to the Almighty God who has made us (and who has been revealed as flesh). We can only probe what it means to remain bodies after the fall when we consider our promised end:

¹⁶ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 93.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Reissue, vol. 1, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2006), I.1.1.

resurrected bodies in the life everlasting. We can learn something of our calling and of our God when we turn to God's intentions in creation and to God's ongoing preservation of the material world. Knowledge of ourselves apart from our bodies, and knowledge of God apart from God's intentions in creation, is peripheral and incomplete at best.

Lest attention to individual embodiment becomes a collapse into individualism and subjectivity, it must be pointed out that God's creation is fundamentally relational, and therefore necessarily diverse. Talk of the individual body should not overshadow the particularity of other bodies in society. Human beings were not created in solitary isolation, nor do we spring from solitary intention. We are reflections of the Triune God, and we come to being within a particular community. The individual cannot consider her body abstracted from the bodies of others with whom she is in relationship. Honoring the goodness of the body serves both the individual and the community. If my body is holy, having been made to reflect the divine image, so too is yours, sharing equally in that image. If my body, with its wounds and contradictions, will rise again, bearing its history and its sanctity, it inherently carries a moral imperative for those with whom I am set in relationship. We treat one another differently when we recognize one another in our mutuality, as creatures of the Creator unfurled by the divine intention. Our relationships take on a new character when we confront one another as those for whom resurrection is a promise. This work, meant to serve congregations, is fundamentally ethical, a reminder to the church of its obligation and its core proclamations, including both goodness of diverse bodies and the sure hope of bodily resurrection.

0.6 The Structure of the Text

Bodies matter. The unity of our Spirit-flesh matters, as do the embodied others who come to us as a gift. It is the goal of this text that the reader (re)imagines their God-formed bodies, acknowledges the goodness of having been created, and moves toward an Incarnational ethics. The argument will unfold across five chapters. I will close this thesis with a larger homiletic reflection on the shared promise of resurrection, an article of faith better proclaimed than prescribed.

In Chapter One, “Heretics and Histories,” I will trace Christianity’s ongoing negotiations with the body through the lens of Platonism, Gnosticism, and the Creed. The surprising neoplatonism in Calvin’s thought will add a point of connection between ancient Christianity and the modern Reformed church, as will the work of Descartes, whose *Cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) has widely influenced Western thought.

Chapter Two “Post/Modernity and Western Disregard for the Body,” will engage postmodern thinkers with particular attention to Leder’s theory of bodily absence (including instances of the body being brought to presence, whether through pain or the objectifying gaze). It is my claim that, despite Creedal affirmations, our ecclesiastical inheritance remains deeply Gnostic. Two millennia of dualistic thinking has formed humans to think of our “true selves” as disincarnate souls, a belief that has distorted human self-understanding and the witness of Scripture. Chapters One and Two serve to

orient the reader to the present reality in order to set the stage for a more robust somatology appearing in the latter half of the thesis.¹⁸

In Chapter Three, “Embodied (Limited) Creatureliness as a Gift,” I will begin to explore the creation narratives as a way to understand creatureliness and the human body. Guided by *Creation and Fall*, I will begin to develop a somatological anthropology rooted in revelation, limitation, *imago*, and freedom. Finally, I will turn to the Incarnation in hopes of gaining insight into embodiment writ-large. Individual participation in the body of Christ, an act made possible by the sanctifying interventions of the Spirit and through the Body of Christ revealed in the church, is critical for Christians seeking to understand and embody the calling of creatureliness.

Chapter Four, “Incarnation after the Fall,” will focus on the givenness of relationships within creation. Sustained focus on transcendence, aided by the work of Myra Rivera in *The Touch of Transcendence*, will ground questions of relationality across space. Against theologies of radical contingency, Rivera insists that an appropriately centered view of transcendence acknowledges the concrete other in this world, including the *ontologically different divine other*. Thus, “Transcendence designates a relation with a reality irreducibly different from my own reality, without this difference destroying this relation and without the relation destroying this difference.”¹⁹ Fallenness, which will be explored, will not be given the final word.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Ola Sigurdson, for the language of “theological somatology,” and his persistent attention to the theology of the body (Sigurdson, “How to Speak of the Body?,” 30). Somatology will be given more attention in the latter part of this thesis. It is enough now to note that somatology signifies all that forms a person, most especially their God-gifted carnality.

¹⁹ Myra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 82.

Chapter Five spells out the implications of a carnal creation (in both this and the life-to-come). “Bodies at Work: Ethics in an Embodied Church” takes as its premise that we are compelled to ethical living by the givenness of the other. The gift of diversity in creation and the possibility of freedom granted through the *imago* implicates Christian bodies in a moral undertaking. That we are cleaved to God should make a discernible difference in our way of life. Joyfully accepting the limit of the other so that we might facilitate human flourishing is intrinsic to the task of Christian discipleship. To close the chapter I will briefly (re)turn to modern Gnosticism and individual piety before turning again to the work of the beloved community and the place of Spirit-flesh in it.

Finally, I will turn to the end. Not only the end of this work (and long-anticipated end of this introduction!), I will consider what it means to be a body in the life everlasting. Any Christian proclamation that does not take as its center the promised resurrection fails to capture the central hope of embodied life. God will reign, and our Spirit-flesh will live. Resurrection is the hope of Christian faith, and the promise of a faithful God. Because the resurrection is also a mystery, veiled in the divine life, it belongs rightly to the world of preaching. In *Sunday’s Sermon for Monday’s World*, Sally Brown suggests that the sermon, at its best, reorients us to the world in which we live, “Prerequisite to a new way of acting is a new way of seeing.”²⁰ In order to follow, disciples first have to encounter our strange, enfleshed God in proclamation and invitation. We have to be oriented to the Kingdom, shown a world in which our bodies

²⁰ Sally A. Brown, *Sunday’s Sermon for Monday’s World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2020), 71.

matter because they are God-breathed and imprinted with God's image. We have to be reminded that our bodies, like Jesus', are ours eternally.

God is still speaking, and the promise of the resurrection — asserted in Canon and Creed — is a rich way to explore the beauty of embodied living, the gift of community, and the promises of faith. Resurrection is formative for Christian disciples and for Christian flesh. It is a way of life orbiting the body of Jesus Christ in his own life, death, and resurrection. Embodiment — *our very bodies* — are both our beginning and our end. Thanks be to God!

“Israel worshiped a God who could grow angry, who changed his mind, a God involved in history, who cared so much about one group of people that their apostasies drove him to fits of impatience. The greatest philosophers of Greece spoke of an unchanging divine principle, far removed from our world, without emotion, unaffected by anything beyond itself. Improbably enough, Christian theology came to identify these two as the same God”

— William Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*

“What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

— Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*

Chapter 1 | Heretics and Histories: Christianity’s Ongoing Negotiations with the Body

In both the sciences and the humanities anthropological conversations have recently taken center stage.¹ A glance at modern academic literature in might lead the reader to the conclusion that the body disappeared in the seventeenth century with the rise of Rationalism, when René Descartes formulated his now ubiquitous “Cogito, ergo sum,” grounding ontology in cognition. But the body’s history in the Western tradition is far more complex. The “absence” that we have inherited, which is to say the soul-mind/body dualism that rules much of our thinking and renders our physicality secondary to a superior “inner” self, rose from of a rich intellectual heritage, blending strains of Hellenistic philosophy, Christian heresy, Reforming zeal, and an early modern quest to ground autonomy in verifiable subjectivity.

Over the course of this chapter I will trace — with a decidedly broad brush — Christianity’s assertions about the body and the varied ways Christian thinkers were influenced by contemporary philosophical ideologies. Insofar as the intention of this

¹ Whereas conversations about salvation, for instance, belong within the field of soteriology, “the body” belongs to medicine, philosophy, psychology, disability studies, queer studies, and anthropology, to name only a few. Thus the body cannot be said to “belong” to any one subject (or subjectivity). Perhaps more accurately the body belongs to everyone — each field sharing a common interest in the implications human life.

thesis is to make a claim for the goodness and necessary limitations of bodies as ordered in God’s creation, my purpose in this chapter is to both refute theological dualism as a starting point and, more centrally, to “account for [dualism’s] abiding power.”² It is my claim that the way we have organized our thinking about the world and our subjectivities has had concrete implications for our bodies, our understanding of other bodies, and therefore our body politic.

1.1 Philosophical Dualism: The Platonic Legacy

When considering the development of Western theology, Plato’s legacy, including his foundationally dualist worldview, should not be underestimated.³ The Jesus movement interpreted its sacred stories alongside the norms and values of the communities it inhabited. As Christianity moved beyond the synagogue and into the Greek forum it took on the philosophical underpinnings of Hellenistic society.⁴ Given the discursive structure of Plato’s writings and their wide influence throughout the Greek world, Platonic rhetoric was especially amenable to variation.⁵ The increasing centralization of power and codification of orthodoxy by the nascent Christian bishopric in the second and third centuries coincided with renewed waves of interest in Plato’s work.⁶ Thus it could be noted of Neoplatonism, a religious iteration of Platonism that

² Leder, *The Absent Body*, 69.

³ Costica Bradatan, “Platonism,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. Andrew Louth. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780199642465.001.0001/acref-9780199642465-e-5703>.

⁴ Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 66.

⁵ Taneli Kukkonen and Paulina Remes, “Divine Word and Divine Work: Late Platonism and Religion,” *Numen* 63 no. 2/3 (2016): 77. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341417>

⁶ Regarding the coalescing of power by newly-centralized groups of leaders in the Christian church, see Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco), 65-66.

developed in the third century, that “there were built-in mechanisms for some of its distinctive approaches and analytical categories to be adopted into the conceptual schemes of the continually evolving monotheisms of the Mediterranean.”⁷ As Christianity struggled to settle its intellectual boundaries, it borrowed Platonic ideas from the emerging Neoplatonists.⁸ Nowhere is the Platonic influence more clear than in reigning Christian dualisms. In an attempt to tease out the lasting influence of Platonic dualisms and their impact on anthropology, I will explore Plato’s understanding of transcendent Forms, the role of the body in Platonic thought, and the Greek philosopher’s distinctive approach to immortality. I will then consider Plato’s influence on Gnosticism, the second century theological crisis that prompted the earliest iterations of the Apostles’ Creed.⁹

In Plato’s well known “Allegory of the Cave,” a group of captives bound in a dimly lit cave can see nothing of themselves save the shadows of an outside world flitting across a dim rock wall. The outside world is filled with movement and sound. The captives encounter only what they see projected on the wall and what they hear in dull subterranean echoes. The cave dwellers come to think of shadow and reverberations as true objects until one is introduced to the world beyond the cave, where he slowly confronts the reality of the objects formerly sensed in projection. The once captive man

⁷ Kukkonen and Remes, 77.

⁸ Divine impassability and immutability, each cornerstones of the Platonic realm of Forms, are at first blush ill-suited to the God proclaimed in Scripture who, as Placher notes in the epigraph, “could grow angry, who changed his mind...who cared so much about one group of people that their apostasies drove him to fits of impatience.” William Placher and Derek Nelson, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 54.

⁹ González, *The Story of Christianity*, 62-66.

comes to understand that the dancing shadows are a reflection of a distant object and not the object in itself. Through the allegory, Plato suggests that what humans first sense as objects in the world are analogous to the shadows. In this life, we encounter the shadow projection, which, though it may evoke a memory of the true object, is but a shadow. The confined sense encounter is inferior and incomplete. The true object, locked in a transcendent spiritual realm, is the heart of Plato's conception of "Forms."

The allegory is rooted in the lived reality of limitation. Human experience of the world and of one another is fragmentary, one always senses there is more to be known, a "luring excess" between the subject and the encountered.¹⁰ In view of the ever-transient and excessive nature of the world and the imperfections of human embodiment, Plato develops the theory of "Forms" (or "Ideas"). The realm of Forms is a spiritual reality beyond material existence. The totality of Forms constitute a spiritual world where any given being's essence exists in perfection alongside all other perfected essences, a realm "which is immaterial and immutable, existing outside and above sensible things."¹¹ The objects (and subjects) humans encounter in our everyday living are in constant relationship to their perfected, transcendent Forms.¹²

For the purposes of this work, Platonic Forms are important for two reasons. First, the idea of "Forms" relies on otherworldly transcendence, moving seekers away from the

¹⁰ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 138-139. Rivera, as I will note in Chapters Four and Five, is extolling intracosmic transcendence and the irreducible otherness that exists in interhuman relationships. The excessive mystery of the other does not, in Rivera's reckoning, have to be banished to a transcendent realm. It exists in incomprehensible fullness in this world alongside the transcendent God, both of whom are utterly "other" to the subject.

¹¹ Leo J. Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors: The Philosophers and the Church Fathers* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of Americas Press, 2018), 6.

¹² The Allegory of the Cave appears in Plato's *Republic* and is ubiquitous in Philosophy 101 seminars across the Western world.

material world and toward an inaccessible spiritual realm. Truth in the Platonic account is revealed outside of the created order. Forms are absolute, immaterial, and, at least to the untrained, inaccessible. Truth is other, *alterior*. Plato's ontology is troublesome for Christians who affirm God's revelation and abiding presence in (a good) creation. The othering of truth in a system that relies on inaccessible transcendence is incompatible with the Christian affirmation that God became flesh and dwelt among creation. God is active in God's creation, making God's self known through the covenants, the unfolding of history, and the Incarnation of the divine Son.

Secondly, the idea that there is a perfected form beyond sense experience suggests that humans can project a self beyond their embodiment. That "self," utterly divorced from flesh and blood, dwells in a perfected immaterial world alongside other perfected immaterial essences. Selfhood is, in that sense, limitless. The damage is twofold, erecting a barrier between the world and the truth, and locating the reality of objects — including human beings — outside of their enfleshed existence.¹³ The Christian tradition affirms no such spiritualism.

Unsurprisingly, given Plato's suspicion of matter and regard for spiritual realms, he considers bodies useful only insofar as they house the soul. The body is animalistic, consisting primarily in its capacity to survive and satiate basic needs. The soul, on the other hand, has the capacity to touch the spiritual realm and access the Forms. In his work on resurrection, German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann captures the complex, recurring relationship between knowledge of the physical world and the soul's quest for

¹³ Elders, 7.

the eternal in Platonic systems: “We perceive everything through the mediation of our bodily senses, but in its anticipation of the death of the body and the extinction of all bodily senses, the soul ceases to become aware of itself through the mediation of the senses, and hence becomes conscious of itself through itself, without any mediation.”¹⁴

The goal of knowledge is the cessation of bodily mediation and awareness of transcendent essence. The soul’s capacity for spiritual awareness comes through long processes of regeneration — the body is forgotten as the soul makes its return to the realm of Forms. Through regeneration the soul is able to remember the perfect Forms, slowly accruing in its reincarnations the power to transcend material data. The soul can access the spiritual realm not only because it is immaterial, but because its most essential quality is immortality, “if the soul does have previous existence, and if when it enters upon living and being born, it must come from no other source than death and being dead, surely it must also exist after it has died, given that it has to be born again?”¹⁵ From death the soul returns to life. A natural cycle of regeneration fuels inward, spiritual revelation.

In Christian theology death is an enemy only overcome by the stunning, impossible resurrection of the Son by the Father. Resurrection is not a natural occurrence. Death, which is contrary to God’s will, can only be overcome by God. By contrast, in Platonic systems, death comes as a hoped-for liberator, “the soul’s best friend,” releasing the essential self to the realm of Forms and eradicating the body and its troublesome

¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 59.

¹⁵ Plato, *Phaedo* 77d.

limitations.¹⁶ For Plato, then, death is a gift. But regeneration and resurrection are not synonymous. The human spirit does not simply return. The person in the full unity of Spirit and flesh is gifted life *despite* death. Resurrection is neither a Platonic inevitability nor a natural recurrence, like the daffodils that spring from the soil each Easter. It is a sheer, creative gift from the God who in the beginning rendered life from nothingness and at our ends, has promised life from darkened tombs. The Platonic attitude toward death is deeply consequential, both as an ethical matter, and also for the way we understand the promises of God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1.2 Embracing Religious Dualism: The Rise of Gnostic Christianity

As previously noted, Platonic thought was not fixed in unchanging orthodoxy. The dialogues Plato imagined were taken up throughout the Greco-Roman world, variously influencing theologians of the church in the second and third centuries.¹⁷ Nowhere was Plato's influence on the church more widely felt than in the Gnostic movement, which suffused popular Neoplatonism with mystical Christianity and sparked a theological crisis.¹⁸

In the second century, the young church was centralizing its administrative systems. The Creed, the scriptural canon, and the bishopric were beginning to take shape.¹⁹ Of all the doctrines of the new church, Gnostic Christians found themselves

¹⁶ Moltmann, 60.

¹⁷ Elders, 88.

¹⁸ Birger A. Pearson, "Gnosticism as Platonism: With Special Reference to Marsanes," *The Harvard Theological Review* 77, no. 1 (January 1984), 56.

¹⁹ González, *The Story of Christianity*, 62-66.

particularly bothered by the humanity of Jesus, Jesus' relationship to the Creator, and the means through which one attains salvation.²⁰ For Gnostics, Jesus' vulnerable earthiness was a scandal. Before turning to the Creed, which functions as both a standard of orthodoxy and an answer to the increasingly threatening Gnostic movement, I will consider (and quarrel with) three features commonly attributed to the Gnostic system: insider "gnosis" (secret mystical knowledge), ambivalence toward the material world, and disregard for the body.²¹ Especially in relationship to matter — whether the created order or the flesh of bodies — connections with Platonism will be noted.

Gnosticism draws its name from the Greek word for "knowledge." The knowledge it espouses is not a comprehensible system. Rather, it is a mystical "pietistic" revelation.²² Unlike Platonism, where repetition fosters a subjective recognition of truth, Gnostic Christian theologies depend on a messenger, whose primary goal is to announce truth. Jesus, who is enclosed by his divinity, and whose flesh is an illusion, conveys redemptive (salvific) knowledge to humanity.²³ Though the means by which one acquires knowledge are different, a fundamental othering of reality is shared between Platonism and Gnosticism. Each espouses a spiritual, otherworldly ontology inaccessible in the earthly realm. Because truth lies outside of the world and Jesus' sole function is to point to that truth, it is not necessary that Jesus be truly human, only that he appear in a way that is comprehensible to humans.

²⁰ Jenson, 5.

²¹ Because its arguments primarily appear in refutations, Gnosticism is notoriously difficult to define. There is general consensus regarding the Gnostic rejection of bodies as capable in any meaningful way of bearing transcendent truths (González, *The Story of Christianity*, 34).

²² Elders, 85.

²³ González, *The Story of Christianity*, 59.

Divorcing Jesus from his full humanity has profound consequences, not only for Christology, but also for divine and human anthropology. If truth lies elsewhere then the fleshy reality of human identities is inconsequential. How we treat one another, what our bodies can communicate, and how we understand ourselves are ultimately tertiary considerations to the pursuits of Forms and the grasp of immortality. Locating truth in a spiritual realm inaccessible (and irrelevant) to everyday life moves the realm of God's activity away from God's good creation and draws believers away from their bodies. Denying the fullness of the Incarnation sanitizes its scandal. God's full self-attestation on behalf of creation becomes nothing more than a spiritual quest.

It is unsurprising, given Gnosticism's Platonic roots, that the heresy is contemptuous of both the material world and for the human body. Justo González, a historian of the Christian movement, has suggested that it is precisely Gnosticism's flight from worldly concerns that drew Christians to its theological system, "The main reason for the attraction of Gnosticism was not that it offered an explanation for the origin of this apparently evil material world. Its main attraction was that it promised a means to escape from the world ... salvation as an escape for the soul from the material world."²⁴ In a particularly fraught geopolitical climate, the Gnostic Christian need not concern themselves with the woes of the world *or* with its preservation. The world, a mere shadow of reality, will eventually be left behind.

²⁴ Justo L. González and Catherine Gunsalus González, *Heretics for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 34.

1.3 Establishing Orthodoxy: The Surprising Protest at the Heart of the Apostles' Creed

By the second century, Neoplatonism and Gnosticism had enough cultural influence within Christian circles that the leadership of the young church recognized a need to define and defend its orthodoxy, creating a unified faith based on adherence to shared doctrinal standards.²⁵ Early forms of the Creed began to appear in local congregations by the turn of the second century, often within the context of baptismal liturgies.²⁶ There were regional variations among its iterations but their content was, on the whole, remarkably consistent.²⁷ Not only was the Creed a standard-bearer of orthodoxy, it was intended to be pedagogical: short enough that it could be memorized and simple enough that it could unite Christians across languages and continents. It was a litmus test and a teaching tool for new congregations and Christian movements

Though the Creed's reach was broad, and its language widely accepted as a standard of orthodoxy, church leaders were not able to fully eradicate dualism in the church. The earliest Christian theologians and congregations recognized the danger of dualism and affirmed in the Creed an incarnational anthropology against otherworldly Gnostic theologies. In this subsection, we will examine three affirmations of the Creed, each directed against Gnosticism and its Platonic forbearers: God's role in creation, Jesus' vulnerable humanity, and the resurrection of all flesh.²⁸ Then as now, creedal protests remain relevant in the quest to return Christianity to the materiality of the body.

²⁵ González, *The Story of Christianity*, 65.

²⁶ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., vol. 1, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), 16. Regarding the claim that the Creed would serve as a standard of belief, see MacCulloch, 127.

²⁷ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 16-18.

²⁸ Philip Schaff provides a helpful side-by-side analysis of the earliest iterations of the Creed in *The Creeds of Christendom*, pages 16ff.

It is remarkable that the earliest Creed of the Christian church saw it fit to affirm not only God's involvement in creation, but Jesus' limited humanity, and humanity's fleshy hope for resurrection.

In the abstract, proclaiming one's belief in "God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth" seems both benign and self-evident. In light of Gnostic claims that an evil demiurge is responsible for the material world, affirming the Father's role in creation and providential rule over the earth takes on new urgency. The cosmos was not an accident, it was an outpouring of loving intention. By connecting God's role as parent with God's capacity to "make," the Creed affirms the goodness of creation and God's intimacy with that creation. Our earliest affirmation of faith does not begin with an ambiguous, evil world — whether the world after the Fall or Gnostic suspicion of matter — but with God's good work. Against any system that would eradicate of God's pleasure in unfolding creation, the Creed opens with a shorthand affirmation of Jewish creation accounts. The God humanity has known in history as "Father," is responsible for the world in which human beings are placed. God crafted the material of the world and of our bodies. Before we are anything else we are creatures: enfleshed by God's intention.

The Creed announces God's provision in the world by braiding with triple knot: the God Christians worship is not only Father and Maker, God is also "Almighty." To assert "almightiness" is not to equate God's parenting with sheer might or arbitrary

power.²⁹ The Greek “*pantokrator*” is better translated “mighty ruler of all.”³⁰ “All” commands attention. In both the highest heights and the depths of nonbeing, “thou art there” (Psalm 139, KJV). God is not aloof in a spiritual realm, God is *actively ordering this world*. By virtue of God’s ever-present rule (articulated as almightiness), humans can trust that God is *present and at work in this world*. Gnosticism claims a creating demiurge, who, in conflict with the true otherworldly god, brings matter to being before receding into an inaccessible realm. In contrast, the God of the Creed lovingly creates and preserves our world.

The longer second section of the Creed reads as a brief on the life and death of Jesus Christ. Born of Mary, he met his end at the hands of the Roman authority in Palestine. Lost when read as history is the *fleshiness* of the clause. Jesus is born of a woman, a vulnerable and visceral coming-into-being. Jesus suffers bodily harm at the hands of the government. He is crucified, an act of torture designed to both humiliate and slowly suffocate its victims. He dies. He is entombed. Jesus’ body comes into sharp focus in the second section, both the real harm Jesus experienced and the vulnerable materiality of his flesh. Jesus was not an apparition. Against any theology that would suggest that Jesus could not be harmed, “because of the true, divine and hidden nature of the

²⁹ “Father” here should not be read as a gendered expression of divine masculinity, but as a way of expressing God’s intimate parental care for creation. Both “Father” and “Almighty” should be held in tension and defined alongside the affirmations appearing elsewhere in the Creed: the Father’s relationship to the suffering of the Son, the father’s victory over death, the father’s continued presence by the power of the Spirit, and the father’s lasting victory in the resurrection. Father and Almighty are not synonymous terms, nor, in light of current debates over masculinity and cultural constructions, can they be read uncritically. Ours is the *particular* Father, whose power is righteousness and who has been revealed in the vulnerable flesh of the Son.

³⁰ Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 265.

Redeemer which cannot be destroyed,” the young church proclaimed a thoroughly material Redeemer, whose very real suffering and death changed the course of history and upended prevailing Platonic wisdom about divine impassibility and the nature of Israel’s God.³¹

As we have seen, Gnostics and Platonists built their ideologies on a transcendent nonmaterial realm. At death one’s immortal spirit is regenerated into an eternal realm. The Creed offers a more jarring portrayal. The redundant affirmation that Jesus is “crucified,” “dead,” and “buried” bespeaks finality. Jesus is not reintegrated into the Forms. Jesus is dead, his body decaying in the cavernous tomb, which makes the affirmation that he “rose again,” one of surprising triumph. The third day brings both resurrection and ascent. Though less “fleshy,” the affirmation is no less material. Jesus now “sits” at the right hand of the Father. The Son of the Father was incarnate of flesh, and his flesh remains in eternity. The third section is a summation of Christian faith: the Redeemer in victory, flesh of our own flesh alongside of the Almighty ruler of all.

The uniqueness of Jesus’ resurrection, according to the third clause, is not that it stands as a singular, unrepeatable act, but that it is the inauguration of a new era. Jesus was raised, “the first fruits” of those who will be made alive in resurrection (1 Corinthians 15, NRSVUE). And indeed, the Creed affirms, by the power of the Holy Ghost, belief in “the resurrection of the body,” as a central tenant of the faith. Resurrection stands as a powerful protest against Gnosticism, “a final rejection of any

³¹ Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles’ Creed* (New York: T&T Clark (International), 2009), 51.

notion that flesh is evil or of no consequence.”³² Resurrection is not *only* the fate of divinity, it belongs, by the grace of God, to the communion of saints in their shared physicality. Affirming not only resurrection but the particular resurrection *of our bodies* denies Gnosticism its final victory and stands as a corrective to any theology that would reduce eternity to abstract spirituality.³³ Resurrection is not a liberation from embodied captivity or an ascent to a higher plane of knowledge.³⁴ It is a material event in the flesh predicated on the mighty acts of the Almighty Maker.

Curiously, the earliest Latin and Greek iterations of the Creed prefer to proclaim the resurrection “flesh” (Latin, *carnis*; Greek, *sarkos*).³⁵ Not only the Old Roman Form, likely dating to 150 C.E., but also documents from Irenaeus (170 C.E.) and Tertullian (200 C.E.) specifically assert the resurrection of “flesh” rather than the more abstract and impersonal *corpus* or *soma* (“body”).³⁶ Even the received Latin texts from which English translations later sprung retain *carnis* (flesh). While some phrases of the Creed have been disputed — the descent into hell, the belief in the catholic church, and the communion of saints — the resurrection of flesh has been proclaimed throughout the Creed’s long history. English translations soften “flesh,” proclaiming the “resurrection of the body,”

³² González, *The Story of Christianity*, 65.

³³ Ola Sigurdson, “How to Speak of the Body? Embodiment between Phenomenology and Theology,” *Studia Theologica* 62, no. 1 (2008), 31.

³⁴ Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski notes that Gnostic Christian theologians attempted to proclaim belief in resurrection as “yet another metaphor of ‘freedom of the soul ’or ‘liberation of the divine spark ’from the bondage of the material element through spiritual illumination/knowledge” (Ashwin-Siejkowski, 125). In light of the bodily affirmations of the second section of the creed, it is difficult to imagine the integrity of any Gnostic argument that would suggest that resurrection entails a flight from the body given how peculiarly assertive the Creed is in *affirming* the body. The church does not proclaim resurrection in the abstract. It proclaims resurrection of the flesh, a derivative gift that mirrors Jesus’ bodily resurrection and cannot be divorced from the birth, suffering, and death proclaimed in the second section of the Creed.

³⁵ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 18.

³⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5th ed., vol. 2, 8 vols. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, n.d.), 536.

while modern German translators prefer “resurrection from the dead,” suggesting a discomfort with the viscera of our faith.³⁷ The Creed in its earliest form asserts and reasserts the fleshiness of this life by focusing on the intentions of the Maker and the body of the Incarnate Son. There is no escape, no beyond, human bodies. The porous skin that constitutes the body’s boundaries is hallowed in creation, in God’s Incarnation, and in the final victory of resurrection. Christian faith, according to the Creed, is a faith of bodies in this life and the surprising life to come.

1.4 A Wordy Reformation: the Church’s Platonic Regression and (dis)incarnate word

When accounting for the influence of dualism in the Western church, the conversation has focused on Plato.³⁸ In this narrative I have widened the scope to consider dualisms inherited from Christian Gnostics. Rarely accounted for is the impact of Reformed theology and praxis on received cultural dualisms. The Reformed congregants who stand each week to recite the Creed have — perhaps unknowingly — been shaped by Calvin’s Platonic account of the soul. Calvin left the Reformed church a rich theological inheritance, but his admiration of Plato had dire implications for his understanding of human anthropology and divine transcendence. It is no surprise, then, that churches formed in Calvin’s mold have overemphasized the mind’s capacity to comprehend God’s transcendent word and are generally ambivalent in their theological approach to ethics and embodiment.

³⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 89.

³⁸ Sarah Broadie, “Soul and Body in Plato and Descartes,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101 (2001), 296. I will turn to Descartes shortly.

Plato's influence on Calvin is particularly evident than in the latter's discussion of the nature of the *imago*. For Calvin, humanity consists of two distinct parts: an immaterial soul and an animalistic body.³⁹ The soul directs the body and is its moral and interpersonal barometer.⁴⁰ Referring to the soul as the “nobler part,” Calvin insists that it is immortal — though its immortality is a gift of God “in a derived and secondary sense,” not in its essence.⁴¹ With Plato, it is the soul, not the body, that is capable of discerning the truth (for Calvin it is the truth of divinity, for Plato the spiritual realm of Forms). By virtue of the immaterial and immortal soul (which for Calvin is synonymous with intelligence), a human can come to “conceive the invisible God and the angels,” a revelation otherwise incomprehensible to the body.⁴² Plato's view of the body is decidedly negative — the body is a tomb (a playfully dark pun, Plato's *sōma sēma*).⁴³ Calvin prefers to think of the body as an equally entrapping “prison house.”⁴⁴ One's flesh, which is limited in time and space, is a prison for the immortal image of God and nothing more.⁴⁵ The body limits the soul's possibilities. Limits are conceived of as inherently negative, to be overcome by the working of God and the immortal soul.⁴⁶

Though Calvin insists that immortality is derivative, it is nonetheless because of the soul's immortality that it is capable of bearing the *imago*. Only an immaterial soul

³⁹ Calvin, I.15.2.

⁴⁰ Paul Heim, *John Calvin's Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 130.

⁴¹ Heim, 133.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.2

⁴³ Plato, “Gorgias,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 493a.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.2.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.6.

⁴⁶ For more on disability, the limits model, and Calvin's theology, see Deborah Beth Creamer, “John Calvin and Disability,” ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 216–50.

unaffected by time can bear the weight of the God's image.⁴⁷ Calvin is concerned that the material world not encroach on the eternal, transcendent realm of God, who resides outside the created order.⁴⁸ Once again, Plato's influence is easily discerned. Calvin praises Plato for his grasp of transcendence and immortality, suggesting that Plato alone among the Greeks "has rightly affirmed its immortal substance."⁴⁹ When Andreas Osiander, a contemporary Lutheran theologian, suggested that the image of God could be reflected in the human body (most particularly in the body of Christ), Calvin called the assertion "repugnant to all reason."⁵⁰ Calvin's critique reflects his worldview: what belongs to the immaterial realm cannot be revealed in the material world because it wrongly "mingles heaven and earth."⁵¹ God dwells in transcendence and cannot be manipulated by earthly forces. Though God has drawn near in Christ, God remains distant in heaven. Only human intellect retains the capacity to be turned toward God, and indeed God's salvation is offered by way of revelation through the intellect. It is a saving *knowledge*.

For all his value, Calvin left the Reformed church with a legacy that privileges dis-incarnated discipleship. Reformed traditions tend to emphasize speech and word over embodied acts such as prayer, healing, protest, or proclamation. Feminist theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel argues that the emphasis on cognition and the the word not only impacts the Reformed worldview, it skews our understanding of the life and

⁴⁷ Heim, 130-131.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.2

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.6.

⁵⁰ Heim, 135-136

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.2

ministry of Jesus Christ: "... for all too long the word and preaching have been put at the center of Jesus' action. In our cultural tradition preaching and the word have long been rationalized and separated from the body, so that the church leaves the human body in the lurch."⁵² In the quest to comprehend God human bodies are, once again, cast aside. Despite the carnality of the Creed, faith remains a matter of intellectual ascent. The vulnerability of Jesus' flesh and hope for embodied resurrection is irrelevant in the revelation of an otherworldly God.

As has been noted, Calvin famously began the *Institutes* by conflating knowledge of God and knowledge of self.⁵³ One of his primary concerns in linking the two was related to the *imago*. Only in the knowledge of one's own failures, which for Calvin are to be discerned by the intellect, is one able to understand the character of the God who has interceded on behalf of fallen humanity. In knowing itself as sinful, humanity knows God as merciful. While granting the centrality of justification in understanding creatureliness, it is also vital to consider that which precedes our rebellion. Despite himself Calvin points to a fundamental truth: we cannot know ourselves apart from the God the Maker, nor can we understand God without knowing ourselves as Spirit-breathed flesh. That we are creatures of the Creator is the first truth of our being.

1.5 The Cartesian Assertion: Descartes and the Subject

In 1641, just over a century after the publication of Calvin's *Institutes*, René Descartes published *Meditations on First Philosophy*. By that time the Western world

⁵² Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995), 36.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.1.1

was embroiled in the protests and counter protests of the Reformation. Though the Creed was widely accepted, dualisms found new expression in both church and culture. The Roman Empire was losing its influence and Descartes, a scientist and mathematician, was interested in uncovering the mathematical reasoning behind matter and the epistemological ground of individual being.⁵⁴ Though rooted in intellection, Descartes' conclusions were no less dualistic and averse to matter than those of the Gnostics.⁵⁵ The Cartesian world-view shaped modernity and, like its predecessors, continues to haunt modern expressions of Christian faithfulness.

As in Gnosticism and Platonism, the animating principle of Cartesian life (the mind) exists in opposition to the body: “[Cartesian] dualism privileges an abstract, prediscursive subject at the center of thought and, accordingly, derogates the body as the site of all that is understood to be opposed to the spirit and rational thought, such as the emotions, passions, needs.”⁵⁶ The human subject is the self in pure abstraction, long before the body intercedes in its development. That which impacts and forms the body does not affect the interior subject.

Given his quest to understand and apply mathematical principles to matter, it is not particularly surprising that Descartes approached the body as one would a non-living machine. The body is reduced to its “mechanical or hydraulic systems.”⁵⁷ The rational

⁵⁴ Tom Sorell, “Matter and Metaphysics,” in *Descartes: A Very Short Introduction*, ed. Tom Sorell (Oxford University Press, 2000), 2-5.

⁵⁵ Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11.

⁵⁶ Lois McNay, “The Foucauldian Body and the Exclusion of Experience,” *Hypatia* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1991), 126.

⁵⁷ Brown and Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life*, 30.

subject inhabits the machine, whose only purpose is “gathering sensory experience and performing actions...input and output.”⁵⁸ Descartes’ ambivalence towards the body reads as outright animus, and shares more in common with Gnosticism and its creating demiurge than with the first accounts of creation. Any claims that God has created a good world are subsumed in pursuit of abstract self-realization. Cartesian themes will sound again in the next chapter. As I will show in Chapter 2, the Cartesian turn to the subject, abstracted from its body, continues to haunt the modern church.

1.6 | Forgotten Carnality

Six millennia of dualisms have shaped Western thinking; the West has, in turn, has forgotten its carnality. The church, called on to form disciples, has been complicit in the forgetting. That modern Christian practices echo ancient Gnosticism, a claim that will be developed in the coming chapters, lies squarely on the shoulders of church leaders. Despite affirmations of Scripture and the influence of the Creed, pastors have failed to develop a robust theological vocabulary that can aid congregants who seek to cultivate a robust theological somatology. Insofar as they remain unexamined, the dualisms we have inherited render us ignorant of the character of our creatureliness and the goodness of our limitations, and set us on a quest for a transcendence that does not represent the peculiar history and stated intentions of the God who brought us to being, interfered in our histories, and promises us embodied life everlasting.

My hope is that over the course of this chapter readers have come to recognize the theological impact of dualisms inherited from Plato, the Gnostics, Calvin, and Descartes.

⁵⁸ Alvin Snider, “Cartesian Bodies,” *Modern Philology* 98, no. 2 (November 2000), 305.

Despite the Creedal instance on the goodness of creation and internality of matter, the church has retained an anthropology rooted in an ill-defined, amorphous “soul.” Where flesh is affirmed, it is tertiary to being (as in Plato, who holds out the possibility that imagination is a function of flesh). More commonly, as in Descartes, flesh is conceived of as, at best, incapable of affecting the inner subject. Nowhere is it acknowledged that that the subject, in the fullness of her Spirit-flesh, cannot exist without her body.

“We have never known any reality outside of our bodies. And yet, it is precisely because we are so immersed in being bodies—and because our collective thinking has been shaped by a particular cultural framework of post-Enlightenment, settler colonialism; heterosexism; supremacy of white bodies; and patriarchy—that we often forget that the body is the very center of our existence.”

—Hilary McBride, *The Wisdom of Your Body*

“For in the late twentieth-century affluent West, ‘the body’, to be sure, is sexually affirmed, but also puritanically punished in matters of diet or exercise; continuously stuffed with consumerist goods, but guiltily denied particular foods in aid of the ‘salvation’ of a longer life; taught that there is nothing but it (the ‘body’), and yet asked to discipline it with an ‘I’ that still refuses complete materialistic reduction.”

—Sarah Coakley, “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God”

Chapter 2 | Post/Modernity and Western Disregard for the Body: Absence, Construction, and Modern Gnosticism

Despite the widespread acceptance of the Creed, both the Western protestant church and Western culture writ large remain entrenched in dualisms inherited from Platonic, Reformed, and Cartesian traditions. The cumulative impact of two millennia of dualistic thinking has affected the way we perceive — or fail to perceive — our bodies. Where postmodern thinkers have set out to contest dualisms, they tend to reduce the body to its phenomenological manifestations in culture and society, stripping bodies of intrinsic meaning and reducing them to their social, historical, and political accounts. The body is either lost to the mind or evaded in endless constructions. The compound legacy of dualisms and deconstructions has been dire. Lacking a robust somatology, a pop spirituality that resembles Gnosticism has taken root in American churches. This is not to say that American Christians do not pay attention to bodies. Anyone who has opened a magazine to sculpted bodies and a plume of perfume knows well that bodies are ubiquitous in Western culture. Where society does turn its gaze to the body it is often as an *object to be evaluated*, rather than an essential part of the self. The objectification of the body and subsequent denial of the unity of Spirit-flesh has concrete implications for individual bodies, relationships between embodied humans, and the Western body politic.

In this chapter I will attend to the compound consequences of dualism using Leder’s concept of the “absent body.” I will also briefly consider articulations of the body in Foucault’s

writing as a way of exploring the wave of anti-essentialist theory that arose in the twentieth century in protest to reigning Cartesian thought. It is my contention that both dualisms and its dissenters have created an environment fertile for a new American Gnosticism that prioritizes and inner “spiritual” self over the unified Spirit-flesh gifted by God at creation. An outsized emphasis on the inner self has allowed Americans to disregard the matter of their embodiment and the concrete bodies of others. When bodies are brought forward by the objectifying gaze, it is rarely in celebration. Rather, as Leder has shown, bodies are perceived of as threats. Fears of untamed sexuality, the persistent problem of pain, and the quest to improve individual bodies and control the bodies of others represent a failure to attend to the flesh and Spirit as an integrated whole (Excursus 2.4).

2.1 Lived Dualism and the Absent Body

Central to understanding Leder’s theory of the “absent body” is the experience of lived dualism. Regardless of individual acquaintance with premodern and modern philosophical accounts of embodiment, the structures of meaning that pervade Western civilization have been built on dualistic foundations.¹ At the most basic level, bodily absence is a way of acknowledging that engagement with the world does not always require conscious negotiation with one’s body. A society that has become less consciously dependent on bodies has, in turn, “valorized” intelligence, cognition, and abstract thinking, all features of the Cartesian subject.² The assumption that the body is not a driver in reasoning accelerates the inward turn, reducing the body to its most basic functioning. The turn is amplified by privilege. Privilege insulates, divesting those it impacts from the need to engage with embodiment. Even as the body in its

¹ Mark Johnson, “Mind Incarnate: From Dewey to Damasio,” *Daedalus* 135, no. 3 (2006), 46.

² Leder, *The Absent Body*, 4.

“normal” functioning recedes from awareness, the bodies of those who work at industrial farms, clean office buildings, and labor to ensure roads are well maintained are hidden to those whose work requires less physical engagement. The capacity to recede into an interior self, a central component of absence, relies on indirect engagement with other bodies, whether or not those bodies are recognized.

Of course bodies are not entirely hidden, and any theory of absent bodies has to account for their undeniable materiality. In view of their physicality, Leder develops the idea of the “ecstatic” and “recessive” body. The ecstatic body is outwardly oriented. Where the recessive body is characterized by the non-willed functioning of the viscera, the ecstatic body is rooted in sense perception. The senses direct attention beyond the flesh. One’s eyes, for instance, do not perceive themselves. Likewise, hearing, touch, smell, and taste bring the outward world into focus while hiding the embodied means of perception.³ Consumed by what is perceived, the body, the precise means of perception, recedes from awareness. For Leder, both ecstatic and recessive functioning are critical to human flourishing — too much awareness would be paralyzing, and a mechanistic understanding of the recessive body has been critical to medical research.⁴ Leder is careful to note that absence is rooted in “unproblematic” operations of both the ecstatic and recessive body.⁵ Pain, objectification, and chronic illness — presumed to problematic operations and considered in this chapter’s excursus — bring that which is absent into full view.

³ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 34. Touch is a unique case, not entirely similar to the other senses in its ecstatic functioning.

⁴ Drew Leder, “The Absent Body (and Beyond),” *The Philosopher* 108, no. 3 (Summer 2020), 6.

⁵ Leder, “The Absent Body (and Beyond),” 7.

Leder's theory of "absence" gives language to the lived experience of soul-mind/body dualisms. Whether because attention is ecstatically drawn outward, or because recessive bodies tend to function without conscious will, embodiment loses its character as a critical component of being. The church's failure to proclaim the goodness of bodies and the experience of absence in everyday living has produced soil fertile for the emergence of absent theology. When human bodies are lost to the subject, so too are God's most fundamental gifts: our concrete being, the embodied communities in which humans are placed, and the divine gift of Incarnation.

2.2 The Formation of the Body in Society: Dualisms, Domination, and their Cultural Responders

Within the academy there is no clear consensus regarding the meaning of the human body. Questions surrounding environmental, biological, and social formation dominate recent scholarly (and political) discourse. Among postmodern thinkers there is a broad distrust of epistemological systems that attempt to fix stable meaning to the material body. Instead, postmodern thinkers have coalesced around the role of identity, language, power, and culture in bringing the subject to being. After all, bodies cannot escape their cultural boundaries. Across time and place different bodies have taken on and reflected radically different cultural meanings related to sex, economics, and ability (to name only a few!). Theologian Sarah Coakley summarizes the modern dilemma well, "It is as if we are clear about an agreed cultural obsession, but far from assured about its referent."⁶ We can acknowledge human materiality, but across history the signified — which is to say the way we come to understand the purpose and consequence of embodiment — seems to be constant flux.

⁶ Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (January 2000): 62.

The varied manifestations of the body throughout history and the recognition of how language shapes thought have led to a wholesale rejection of Cartesian dualism.⁷ The unabstracted physical horror of the World Wars and subsequent collapse of systems of colonialism built on dualistic and hierarchical structures of thought brought the concrete reality of bodies to the fore. No longer could the body be disregarded as a host for a true, unaffected subject. Instead, the body was foregrounded in postmodern thought in hopes of understanding the construction of self and culture. Writes Rivera,

Modernity imagined the *ego cogito* of self-identity as transparent, unaffected, autonomous. This self was assumed to be the master of his agency; he knew himself and was in control of his emotions and desires. Thus, it was supposed, his agency did not require further examination. As we become aware of the effects of communal histories in shaping our selves, we move away from that confidence in the autonomy of the subject.⁸

Responding to a world that seemed to lose meaning by the day, postmodern thinkers challenged fixed ontological valuations of the body in favor of a more robust phenomenology. Affected by its history (and the histories of its ancestors), the body came to be thought of as a contested sight, formed not by DNA, but by place, in struggles for power and through linguistic constructions.⁹ Whereas the body in a dualist reckoning is devalued in favor of inner consciousness, the poststructuralist body stands on shifting grounds, caught up in endless variations and given meaning not by its materiality, but through engagement with structures of power and language.

As I have noted, Descartes grounded being in its capacity to reason. He assumed that subjectivity could be trusted since it sprung from a stable mind with sound (and, for Descartes,

⁷ Caroline Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 1, 1995, 28.

⁸ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 107

⁹ Brown and Strawn agree, "Genes contribute only a rough blueprint of brain wiring; the rest is formed by a self-organizing process based on continued feedback from action in the world." Brown and Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life*, 53.

universal) reason. By the twentieth century, trust in the subject and in access to universal truths had eroded. It became increasingly clear that “the subject” was a cultural construction based on willful ignorance of the body’s capacity to create meaning. McNay accurately summarizes the intellectual climate,

It is this particular opposition that has become the focus of the deconstructive maneuvers of the poststructuralists and the pivotal point of their attack on Classical systems of thought and the philosophy of the subject. In regard to this opposition, a main concern has been to unpack the concept of the stable and unified subject by demonstrating how the ideas of rationality and self-reflection which underlie it are based on the exclusion and repression of the bodily realm and all that which, through analogy, it is held to represent—desire, materiality, emotion, need, and so on.¹⁰

Notable in McNay’s analysis is the inherent “exclusion and repression” of the body in dualistic systems. If the body is simply a vehicle for the soul and not a conduit by which one comes to knowledge of self and world, attributes assumed to belong to the bodily realm, such as “desire, materiality, emotion, need, and so on” are devalued. Emotion becomes less trustworthy than dispassionate reasoning, and nature less reliable than abstract formulations.

Poststructuralists brought a hidden truth to the light: “abstract reasoning” is a myth, another construction whose ultimate goal was consolidation of power and whose ends were destructive to persons assumed to be less rational. It is no surprise that the generations of thinkers formed by dualistic “rationalist” claims created and participated in structures that ensured the perpetual flourishing of (white) men, who were presumed to have access to a higher realm of reasoning. The prioritization of disembodied reasoning (as if there is such a thing!) created an intellectual and cultural climate whereby women, by virtue of their role in childbirth and their presumed emotionality, were considered less rational and therefore less trustworthy

¹⁰ McNay, 126.

than men. For Leder, the result of generations of “rationalist” thinking has led to an unexamined “onto-valuational dualism,” a structure of meaning that prioritizes and assigns value to traits coded masculine in Western culture.¹¹ Dualisms beget hierarchies, and hierarchies allow for a structuring of human community based not on the inherent value of the person, but on qualities assumed to be closer to the realm of transcendence (or, to use the Platonic language, Ideas): impassability, reason, and autonomy. In the wake of rationalism lies the bodies of women, nonwhite persons, the chronically ill, and a myriad of others, each a victim of history’s “disembodied” dualisms.

Systems of “onto-valuational dualism” could not hold in modernity. As has been noted, the catastrophes of history laid bare the effects of hierarchies and exposed the lived trauma of dualism for subjected bodies. French poststructuralists, chief among them Michel Foucault, brought bodies to the forefront in philosophical discourse. Foucault suggested that bodies were the primary location where power was made manifest in culture.¹² Granting that the body was a material reality, Foucault asserted it had no fixed meaning — the body is neither animalistic nor divine. Instead, bodies find their meaning in the nexus of competing ideas imposed on them. Bodies have, despite their undeniable presence, no “fixed biological or prediscursive essence.”¹³ They hold no meaning *in themselves*. Descartes questioned the utility of the mechanistic body and reduced it to its natural operations. Foucault allowed for the materiality of the body, but reduced it to societal meaning. At the center of Foucault’s theory is a distrust of any “totalizing system.” The “totalizing system,” which includes for Foucault theological systems, imposes

¹¹ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 154.

¹² McNay, 137.

¹³ McNay, 128.

unified, coherent meaning on historical events. For Foucault, there are no universal explanations in history, since history is no more than the unfolding of competing powers at the expense of concrete persons. Neither events in history nor the bodies they affect have meanings *in se*, rather, they are expressions of language, power, and repression.¹⁴ Writes Foucault,

We believe that feelings are immutable, but every sentiment, particularly the noblest and most disinterested, has a history. We believe in the dull constancy of instinctual life and imagine that it continues to exert its force indiscriminately in the present as it did in the past. But a knowledge of history easily disintegrates this unity, depicts its wavering course, locates its moments of strength and weakness, and defines its oscillating reign. It easily seizes the slow elaboration of instincts and those movements where, in turning upon themselves, they relentlessly set about their self destruction. We believe, in any event, that the body obeys the exclusive laws of physiology and that it escapes the influence of history, but this too is false. **The body is molded by a great many distinct regimes**; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances. ‘Effective’ history differs from traditional history in being without constants. **Nothing in man —not even his body — is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men.** The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. Necessarily, we must dismiss those tendencies that encourage the consoling play of recognitions. Knowledge, even under the banner of history, does not depend on ‘rediscovery,’ and it emphatically excludes the ‘rediscovery of ourselves.’ History becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being — as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself.¹⁵

Foucault’s focus on power allows him to see the ways in which the idea of “the natural” imposed on concrete bodies was nothing more than societal constructions that allowed for structural dehumanization in service of power (“a great many distinct regimes”). His work, an answer to ontological dualisms, was a forceful critique of “onto-valuational” systems that impose value on bodies based on abstract claims to universal truths.

¹⁴ McNay, 128. In-line quotation taken from Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.”

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 153. Emphases mine.

Foucault inspired generations of anti-essentialist thinkers, each of whom rejected the idea of a center from which fixed meaning springs. The postmodern body is, by its own account, fluid, responsive to “the categories with which we live” even as those very-same categories “are created by us as we live them.”¹⁶ Though perhaps not as ubiquitous a catchphrase as *Cogito, ergo sum*, the influence of postmodern thinking has been wide-reaching. While clearly influential in queer, race, and feminist theory, debates about the body-as-constructed have made their way to the Supreme Court, in school curricula, and among healthcare conglomerates. American culture is caught in ongoing conversation about the meaning of embodiment, and the ways in which bodies are formed in culture, nature, and society.

That we make meaning of our world by constant repetition of cultural norms cannot be denied.¹⁷ Our bodies are inscribed with culturally coded signifiers well before we come into awareness of the meanings they project. Humans reflect those meanings, even as they occasionally resist them. Either way, bodies are at least in part socially constructed. They are not, as Descartes may claim, neutral sites void of relevant data. The work of Foucault and those he influenced has been critical in the ongoing work of deconstructing systems of power and understanding human formation. However, their ultimate conclusions, that the body in an unstable site that resists meaning, is problematized by Christian claims about the goodness of the body, its foundation in divine intentionality, and its capacity to reveal absolute truths. If for Descartes the body has no impact on the subject, for anti-essentialists its impact is undeniable but

¹⁶ Bynum, 28. Bynum is responding to Judith Butler’s construction of the endlessly signified body.

¹⁷ This is an elementary summation of Judith Butler’s complex work on gender — “‘Gender ’is not ‘natural ’but repetitively ‘performed’”; “Thus the ‘body ’is no ‘ready surface awaiting signification, but ... a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained.”” Excerpts from *Gender Trouble* quoted in Coakley, 66.

elusive. Bodies have no foundation, no sure beginnings. Both theories resist meaning. Neither will hold.

2.3 The Cumulative Impact: “Absent” Theology, Modern Gnosticism, and the Spiritualized Church

Over the course of these pages I have attempted to show the intellectual foundations of the ancient, modern, and postmodern church, especially as they apply to the body. It is my contention that sustained focus on the true “inner” being has allowed for the flourishing of an overly spiritualized church that, like its dualist forebearers, prefers an inward, nonmaterial relationship with divinity to embodied discipleship exercised in daily living.¹⁸ As I will show in Chapters Four and Five, the inward turn has ethical ramifications. If the essential being is outside the body, then one can more easily ignore the work of caring for the concrete bodies of self, nature, and neighbor. Inwardness reflects an old heresy: the disembodied inheritance of the modern Western church has cultivated an environment ripe for a return to Gnosticism focused exclusively on the capacity of the “true” self to rise above its limited place and reach the transcendent realm of the deity. The consequences have been far reaching, both for the way we understand the role of the church and for our witness in the culture. The church has, both implicitly and explicitly, repackaged Gnosticism and, in so doing, reinforced dualistic ways of thinking that are contrary to the Scriptural witness.

¹⁸ “Spirituality Among Americans,” Beliefs and Practices, Pew Research Center, December 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans/>. As recently as December 2023, the Pew Research Center concluded that “7 in 10 U.S. adults describe themselves as spiritual in some way, including 22% who are spiritual but not religious.” The same survey found that over 80% of American adults “believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body.” The dualism is troubling and consequential. When meaning is turned inward, without reference to a unified person or a unified narrative, truth becomes the sole possession of the individual, who is able to judge and act according to her own inner barometer. Communities suffer when truth is reduced to individual meaning, and bodies can be disregarded when the “soul” can be extracted from the person.

In Genesis 1:26-27 God declares the divine intention to create humankind “in our image.” In two short verses variations of “bə·še·lem” (image) are repeated three times, once as an intention to create in the image and twice as an achieved reality. God grants humankind the derivative image, translated in the NRSVUE as “likeness.” For all this is overlooked about the primordial stories of Genesis, the *imago* has retained a place of privilege in the theological imaginatoin. We have already seen Calvin appropriate the *imago* in his discussion of Plato, transcendence, and immortality. For Calvin, the *imago* carries profound weight. Only nonmaterial essences unaffected by time and space can bear its burden. Any suggestion, as was made by Calvin’s contemporary, Lutheran theologian Andreas Osiander, that the image of God resides in the limited, sinful human body was anathema because God rightly dwells in only the transcendent realm. What is divine in humanity, then, must also dwell in incorporeal transcendence. By Calvin’s reckoning, to reduce the image to the body is to tear God from God’s rightful place and threaten the integrity of a dispassionate, invisible God. The *imago* is the immaterial soul in humanity, capable of ascent to the spiritual realms (as opposed to condescension of the divine to human flesh).

Calvin was not alone in his approach to the *imago*. Classical theologians assumed that human uniqueness was not in flesh, which is shared with other beings in creation. Instead, uniqueness is exercised in humanity’s capacity to reason and rule. That God announces God’s intention to create in the divine image and immediately grants humans dominion over creation was taken to mean that humans in turn rule their environments as God has ruled God’s creation. The *imago* in Classical formulations is the capacity to order and regulate. God exercises dominion over humanity, and humanity, in God’s image, exercises dominion over the created realm. Migliore traces the connection to Aquinas, “Perhaps the dominant Western interpretation

of the image of God has been that it resides in the rational nature of human beings. In the view of many classical theologians, including Thomas Aquinas, the exercise of human reason is a participation in and reflection of the divine logos or reason by which the word was created.”¹⁹

The logic sounds all too familiar, once again suggesting that which is most essential in humanity lies outside of embodiment. Still, the Western preference for disincarnate reality should not dull us to its danger. If the *imago* is only in the disembodied interior, there is a corollary disregard for all that is associated with bodies, and for those incarnate people who, by virtue of ability, age, or any other metric, are incapable of ascending to the heights of transcendence or the realm of Ideas.²⁰

The ascendance of internal being, whether the *imago* or the unaffected, inner self, has, despite the witness of the Creed, led the church closer to Gnosticism.²¹ Gnosticism in the second century adopted Neoplatonic attitudes toward embodiment and questioned Jesus’ true humanity because of his vulnerable flesh. Modern Gnosticism tends toward the former, assuming the fundamental reality and primacy of the nonmaterial “soul.” Brown and Strawn, in their account of dualism in the church, argue that the preference for “soul” and “spirituality” over embodied discipleship can be traced to Augustine (late fourth century), the father of Western theology.²² By their reckoning, Augustine’s Platonic dualism influenced Christian formation by turning it inward.²³ No longer was Christianity’s primary goal the reconciliation of the community or the

¹⁹ Migliore, 144.

²⁰ Migliore reminds us that where reason is prioritized there is a “corresponding depreciation of the emotional and physical dimension of human existence” (Migliore, 144). As in Cartesian dualisms, rationalist preference for reason applied to the *imago* once again works against bodies coded as more natural, feminine, or emotional.

²¹ Brown and Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church*, 23.

²² González, *The Story of Christianity*, 216.

²³ Brown and Strawn, 15.

wellness of one's neighbor. Instead, the primary concern of the Christian was the state of the "the essential me."²⁴ Alister McGrath further teases the connection between the ancient heresy's distrust of embodiment and our modern spiritual melting pot, turning our attention to the rise of Eastern meditative practice in the Western world and the modern suspicion of authority,

"If any ancient religious tradition can be said to resonate particularly well with contemporary social and religious fashions in North America, it is Gnosticism. What we know of Gnostic beliefs suggests that they chime in with contemporary ideals of self-discovery, self-awareness, self-actualization, and self-salvation, not to mention a dislike of any kind of authority, especially ecclesiastical."²⁵

That the soul, marked with the *imago*, was the true seat of selfhood and only temporarily enclosed by flesh became a self-evident theological truth across the millennia. Through the interventions of the soul, humans reconcile with God and receive their salvation. Because of the soul's immateriality, otherwise limited human could rise above their enfleshed station to the right hand of the Father, creating opportunities for ecstatic communion with God.

This thesis rose out of a concern that one of the most fundamental affirmations of Christian faith, the resurrection of the body, has no bearing on Christian praxis. How could we be transformed by a belief in the bodily resurrection if we believe that our true selves exist beyond our bodies? Sustained attention on "the essential me" and the ascension of the soul has distorted Christian understandings of both salvation and resurrection. Without a robust affirmation of the goodness of the body and the scope of salvation in the created order, Christianity has lost its core conviction: embodied resurrection in the life everlasting.

One consequence of Augustine's inward turn is that salvation is conceived of as an inner connection with God. As an inward experience, salvation has no bearing on the body or its

²⁴ Brown and Strawn, 15.

²⁵ Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 117.

surrounding community. One is saved in one's soul, and experiences reconciliation exclusively between God and the believer. One's attitudes and behaviors are irrelevant, only the state of the soul vis-a-vis its (disembodied) savior. Salvation is reduced to individual peace. For theologian and biblical scholar Richard Hays, this is best seen in troublesome beliefs about death that pervade the modern church. Death is not an enemy overcome by the work of God, but, as in Platonism, an expected friend. The soul springs from its trap and is greeted at the somehow nonmaterial pearly gates,

When we confront death," writes Hays "we tend to focus on the fate of the individual soul (conceived as going to heaven immediately), not on the resurrection of the body, and certainly not on God's restoration of the whole creation. Regrettably, this kind of individualistic, dualistic, piety is closer to ancient Gnosticism than to historic orthodox Christianity.²⁶

It is notable that Hays links death, individualism, and a nonmaterial resurrection with dualism. When Christian theology is shaped by dualism, it proclaims a transactional, nonmaterial salvation entirely divorced from God's surprising interventions in creation. Resurrection is an immediate transition to eternal bliss. That which was made in creation is left behind for an impersonal, eternal transcendent realm.

A troublesome practical disbelief in the bodily resurrection is pervasive where our only concern is the wellness of the soul. The outlook is not fatalistic — it is, as with Platonism, *assumed*. Life everlasting is *expected*: life follows a cycle of regenerations. God's will for creation is perpetual nonmaterial being. The result is a denial of both the fleshiness of resurrection and the sheer gift of resurrection. Abstraction strips creation from its original

²⁶ Richard B. Hays and Roger E. Van Harn, "The Resurrection of the Body: Carnis Resurrectionem," in *Exploring and Proclaiming The Apostles' Creed* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 266.

materiality, orienting believers toward a scripturally dubious claim that only their souls, or that in them which is capable of transcending to God, can also transcend to heaven on their death.²⁷

Scripture, on the other hand, affirms the centrality of embodied resurrection for all whom God redeems. Resurrection is always an act of the God whose will is life. Resurrection is bound to God's creative agency and is a gift that echoes the primordial gift of creation. Embodied resurrection is the end promised by Christ's faith. Its link to creation will be explored in the chapters to come, but it is sufficient now to note that the doctrine of the resurrection, rightly proclaimed, eschews culturally attested dualisms, announcing instead the unity of the created Spirit-flesh in its complex materiality.

Whether ancient or modern, Gnosticism leaves a vacuum in the heart of Christian theology. Where concrete, embodied persons become tertiary, theology becomes overly abstracted, disconnected from both individual bodies and the social body. Absent bodies cultivate absent theology. Inwardness as a primary mark of discipleship encourages Christians to only consider themselves and their spiritual needs, which are conceived of as being disconnected from their bodies and are surely disconnected from other flesh in creation. No longer is the Christian called on to work for the already-present Kingdom on earth or to care for the needs of her neighbor, her goal in a dualistic world is directed toward her future and her ascent to heaven. Lived discipleship loses its embodied character. Absent theology is surely a consequence of what Bonhoeffer would call "cheap grace," a feature of Christendom wherein what is proclaimed in the church does not transform Christian living, "Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without

²⁷ Hays, 262.

confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.²⁸ Cheap grace is inward spirituality that does not transform the believer or the community. It is dualistic and pervasive. “Costly grace,” or true discipleship, is both the inward awareness of one’s absolute dependence on God and an embodied awareness that transforms individual and communal life. Costly grace is *literally* following, a physical act that reorients behavior. Discipleship is, in its varied expressions, utter dependence. It is chasing after the *enfleshed* Jesus Christ.

2.4 A Counter-Factual Excursus | *The Dys-Appearing Gaze: Absent Bodies Brought to Presence*

Over the course of these chapters I have argued that the cumulative impact of dualisms has led to a displacement of the body in Christian theologies and practices. It is not sufficient, however, to suggest that church and culture are somehow body-blind. It is important at this juncture to hold together two seemingly contradictory truths: humans formed in a matrix of privilege do not account for embodiment as a part of their essential being *and* those very same persons are often obsessed with bodies, whether it be policing them, improving them, or obsessively attending to their care. Thus the necessity of this excursus: to claim that bodies are absent, and that Christian theologies do not adequately account for embodiment is not to suggest broad cultural neutrality toward bodies. Western attitudes toward race, gender, size, and ability are aimed directly at bodily representation. It is my claim that the contradiction is itself an expression of embedded dualism.

In what follows, I will focus on experiences that bring bodies into focus, broadly categorized as incidents of “dys-appearance.” Dys-appearance, defined by Leder as the sudden appearance of the body “away from an ordinary or desirable state is, in each case, a function of dualism.²⁹ The otherwise absent body suddenly announces itself in a way that is distracting, troublesome, or dire” (hence the usage of the prefix “dys-“). The body becomes an object to be overcome rather than a unified gift of God. Four experiences of dys-appearance will be considered. First, bodies have been brought forward by virtue of the historical church’s obsession with sex, sexuality, and gender (including not only gender roles, but ideal body types within the presumed binary). Secondly, bodies are brought into unavoidable presence through the experience of aberrant physicality, by which I mean the near-universal experience of non-normative physical states, be they temporary experiences of pain or more chronic experiences of illness, loss, and disability. Third, the threat posed by our own limitations and our near-constant quests for self-improvement bring “ideal” bodies to individual and cultural consciousness. Finally, bodies are brought forward in the objectification, classification, and othering of bodies not our own. Bodies brought to presence as objects do not belong to the unified Spirit-flesh. They remain traps from which the true self seeks release.

Reflecting on Western culture’s antagonistic relationship with sexuality, Richard Rohr captures the dissonance between what is proclaimed in Scripture and the puritanical approach toward the body cultivated in Classical theology, “How ironic that the very religious that has believed that God became flesh has been the most consistently negative in its relatedness to human flesh.”³⁰ A faith rooted in creation and incarnation has failed to proclaim the goodness of incarnation, creatureliness, and the body. Where it has turned attention to our incarnations,

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, vol. 4, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 44.

²⁹ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 90.

³⁰ Richard Rohr, *Near Occasions of Grace* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 26.

the church has been conceived primarily as arbiters of morality, as if publicly policing gender and sexuality is the central purpose of discipleship.³¹ The sustained focus on gender and sexuality skews the way in which we understand ourselves as bodies, reducing flesh to its function in procreation and *again* prioritizing disembodied reason over embodied, relational experience.

Leder interprets sexuality as a mode of dys-appearance by referencing the threat of “dispossessed reason.”³² A human solely focused on fulfilling their sexual desires calls to question any mode of self-understanding presumed to be built on the primacy of reason. Sexuality as an expression of intimacy, passion, and pleasure threatens the integrity of an autonomous, dispassionate, disincarnate subject. Sowle Cahill traces modern ecclesiastical obsessions over the sexed self to Descartes: “This stream bears forward the modern concern with interiority, consciousness, and the thinking, knowing, willing self.”³³ The individual is “lost” to her passions or “overwhelmed” by them. The true self is subject to the whims of the illogical flesh and opens herself to any number of disasters when driven by bodily passion. The problems for theological somatology are legion. Among them, the goodness of connection and pleasure *in se* are lost, dualisms are reinforced, and sexuality is understood primarily in its relationship to reproduction, “procreation as a bodily dimension of sex has in the past been used to control sexual behavior, restrain and subordinate sexual pleasure, and restrict sexual identity, especially of women.”³⁴ Sexuality, a potential site for expression of the body’s goodness, is used as a cudgel to amass power. Those embodied persons for whom sex is an expression of pleasure, whether they be women who wish to express themselves beyond procreation or sexual minorities for whom sex cannot be linked to procreation, challenge the system that has built its power on restraining pleasure. All bodies suffer when sexuality is coded as a threat to interior personhood. Stereotypes of the rugged, unaffected individual are reinforced, and the pleasure of relationship — intimately bound to the work of creation in Genesis 2 — becomes secondary to the recessive functioning of the body. Within a dualistic paradigm, sexuality nearly always appears as a threat to be controlled rather than a joyful celebration of relationality and the pleasures of incarnation.

The most vivid example of the connection between dys-appearance and dualism is the experience of pain, whether acute pain or chronic illness. In its normative state, the body recedes from perception. Pain, by virtue of its “affective call” proclaims a rupture, it is “the very concretization of the unpleasant, the aversive,” or, simply, that which cannot be ignored.³⁵ Borne from embodiment, pain is an unavoidable reminder of the connection between self and flesh. But pain is not received as a celebration of the unity of Spirit and flesh, “At times of pain and illness, the body surfaces as something essential to, but also ‘away from’ the essential self, blocking its intentions, causing it to suffer, endangering its life.”³⁶ In a dualistic perspective, pain is an object to be eradicated in order that the unencumbered inner self may flourish. Summarizing the findings of a study on pain in medical settings, Leder notes that “patients almost universally describe their pain as an ‘it,’ separate from the ‘I.’”³⁷ The self is stymied by the dys-appeared body. Though brought to presence, the body is functionally absent; selfhood is maintained as an “inner” reality apart from and bothered by experiences of limitation announced by pain.³⁸ The experience of pain cannot be ignored, but neither is it a reason to flee from embodiment. Pain limits us, but it also unites us in our vulnerability. Indeed, through the experience of the Incarnation pain is shared even among the Godhead. The inner reality is not affirmed by divorcing itself from the flesh. Rather, the unity of the person is affirmed in her experience of shared vulnerability and dependence.

³¹ Lisa Sowle Cahill traces the obsession with sexuality to the Thomistic legacy of moral theology within Roman Catholicism. For more see *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73ff. Anyone who lived through the 1990s, the era of purity rings and threatening seductresses, will likely associate church primarily with its quest to control women’s bodies, which were coded as both pure and threatening.

³² Leder, “The Absent Body (and Beyond),” 7.

³³ Sowle Cahill, 74.

³⁴ Sowle Cahill, 74.

³⁵ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 71.

³⁶ Leder, “The Absent Body (and Beyond),” 7.

³⁷ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 76.

³⁸ If pain furthers the distance between “I” and the body, one could rightly wonder how pleasure functions vis-a-vis bodily absence. Leder theorizes that pain is “disrupted intentionality” (Leder, *The Absent Body*, 74). The body does not respond to the will, or it acts against the will (both reflect dualisms). Pleasure, on the other hand, brings embodiment forward but (often) in response to a chosen pursuit (Leder, *The Absent Body*, 92-93).

A quarrel with limits lies at the heart of the quest for self-improvement (I will further explore limits in Chapters Three and Four). Where pain exposes an inability to will wellness, self-improvement, as an expression of dys-appearance, bespeaks a capacity to make objects of our own bodies. It is a common human experience to obsess over appearance, and to evaluate one's own body as it might appear from the outside.³⁹ The very same gaze that discursively acts to form bodies in society, both as a manifestation of power and of culture, forms human thinking about normativity and forces humans to consider their bodies as *objects to be evaluated*. In a trivial but illustrative vignette, Leder points to dress as an example of the way dys-appearance functions in social settings: "I most easily forget my body when it looks and acts just like everyone else's. However, walk into a party inappropriately attired, and self-consciousness returns."⁴⁰ The "self-consciousness" distinguishes "disappearance" from "dys-appearance" (relying on the prefix ("dys" to connote abnormality). Bodies disappear when they are represented in social, political, and cultural settings. Where bodies are not represented, or when individuals believe themselves to be under the scrutiny of the social gaze, their bodies come roaring back into the field of self-perception. Self-objectification depends on an individual's capacity to judge herself neutrally according to normative standards and to subsequently attend to the task of correction.⁴¹ Embodiment becomes a project, and for those with the means, the lure of limitlessness promises a path to perfection, whether by surgical intervention, through self-destructive behaviors, or by a pervasive "mind over matter" mindset.

Self-consciousness drives individual dys-appearance. But there is a far more pernicious expression of societal dys-appearance that lies at the root of societal dys-function. The objectifying gaze turns its attention to the bodies of the other and attempts to categorize and comprehend them based on perceptible characteristics that are assigned moral significance and assumed to carry ontological weight.⁴² Bodies brought forward by the social gaze —dys-appeared bodies — are forced to presence because of their perceived difference vis-a-vis the "normative body." Reduced to a social category, those coded "other" are simultaneously stripped of their individuality and viewed as objects within a comprehensible system (such is the "totalizing knowledge" of totalizing systems with which Foucault quarreled). Bordo illustrates the point well, linking Cartesian dualisms and their "self"-justifying degradation of matter with the desire to classify, comprehend, and control the lesser other, "Now, in the same brilliant stroke that insured the objectivity of science—the mutual opposition of the spiritual and the corporeal—the formerly female earth becomes inert *res extensa*: dead, mechanically interacting matter. 'She' becomes 'it'—and 'it' can be understood."⁴³ Bordo's is a chilling indictment, recalling both the will to power and the way in which power is enacted on bodies. "It," whether the matter of nature, the bodies of women, or any number of societal "others" bears likeness to the "it" of pain. "It" can be controlled, categorized, and eradicated. "It" is distanced from the idealized self. "It" exists contrary to the will of God, who created humans in their precise difference for relationship with one another and with the ontologically different divine other.

The long history of race in America epitomizes the violent (and haunting) outcome of objectification. Rivera recalls the "colonial obsession for classifying body-types," and its impact on modern standards of normativity.⁴⁴ America came to being with the help of an objectifying taxonomy borrowed from the Portuguese and perfected by the Dutch. Only in a system formed by body-objectification, where the subject is denied a united embodiment, could racism so easily flourish. In order to protect production, Black bodies were deprived of their subjectivity and extolled only for their physicality.⁴⁵ Those coded "African," regardless of tribal origin, familial status, nationality, or social rank, were classified based on their presumed capacity to produce. Black bodies became objects to be comprehended, controlled, and kept. Theirs is not the dys-appearance of self-consciousness, wherein we suddenly recall our bodies based on what we perceive to be our failures. Black bodies were forcibly brought to

³⁹ McBride, 84.

⁴⁰ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 97.

⁴¹ Leder, "The Absent Body (and Beyond)," 8.

⁴² In her assessment of Bonhoeffer's critique of totalitarianism, Jean Bethke Elshtain calls attention to the way in which both utopian and totalitarian systems attempt to "assimilate the concrete other" in order to advance their political project. Though not totalitarian, it is "assimilation" — not into the fullness of a culture, but rather into a category with pre-assigned meaning calls to question autonomy, fullness, and capabilities of the concrete other — that is at play here. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Bonhoeffer on Modernity: 'Sic et Non,'" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2001), 354.

⁴³ Susan Bordo, "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought," *Signs* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1986), 452.

⁴⁴ Rivera, "Unsettling Bodies," 120.

⁴⁵ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2023), 46.

presence by the gaze of a normatively white society. Blackness was created within the confines system that assumed the priority of the white mind and the white subject. Within that system, Black bodies were brought to presence, even as whiteness, in its ubiquity and normativity, slipped from perception. Racism is a sin perpetuated against embodiment.⁴⁶ Writing in the wake of the racial violence that erupted in the summer of 2020, theologian Brian Bantum names our shared participation in systems that dehumanize concrete others a “structural sin:” “Structural sin is the obscuring of our bodies...its root lies in making the dehumanization of others a seemingly natural idea.”⁴⁷ Oppression rooted in dys-appearance denies the body both its goodness and its ontology — formed by God according to the purposes of God.

Dys-appearance — whether pain or the objectifying gaze — strips the subject of his unity and trains him to create further space between the unaffected “me” and the problematic body in which I am trapped. There is a contradiction at the root of our approach toward bodies, and one that Christian formation can rightly address: individuals are taught to discount the needs, materiality, and potential of their incarnations *even as we inherit a system founded on (dehumanized) embodiment*. Dys-appearance, particularly the objectification of bodies in a totalizing system, cannot be understood as the will of God. Bodies forcibly brought to presence damage both the society trained to dehumanize and the person — a unity of Spirit and flesh — who is denied her incarnation, “Visible corporeal traits become social data; social classifications become bodily wounds.”⁴⁸ Marginalization, objectification, and dys-appearance expose dualisms and the human tendency to reject the inherent limit of creatureliness and of the concrete other. The harm is not abstract. That which was created “very good” is problematized. Bodily rejection accelerates recession. An examination of the church’s failure to retain and proclaim its first proclamations and a subsequent return to the promises of creation are in order.

2.5 Looking Ahead

The quarrel over the body bespeaks its complexity. Bodies are bounded and placed within a specific tempo-spatial framework that, to some degree, forms them. But it cannot be assumed that because flesh is vulnerable and shared among creation, human uniqueness lies in an utterly interior “self” or a ceaseless rendering of power. Humanity cannot be reduced to a temporarily enfleshed “soul” that will spring to the transcendent realm on death, but neither can humans be imagined as constructs, endlessly signified according to culturally practiced norms. What then can we say with certainty about our carnality? What grounds our formation and gives context to the Christian affirmation of resurrection? In the next section we will turn to Bonhoeffer’s commentary on Genesis 1-3 as a way to explore theological somatology. It is my claim that

⁴⁶ As are other “-isms” — ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia...the list is as long as the catalogue of human difference.

⁴⁷ Brian Bantum, *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 99.

⁴⁸ Mayra Rivera, “Thinking Bodies: The Spirit of a Latina Incarnational Imagination,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 8.

returning to God's intention in creation can help us understand the promise of our embodiment and our promised (enfleshed) end which will, in turn, teach us something of our foundational embodied purpose.

“Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness”
—Genesis 1:26a

“And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”
—Genesis 2:8-9

“And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man [God] made into a woman...”
—Genesis 2:22a

Chapter 3 | Embodied (Limited) Creatureliness as a Gift: Bonhoeffer’s Theological Anthropology

The Psalmist surveys creation, imagining the heavens and the firmament, and proclaims in wonder: “what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:4, NRSVUE). In context, it is a question of grandeur. Why does the God of creation condescend to God’s creatures? What in humanity merits the upholding gaze of God? This work echoes the Psalmist’s cry, but with a different end in mind. The question is not one of God’s character, but of God’s intention in creation. What comprises the human who is redeemed and resurrected? What can we know of ourselves in view of the God who is incarnate among humanity? How does having been made by the Maker of heaven and earth transform our self-understanding? In short: what *are* humans? Bifurcation has been ruled out: mind-soul/body dualisms do not meet the standard established in the Creed, and God’s intention is the ontological ground that postmodernity lacks. While we can acknowledge alongside postmodern thinkers that we are formed in society, and therefore porous to the world around us, our being is a response to divine purpose. Grounding human identity in God’s will protects us from the infinite variation of construction while allowing for the constructive possibility of formation within the social environments in which we are placed.

The Apostles' Creed proclaims a belief in the Maker of heaven and earth. In so doing it affirms the Jewish accounts of creation. The God of Israel, who is revealed in the New Testament as the Father of Jesus Christ, acted in freedom to bring all that is into being.¹ Humanity, alongside heaven and earth, exists as that which is made. Before we are anything we are creatures. Creatureliness is humanity's beginning and its end; creatureliness establishes the parameters of possibility for those who have been gifted life.² To this point, it has been my contention that the church has overlooked opportunities to proclaim a robust theological somatology grounded in the creation narratives. Rather than beginning theological reflection with God's freedom and human creatureliness, theologians and preachers have begun their reflections with the fall and human sinfulness. The early stories of Genesis, vivid though they are, are rendered inconsequential except insofar as they attempt to account for the world's evil. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel blames "Western Augustinian theology" for the oversight, noting the central role sinfulness plays in Augustine's (and consequently Anselm's, Calvin's, and Descartes's) theological worldviews.³ While the profound break that sin introduces into

¹ Ours is a theological, not a scientific proclamation. By insisting alongside Scripture and the Creeds that God created the cosmos, I am not denying scientific claims rooted in theories of evolution. How God created is, as Bonhoeffer reminds us, a thought we cannot think (Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 25ff). We trust only *that* God created, that what we encounter in the material world is a reflection of God's purpose. The days of creation and eons of evolution are not at odds. God created. God's intention sparked the world that is now coming into being and is oriented toward the final Kingdom on earth.

² Norman Wirzba, "The Art of Creaturely Life: A Question of Human Propriety," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 1 (2013), 8. Wirzba engages poststructuralists (specifically the anthropological dialogues between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy) while affirming God's intention in creating *creatures* as the grounding reality of life, the goal of creation, and the structure of Christian living, "creatureliness goes to the heart of human identity and vocation, illuminating *who* we are, *where* we are, and *what we are to do*...creatureliness is a more faithful and compelling rendition of human life than are modern characterizations of subjectivity that have often been uncritically absorbed by Christians." I have been deeply influenced by Wirzba's engagement with postmodern thinkers and his assessments of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology.

³ Moltmann-Wendel, 104.

creation cannot be discounted, an anthropology that begins with the fall limits both the radical (embodied) message of discipleship and misses an opportunity to engage with the Triune God's first gifts to creation. Theology abstracted from the intentions of God in Genesis 1 and 2 can only account for human sinfulness, which further distances humans from their incarnation and limits Jesus' work to a formulaic sacrifice on behalf of an estranged sinner.

That Scripture begins with creation is consequential for the story of God's faithfulness that subsequently unfolds. Genesis opens with the gift of shared life — both God sharing life with creation and creation sharing life with one another. God breathes and hovers, intimately working within creation for creation. Embodied, mutual relationships are brought to being through God's creative will. Genesis 1 proclaims something about human beginnings, human ends, and the God who takes pleasure in the humans God created. Creation, therefore, should be conceived of as a “proper starting point” in the ever-expanding quest for a faith that seeks understanding.⁴ In this chapter I will engage human beginnings from the beginning. Attending to the narratives of Genesis 1, I will pay special attention to the beauty of creatureliness and the freedom of God. I will then turn to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ to explore the potential for embodied life everlasting and the pedagogical reality of God's own flesh. Accordingly, this chapter will begin with creation in an attempt to understand creatureliness. That we are intentionally embodied — enfolded in vulnerable flesh — is a starting point for all that follows and

⁴ Ola Sigurdson, “Theology in the Middle of Things: Existential Preconditions of Systematic Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22, no. 4 (October 2020), 473. For “faith that seeks understanding,” I am indebted to Anselm of Canterbury's famous dictum by way of Daniel Migliore's text of the same name.

serves as a response to the Psalmist's probing cry. Throughout the chapter I will be guided by the creation narratives in Genesis 1-3 and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall*, a series of lectures on the primordial stories transcribed by the author and delivered at the University of Berlin over the course of the 1932-1933 academic year.⁵ Bonhoeffer takes seriously both God's intention and the present human condition, crafting an anthropology grounded in the Scriptural witness in conversation with God's promises for embodied life everlasting. Unlike *Creation and Fall*, this chapter will not proceed as a verse-by-verse commentary. I will utilize Bonhoeffer's themes to explore embodied creatureliness and its potential, considering in turn how humanity comes to trust God's word, God's work in the material act of creation, the goodness of limitations, the giftedness of being, the image of God in humanity, and, finally, the ways in which the Incarnation can instruct humans in our incarnations.

3.1 On the Context of Creation and Fall

"The Limits that Make Us" is intended as a gift to the church, a way of reflecting on the flesh that constitutes both our beginning and our end. In the first two chapters I attempted to reconstruct the ways in which history and theology conspired to minimize the reality of our carnality. In light of Bonhoeffer's contributions to theological anthropology, it is important to note how historical context gives rise to constructive

⁵Bonhoeffer delivered his lectures on the ancient Jewish text in the period after the Nazi power secured a majority in the German government. Over the course of the lectures Hitler would come to power, slowly dismantling the liberalism of the Weimar Republic. In February 1932, during the Winter term at the university, the Reichstag was set ablaze, an event that allowed for consolidation of Nazi power and paved the way for the dismantling of individual liberties and the establishment of a totalitarian, racist regime. Bonhoeffer's choice to teach on a Hebrew text and his dedication to the question of theological anthropology established in that text should certainly be read in light of the rising antisemitism in German life, seen through the lens of the establishment of the German Christian Church and Hitler's Third Reich.

theology. Bonhoeffer did his work in a time of social upheaval, when any illusions that humanity was engaged in a long march of progress were shattered by the sheer power of nativist regimes. The modern man — the gendering is intentional — was judged in view of his capacity for singular autonomy. Theologian and ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain suggests that Bonhoeffer must be read in light of that archetypical “man” and the world that was being made in his image: “the modernist presupposition of, and celebration of, human self-sovereignty...”⁶ In *Creation and Fall*, lectures delivered as Nazis consolidated power across the former German Empire, Bonhoeffer posits the utter gift of being (and therefore of creaturely dependence), the necessity of community, and the foundational reality of limits. His exegesis is colored not only by the threat of the rising Reich, but in view of the ideology that fueled the pursuits of the Reich, an increasingly dangerous view of human superiority and capacity that made its way into the German church.

The autonomous self that Bonhoeffer rejected was not only self-absorbed, he retained no need for counsel and viewed himself as utterly unencumbered, he “has no room for another either because he or she is caught up in the idealist miasma of vitalism or because he or she views the other through the lens of mechanization and utility—or an even more deadly ideology of racial superiority.”⁷ *Creation and Fall* is urgent not only because it helps Christians explore their beginnings, without which we are infinitely susceptible to corrupting outside forces and delusional inner narratives, but because it acts as a protest against any regime or power that holds the rugged individual as its ideal.

⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, 351.

⁷ Bethke Elshtain, 354.

The church faced with the (very Jewish) creation narratives must constantly mind its own present: what do we hold as our highest value in life, and with whom do we share that vision? What is humanity that God is mindful of us, and how might we reflect that reality in our life together? The questions that German Christians faced should haunt our present. Engagement with Genesis 1-3 is not only an intellectual curiosity, it is a way to ground our being in the world. The narrative of human beginnings is, at every time and place, a gift to the church.

3.2 Revelation: Bodies by Faith

Bonhoeffer opens *Creation and Fall* with revelation. In his exegesis on Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning”), Bonhoeffer acknowledges the limits of the academic approach, “Where the beginning begins, there our thinking stops, there it comes to an end.”⁸

Bonhoeffer’s claim is twofold: first, there is a mystery “in the beginning” to which humans do not have access, and secondly, what the Church claims to know is based on the revelation of a God whose faithfulness is told through the imperfect but trustworthy witness of Scripture. That humanity lives in the “middle” is important to everything that follows. We are estranged from our beginnings, both as a matter of history and vocation. Bonhoeffer’s claim, which this text shares, is that the Father has granted us knowledge, mediated through the Son by the power of the Spirit, of “the beginning.” That we are given a glimpse of the beginning is not arbitrary, nor, despite its prescientific formations, folkloric; instead, knowledge of the beginning is foundational for self-understanding.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, vol. 3, 17 vols., Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 25.

Those made in God's image are reminded through God's word of what it is to be made and of what God's image consists. To acknowledge that humans are creatures of the Maker and that the cosmos around us is an outpouring of divine intention is to announce an epistemological structure to which we do not have direct access. In light of the revelation in Genesis, the particular meanings of creatureliness can be understood as a faith claim. God precedes, encloses, and subsumes our beginnings and this liminal middle. God stands at our end. God's will, disclosed in the revelation of Scripture, is the means by which humans make sense of flesh, being, limitations, and freedom.

3.3 Beginning at our Beginning: God the Maker

What does it mean that humanity has been created? That God willed life — not as an accident but through the work of the divine will — centers God in human self-understanding and creates room for a positive conception of human goodness, materiality, and dependency, even while accounting the reality of sin and evil in the world. Whatever the mode of our genesis, humans, and indeed all creation, exist before God because of God's creative word.⁹ God is the primary actor in human history. We cannot access God's history, or "go back behind the beginning."¹⁰ We can only know what we have been given to know: we were created from freedom by a God who willed to share life.

⁹ Reformed theologian John Leith reframes the "human starting point:" it is "not one's own existence but the will of the creator or lord." At every point God's will is foregrounded. That we have a will is secondary and derivative, a manifestation of God's intention in creation. (John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, Revised (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1981), 74.)

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 32.

Immediately in human finitude we encounter a limit. God, known yet shrouded in mystery, goes before us. There is no escaping God, no age untouched by the divine purpose or the divine will.¹¹ In later discussions of the goodness of limits, God's preexistent, sovereign, alteriority will in view. As Creator, God is precisely what humans are not. For now, it is enough to note that humanity does not originate itself, and neither are humans essential to God. Bonhoeffer conceives of God's original creative power in terms of the "nothingness" that exists between God and creation, a "nothingness" that ought to induce awe at the Creator's will to create: "...the Creator — in freedom! — creates the creature... The relation between Creator and creature can never be interpreted in terms of cause and effect... there is simply nothing... Creation comes out of this nothing."¹² By centering God as the Maker of all that is and taking seriously the free nature of God's self-giving act, people of faith come to a jarring realization: it is only because God willed humans that we are. Humanity is not an inevitability. We are breathed, created, encountered. We are not — and can never be independent, sovereign, or autonomous.

Our dependency is, at first blush, terrible news. In the modern world whatever is deemed unnecessary is easily disregarded. It is assumed that "unnecessary" and "without value" are synonymous. The creation story in Genesis offers a different view. Our value lies precisely in God's unencumbered will or, to put it in another way, in the nothingness through which we are bound to God. That God was not forced to create suggests God's

¹¹ Charles T. Mathewes, "A Tale of Two Judgments: Bonhoeffer and Arendt on Evil, Understanding, and Limits, and the Limits of Understanding Evil," *The Journal of Religion* 80, no. 3 (July 2000), 398.

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 32.

pleasure and intentionality in the act. God chose, God spoke, and so it was. What we know of God and of ourselves is interpreted in light of God's freedom, and mirrored in the freedom of the Incarnation and resurrection. We are derived from God's primordial (free) act of self-emptying. We are dependent not only on the acts of generation that form our particular bodies, but also the upholding gaze of God.

In view of human dependency, Migliorie and other Reformed theologians (including Bonhoeffer) frame being as utterly contingent, asserting that God's pleasure upholds humanity in the face of total annihilation. In the abstract, contingency should be affirmed. Were it not for God's will, we would not be. Does it necessarily follow that God holds us over an abyss, "much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire"?¹³ Could God hate those God freely created? When considering creatureliness, we must attend to God's will in both creation and preservation. Any notion of contingency that does not take into consideration the character of the God who turned in freedom toward life is inadequate to the revelation of God, and interprets "nothingness" by Western standards. The God who created us wills life, not the abyss. The God who was Incarnate seeks reconciliation, not annihilation. God's continued preservation and our derived dependency are critical features of our creatureliness revealed in God's free act.

To name that God created in freedom from nothing is also to assert the goodness of creation. Against any theology, Reformed or otherwise, that asserts total depravity, the

¹³ Jonathan Edwards. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, August 2017, 1, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=21212307&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

witness of Scripture draws our attention to God’s creation. Bonhoeffer’s reasoning is transitive, “Because the world is God’s world, it is good. God, the Creator and Lord of the world, wills a good world, a good work.”¹⁴ Humans may have made a mess of their gift, but it does not erase God’s intention or negate God’s work. That God continues to preserve (in Bonhoeffer’s formulation to “gaze on”) creation suggests an abiding goodness possible among creation. We can agree with Calvin that goodness is not derived from human pursuits while allowing for a secondary goodness granted by virtue of having been made by the Maker. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer will further claim that it is God’s love that drives human preservation and leaves open the possibility of goodness: “The real human being is the object neither of contempt, nor of deification, but the object of the love of God.”¹⁵ God does not stand in a dispassionate, mechanistic relationship to the humanity on which the divine image is imprinted. God, who creates from freedom and grants God’s own goodness, looks on humanity with love. Though goodness is derived and often denied, it remains a possibility in the world imbued with God’s love.

Given the interests of this thesis, it is also critical to point to the materiality of creation. God did not manifest a spiritual realm. Across the story of Genesis God unfolds a creation that comes to being wrapped in matter — the firmament, the skies, the creatures, and finally the man. Our understanding of our bodies begins, then, not east of Eden’s fiery gates, but in God’s first works. An adequate understanding of embodiment cannot be developed apart from the first stories in Genesis. God did not create the spirit

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 46.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Charles C. West, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works — Reader’s Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 40.

of a creature or of a human only to wrap it in flesh as an afterthought. Matter is fundamental to the human being and “The body belongs to the person’s essence.”¹⁶ If God creates the human in the unity of Spirit-flesh, and God grants goodness to that person, then, with Rohr, we can agree that “God’s will is incarnation” and “for God, matter really matters.”¹⁷ Faithful Christian somatology cannot ignore our genesis. Beginnings matter. Matter, unspooled by a good Maker, matters.

That it is God who creates is consequential for that which is created. To further assert that God created in freedom from nothing points to the sheer grace revealed in the act of making. Once again, nothingness is in view. Creation is a gift given without an antecedent; creation is an abundant grace, that which is undeserved. The Greek “χάρις” (*charis*) best expresses the theological idea. *Charis* names both God’s kindness and God’s unmerited generosity.¹⁸ To suggest that creation is a gracious gift is to express the unmerited act of creation and the abundant delight God takes in giving the gift. Affirming that life is a gift allows us to frame our embodiment in terms of grace. That we are is a grace. That we, in the fullness of our flesh, exist, is a gift.¹⁹ Flesh is God’s will and God’s gift. When flesh is encountered, it is encountered as a revelation, a *charis*.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 76.

¹⁷ Richard Rohr, 5.

¹⁸ Danker, 876.

¹⁹ Griffiths, 20.

3.4 *The Grace of Boundaries*

“In the center” of the garden, God places two trees, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge.²⁰ The life of the humans in Eden is defined by that “center.”²¹ Bonhoeffer’s reading of the Edenic scene is a masterwork of theological imagination. Life in the garden flows from a generative middle: the tree of life stands and all else on earth revolves around it. In centering God’s gift of life, the de-centering of human beings is affirmed.²² Earth does not revolve around the human creature; Adam is not the apex of creation. At the center stands the tree, the centripetal grace through which God provides. Humans, along with the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, swirl around the tree, they have their being in relationship with the gift of life at the center of their existence. Writes Bonhoeffer, “It was at the center; that is all that is said about it. The life that comes from God is at the center; that is to say, God who gives life is at the center. At the center of the world that has been put at Adam’s disposal and over which Adam has been given dominion is not Adam himself but the tree of divine life.”²³ All existence is oriented toward the gift. Neither the tree nor the life that flows through it can be avoided. In their earthly life, Adam and Eve are continually called back to the center, to the relationship between God and humanity that grounds being.

The directionality of the text is not incidental — it lies at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s theological anthropology. Humanity as it was created exists in reference to

²⁰ The NRSVUE prefers “in the midst,” while Bonhoeffer prefers “middle” or “center.”

²¹ Eden is used as a catch-all for the state of humanity in unbroken relationship with God, which is to say human existence before Adam transgressed the command to eat from the tree of knowledge, changing the character of the relationship between creature and creator.

²² Recall that affirming God is “Maker” is a de-centering proclamation. God is the sovereign, willful actor in creation, which necessarily places humans outside of a universal center-point.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 83-84.

a center, not toward an ever-expanding, limitless margin.²⁴ Our horizons are necessarily bounded by God's graciousness. At our beginning, God tethers humanity to God's self by virtue of the tree, which is of course is nothing less than God's providential gift of life. Because it stands at the center the gift of life is also a limit. Life from the center constricts possibility. Limits, which are constitutive of our being, signify that we are and that we are bound. Whether one lives in relationship to the center or in ignorance of it, there is no life without the limit set by the center. In a reflection on *Creation and Fall* Norman Wirzba explores the relationship between creation, grace, and limit:

a limit is not an obstacle or challenge that lies before us as something to be overcome and then left behind. If it were, it would be at the periphery of our lives as the domain not yet appropriated and internalized. Theologically understood, limit goes to the core of our being because it marks us as ones who must constantly go to the tree of life and receive life as a gift from beyond our own power.²⁵

Understanding the intentionality of matter, and therefore of flesh, the orientation of life-toward-the-center, our constrained possibility, and the sheer graciousness of being is the beginning of an appropriate theological somatology. We do not exist in reference to a perfected, non-material inner self, nor is the sum of our being some esoteric mystery. We are given life, placed in the world, and limited by virtue of our flesh and our being. One does not exist without the other.

Of course, it is not only the tree of life that stands in the midst of the garden. God plants a second tree: the tree of knowledge. The knowledge indicated by the tree is not intellectual curiosity *in se*. It is the particular knowledge that discerns — judges — good

²⁴ For Mathewes, the generative center is an “intrinsic determinant,” not an extrinsic boundary. We return to the well of life rather than pushing toward an outside “imposition.” Mathewes, 399.

²⁵ Wirzba, “The Art of Creaturely Life,” 13.

from evil. In Bonhoeffer's reckoning, the attempt to discern good and evil usurps God, who alone in totality and divinity able to judge. Only God knows the fullness of being, therefore God alone is able to parse good from evil. Only God can be God. The second tree stands as a reminder of what humanity will never be. Human beings are not created to be demigods. We are created as limited creatures with limited knowledge and, by virtue of our flesh, a limited scope of existence. Judgment is not ours.

The limit at the center of our existence, our creatureliness, affirms who we are. We receive life at from a central spring. The prohibition placed on the tree of knowledge further binds us, reminding us what (and who) we are not. We are not gods. Our center and our boundary exist side by side, "There where the boundary — the tree of knowledge — stands, there stands also the tree of life, that is, the very God who gives life. God is at once the boundary and the center of our existence."²⁶ Whether we recognize it or not, humanity is created with and for a limit, and our creatureliness is a grace of the God whose will is that we become what we have been created to be. I will further explore the consequences of humanity's attempts to move beyond its limit in the next chapter. For now, it is adequate to recall that in his own context, Bonhoeffer saw the danger of a man (or system) that assumed itself unlimited. Limitation was both a theological and practical concern for the theologian.²⁷ Surely the horrors of technological innovation that allowed for mass destruction across Europe in the early twentieth century was in view when Bonhoeffer distinguished between the "human" as they were created to be and the fallen "human condition" that strives to transgress its boundary, "...the limit or constraint that

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 86.

²⁷ Bethke Elshtain, 352.

people look for on the margin of humankind is the limit of the human condition, the limit of human technology, the limit of what is possible for humanity. The boundary that is at the center is the limit of human reality, of human existence as such.”²⁸ Limits enable life. Any pursuit that denies our limitations denies God’s intentions for creation and, in so doing, denies the concrete others whom we push past on our quest to transcend our material, creaturely existence. To ignore a limit is to transgress against God, self, and other. To ignore the limit is an act of violence.

To claim that limits are constitutive of the very good human in her materiality is to simultaneously assert that limitations are universal, and indeed that that they are the enabling possibilities of life together. If humans were created with and for a limit, then all humans are limited at their core. Limitations are not (or at least should not be) judged as a deficit.²⁹ Instead, our boundaries are a part of the “creative conditions” of life.³⁰ Humans relate to God, one another, and our world within the God-given limit. Our vocation is fulfilled in the context of our limitations, both those that exist from the center of our lives and those outside of our subjectivity. The flesh that limits us is the very place in which God grants us life. To flee from that flesh in an attempt to manifest an inner person is to deny the limit and the very real fruitfulness (creativity, flourishing) that God has commanded of God’s creation. Against any view that would claim that limitations are a deficit, Debroah Creamer calls her readers to recognize the ways in which we are formed by certain limits,

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 86.

²⁹ Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 116.

³⁰ Mathewes, 380.

Once we recognize that limits are unsurprising, we can then begin to move not only to a perspective where we embrace (value, accept, respect) the idea of having limits (as individuals and as communities) [...] but can also notice ways in which these limits might embrace us, acting to make and unmake issues of identity, relationally, space, and place.³¹

That we are positively formed in society is an expression of our limitation. We are formed by the world in which God places us. To assume that humanity is limitless is to assume that human beings do not have a center, and that the margins of our lives are nothing more than barriers to be overcome (a rather modern approach). The biblical affirmation structures human understanding: there is no “I” that can transcend the given grace of God or overcome the very good limit of human creatureliness.

God limits humanity as a matter of being. To affirm the creative power of limits alongside the goodness of limitations is not to tacitly suggest that *all* limits should be embraced as necessary conditions of creaturely life. The imposition of limits that serve to prevent human flourishing or delimit human possibility are not celebrated. Sinful human expressions of law, economics, relationships, and social expectations that place limits on concrete others and, in so doing, unnecessarily constrict their possibility, are not in view. Structural barriers are not creative conditions. Structural constraints are not constructive boundaries.³² Still: humans, by the grace of God, are limited.

3.5 According to Our Likeness: Humanity's Fleshy Image

The earth, the sky, and the waters that flow are an outpouring of divine intention in creation. Every material thing is depicted as that which has been made, and that which

³¹ Deborah Beth Creamer, “Embracing Limits, Queering Embodiment: Creating/Creative Possibilities for Disability Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2010), 125.

³² Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 116.

is made subject to the ongoing preservation of the Maker. In light of the diversity of creation and our shared creatureliness, the question of the Psalmist still lingers: how might humanity distinguish itself in its unique relationship with God?

Central to a reconstructed anthropology is a robust theology of the *imago*. For Bonhoeffer, a proper understanding the image of God in humanity is also a tool in the fight against tyranny. No human (or human-designed system) can thematize humanity in its totality. The image of the living, Triune God resists reduction.³³ The question begged by *imago* – what makes humanity unique – is answered with reference to Genesis 1-3. If anything can be deduced from creation’s first stories it is that to be a human is to be gifted flesh, and that flesh is marked with the strange image of a peculiar God, a Trinity of persons, three-in-one, one-in-three. The image of God must be understood in light of God’s self-revelation, not with reference to Gnostic, Platonic, or modern (discarnate) themes.³⁴ Only by seeking out the peculiar character of the God from whom human life flows can somatology find its central reference.

Indeed, to speak of the *imago Dei* is to necessarily speak of relationship. The God that orthodox Christians affirm is a Trinity of persons who equally share the essence of divinity (also formulated as the “substance” of divinity).³⁵ Formulating the *imago* without reference to Trinity is a godless task. Creation is material. It is also relational. The human is not only in relationship with the God from whom her life flows and the flotsam of God’s creation, humanity is not complete until it exists in relationship with the other. No

³³ Bethke Elshtain, 350.

³⁴ Wirzba, “The Art of Creaturely Life,” 8 footnote 4.

³⁵ I am thinking of Nicene affirmations of the divine *homoousios*, translated variously as “essence” and “substance.” Jesus is “begotten, not made, being of one *homoousios* with the Father...”

one better articulated the relational character of the divine *imago* than Bonhoeffer. Throughout his oeuvre Bonhoeffer worked to articulate an understanding of the image through an “analogy of relationship,” “The image of God for Bonhoeffer refers to a particular set of relationships in which humans are placed, often expressed in personalist terms as an I-You encounter, whether divine to human or human to human.”³⁶ Consider the creation of Eve. Centuries of patriarchal readings have insisted that order of creation matters. Adam is brought to being before Eve, and Eve comes from Adam’s rib. Thus, Adam holds some primacy over Eve (never mind that Adam’s creation is last among all things, and that Adam’s rib is a gift from God, not a work of his own doing). But Adam has no role to play in the narrative. He does not will Eve into being. God sees that Adam is alone in the garden, and that Adam has no one with whom to share the gift of life. Adam is free in his relationship with God, but he alone bears humanity.

God, affirming that human life is meant to be shared, renders the man unconscious and, as he did when raising Adam to life, works from the matter of creation to bring the man a partner in the created order.³⁷ Eve comes to being not because of Adam’s will, but because of God’s overflowing abundance. The new human is like Adam but utterly beyond him. Adam has no access to Eve’s subjectivity. Instead of control, her creation offers Adam an opportunity to exercise image-bearing freedom on her behalf, a freedom of mutuality that mirrors God’s own existence in relationship (hence the “*analogia relationis*”). Adam is aware of what he shares with Eve, the peculiar human

³⁶ Adrian E. V. Langdon, “Embedded Existence: Bonhoeffer, Barth, and Ecological Anthropology,” *Didaskalia* 25 (2015), 64.

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 97.

flesh of creation, but her being reminds him that his needs and desires are not the sum of his existence. Eve offers Adam the opportunity to exist in free, self-giving relationship, the type of relationship that mirrors God's own free, self-giving love. The limit at the center of Adam's life is reinforced by the concrete reality of this other, who breathes a common breath and shares a common center, but who is utterly different from him. In the heart of Eden, God gives life, and to humanity, God gives a particular grace: the establishment of flesh for one another, and image-bearing freedom in full view of difference.

For Bonhoeffer the image of God cannot be conceived of as an inherent capacity. It is all too easy to assume that humanity bears the image because of some supposed superiority-among-creation.³⁸ But too much is known about our world to presume intellection is the sole property of humanity. Linking capacity to the gift of the image not only relies on disembodied articulations of personhood, it denies large swaths of humanity the ability to know themselves as bearers of God's image. The analogy of relationship better reflects God's revealed intentions in creation. *Imago* is the freedom to exist in relationship, which is shared among all humans (even those for whom "dependency" is their only relation).³⁹ For humans, it is an ectypal, derived freedom, but freedom nonetheless. God gifts humans the freedom to exist with and for one another as God freely exists with and for creation.

³⁸ Brian Treanor, "The Human Place in the Natural World (Introduction)," in *Being-in-Creation: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World*, Groundworks: Ecological Issues in Philosophy and Theology (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 5-6.

³⁹ Langdon, 64 footnote 13. Perhaps of interest, Karl Barth borrowed the trinitarian "analogy of relationship" from Bonhoeffer.

In the context of the created order, relationships cannot exist among disembodied souls. Embodied humans, in full acceptance of their limits, exist relative to one another. Whatever else the human being is, she is not an image bearer without her body and the bodies of those with whom she is in relationship: “It is the image of God not in spite of but precisely in its bodily nature. For in their bodily nature human beings are related to the earth and to other bodies; they are there for other and are dependent upon others.”⁴⁰ Physicality is both the ground of the *imago* in the analogy of relationship and an expression of our dependence on God, creation, and one another.

To acknowledge an ectypal, derived freedom in the context of relationships begs a further question. What is the character of the freedom through which we exist as image bearers in relationship to God and one another? As with the shared cultural understanding of limits, to get to the core of freedom will require divesting of cultural images that prioritize individual ability to exercise sheer, unencumbered will. Any formulation of God’s image in humanity that relies on human autonomy — her self-sufficiency, sovereignty, and neutrality — denies the fundamental truth that the *imago*, like life itself, is a gift given in service to the other. We are not “like God” when we pursue “freedom from contingency and connection,” as if God is a singular, disengaged deity, utterly unencumbered in some otherworldly realm.⁴¹ The image of God is not an ability, a singularity, or a possession to be grasped. It is an unceasing gift. Theologian Brian Bantum suggests that the human fetishization of “unlimited choice” vis-a-vis the (American) idealization freedom betrays a resentment at limitations. Freedom, abstracted

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 79.

⁴¹ Brian Bantum, *The Death of Race*, 33.

from an understanding of the divine, is the human pushing past the margin in an attempt to realize her own self-serving agenda.⁴² Freedom conceived of as sovereign liberty is a rejection of limits, and therefore of the gift of creatureliness. A wholistic view of freedom has both divine freedom and human limitation in mind:

‘Freedom ’is not a word that is its own principle of justification...It is misconstrued if the human being sees himself as his own principle of justification and embraces an image of human completeness and self- sovereignty that forgets mutability, temporality, contingency, and finitude and thus leads to prideful self-absorption.⁴³

In the context of what God has revealed in the stories of creation, freedom only exists because God is a God of relationships. The image of God is an image of persons who freely engage with and for one another, and that image, in its fleshy, free totality, is shared with the human creature. Human beings in their embodied difference are called to a life of free engagement with and for one another. Rightly understood, then, freedom is “a relation and nothing else.”⁴⁴ In its character as “relation,” it is not something that can be grasped or hoarded, freedom can only be shared. It is a response to God’s binding God’s self to creation by, in turn, acknowledging our shared center and binding ourselves to one another.⁴⁵ Freedom implies difference and asserts boundaries.

The image of God is made manifest in relationships that mirror the free relationship among the divine persons. The God who eternally shares divinity among the Godhead also temporally shares God’s self with and among creation. God’s relationship

⁴² Bantum, *The Death of Race*, 38.

⁴³ Bethke Elshtain, 349-51.

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 63.

⁴⁵ Langdon, 66.

with humanity, and God's gift of the image, is instructive for humans who are in relationship with one another.⁴⁶

3.6 Embodied Lessons from the Incarnation

To this point in the text I have, with few exceptions, proceeded as if humanity still finds itself in the Edenic garden, enjoying the gift of life from the center and in full acknowledgment of our God-given limitations. In the next chapter I will turn to “the fall,” and the ways in which humans have tested the center, choosing to pursue our own desires over the unbroken life with and from God. It is imperative to recognize the myriad ways in which all is not as it was intended to be. Still, humanity has not been left behind. The second clause of the Creed turns our attention to God's ongoing commitment to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was conceived, born, suffered, and crucified. He was dead and buried – and then he rose again. Despite human unfaithfulness, God has remained in relationship with us through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. It is remarkable that the early church affirmed “sin” (our fallenness) in the creed only by way of noting that it has been forgiven. Jesus stands as the conduit of new life, the center point between creation and resurrection. The Incarnation reestablishes and affirms God's will to provide life from the center and instructs us in our own flesh-wrapped humanity.

Christians cannot rightly read the creation story apart from the Father's commitment to a new creation through the universally transformational self-offering of the Son. The story of creation is trustworthy not only because the Spirit attests to it in our reading of Scripture, but also because the enfleshed Jesus Christ attests to the Father's

⁴⁶ Langdon, 67.

ongoing remaking of the world according to the divine first purposes. The Kingdom of God — which is to say gift of unbroken relationship first announced in Genesis — is revealed to be an ongoing divine commitment throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and, most acutely, in the ministry of Jesus Christ, who shares in divinity with the Father and in embodied solidarity with humanity. Jesus is thus “the end of the old.”⁴⁷ The Christian church can only understand creation rightly in view of Incarnation. Every aspect of Christian faith is transformed by God’s Incarnation, crucifixion, and (embodied) resurrection.

Before he begins his exegesis of Genesis, Bonhoeffer acknowledges that the Christian starting point is not the beginning in abstract, but the beginning in view of the Incarnation, “[The church] views the creation from Christ; or better, in the fallen, old world it believes in the world of the new creation, the new world of the beginning and the end, because it believes in Christ and in nothing else.”⁴⁸ The life that flowed in Eden from the center and in Torah through the covenants is the life offered through the cross, a Spirit-filled gift to all creation that establishes God’s reign and reaffirms the gifts embodiment and *imago*. The promises of creation are available by virtue of the faith of Jesus Christ, the end of creation and the beginning of the new reign (Galatians 2:16). Jesus’ life is instructive not only insofar as he carries the divine creativity forward, but also because his Incarnation is didactic for our own enfleshed living. We cannot answer the Psalmist without turning to Jesus Christ, who in faithfulness became “utterly human,”

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 21.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 22.

“elected and ordained from all eternity to be the Brother of those fatal brethren.”⁴⁹ God’s Incarnation in Christ is pedagogically relevant, most especially because Jesus Christ is the first fruits of an embodied resurrection. Christians participate in the Incarnation by virtue of the Spirit, who, as we will see, works to sanctify humanity that we might live as those created by God and grafted into the Body of Christ. In the gardens of Eden, the tree-at-the-center served as both a reminder of God’s grace and a call to orient oneself around God’s grace-filled gift of life. The Incarnation brings the tree forward into the midst of a fallen, chaotic world. Human beings are meant to return to the witness of the Incarnation in order to make meaning of our own lives.

To assert that God has become flesh is to proclaim that God is eternally present to us in our shared flesh. Flesh after the Incarnation is a reminder of God’s grace, namely that through Jesus’ body we have access to the life for which humanity has been created. Not only that, the Incarnation sanctifies and reinforces the goodness of our bodies. The Son is eternally with the Father as one of us. Flesh is established in the heart of the Triune relationship. After the resurrection Jesus did not disregard the matter through which he was made. Insisting that flesh is eternally present to God is an odd, counterintuitive claim in a world that prioritizes discarnate spiritual truths, but it is nonetheless the claim that lies at the heart of Jesus’ identity. If Jesus is “Emmanuel,” then human beings can trust that God is with us, and we are with God, “the flesh of Jesus is always present to the LORD as the flesh of that divine-human person.”⁵⁰ Acknowledging

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/4, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 53.

⁵⁰ Rohr, 28.

that God has sanctified our embodiment offers a new way of appreciating the gift of our bodies. After all human bodies — those that experience infancy, growth, and pain, those who suffer, decay, and die — are a “privileged place of the divine encounter.”⁵¹ Dualisms cannot hold in light of the Incarnation. Our bodies are made holy in their unity, as God-breathed flesh that, by participation in the Spirit, makes possible a God-filled life.

Our bodies and the body of Christ exist in dialogue. The fullness of our humanity is reflected and challenged by the fullness of Jesus’ humanity, which is to say that in the Incarnation of God we see what it means to be truly human. Christ’s body, his way of being in the world and his embrace of humanity, is not only salvific: it is edifying. Consider human dependence. The Creed announces that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary.” Theologians may quibble over the young maiden, but to do so is to lose sight of a more profound observation. Jesus was dependent on Mary, both her joy in receiving the news of the child and her physical being. The young infant *needed* his mother. God incarnate was not self-sufficient. From the beginning Jesus existed in a relationship of dependency. That it is the second-person of the Trinity who secures himself to Mary is even more profound. God condescended to humanity in freedom. Even as he was dependent on her, he freely chose to be in relationship with and for her. Jesus is an example of the creative power of limits: a human like us who lives from the center and exercises freedom on behalf of those with whom he is in relationship.

Theological somatology is, at its beginning and its end, a Christological task. God’s having become flesh grants humans insight into being flesh. Humans become more

⁵¹ Rohr, 23.

fully alive when we observe and participate in the material life, painful death (suffered, crucified, dead, buried), and utterly surprising resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁵² Jesus' flesh thus takes on individual, social, and eschatological significance. Bonhoeffer quibbled with Athanasius' conception of *theosis* (being made God, or the idea that Christ became human so that, in our redemption, humans might become God).⁵³ He insisted that the opposite is true: "Human beings become human because God became human. But human beings do not become God."⁵⁴ Because of the Incarnation and through participation in the Spirit-filled community, we are able to become what we were created to be, what "The Fall" and our participation in systems of evil have stripped from us: humans in unbroken relationship with God and one another. The Incarnation teaches us how to better become ourselves. As I will show in Chapter 5, becoming more human is a profoundly ethical task. When human beings follow after Christ, they are able to clearly reflect God's image and God's hope for the Kingdom, existing in relationship for one another and for all creation.⁵⁵

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Jesus' Incarnation grounds our hope for our own embodied resurrections. The resurrection of Jesus is the resurrection of a person. Resurrection was not a shared delusion among hopeful group of disciples, instead, was physical happening in the life of God and the world.⁵⁶ The God who wrought matter from

⁵² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 42. See also Moltmann-Wendel.

⁵³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers: New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 54:3. Athanasius famously claimed that by virtue of God's saving work humans in eternity took on divinity, "God became man so that man might become god." Athanasius was not claiming that the ontological gap was bridged in the resurrection, but salvation led toward a derivative "divination."

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 42.

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 40.

⁵⁶ Hays, 262.

nothing defeated death, not in a spiritual sense, but by raising up the full person, Jesus the Messiah (after all, if Jesus was only raised in Spirit, he would not truly be the Jesus of the Incarnation). Bonhoeffer explicitly links creation and resurrection by returning to “nothingness.” There was “nothing” between God and creation: no obligation, no ground of possibility. Likewise with resurrection, “The fact that Christ was dead did not provide the possibility of his resurrection but its impossibility; it was nothing itself, it was the nihil negativum.”⁵⁷ The deepest Christian hope is that life remains ours in everlasting, and that hope, despite its audacity, is grounded in Jesus’ concrete resurrection.⁵⁸ We who hope, whether we realize it or not, cannot exist outside of our flesh. Flesh is the creative condition of life together, and its resurrection is a gift from God.

Not only does the resurrection of Jesus Christ ground our hope, it is, as we will see in Chapters Four and Five, its own ethical demand, “Hope for ‘the resurrection of the body’ permits no disdain and debasement of bodily life and sensory experiences: it affirms them profoundly, and gives greatest honor to ‘the flesh’, which people have made something to be despised.”⁵⁹ Human beings are called to treat their own bodies with grace because the human body is a gift we carry in all our living. The gift of our Spirit-flesh is ours everlasting. When humans encounter one another, we meet as those sanctified by God. The grace of the other in her concrete incarnation (joyful) both enables and limits our freedom. Affirmation of the resurrection calls us to ethical treatment of those who we encounter, because their flesh too will be raised.

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 35.

⁵⁸ von Balthasar, 89.

⁵⁹ Moltmann, 66.

“A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus ’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

— Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

“Humankind has got what it wants; it has itself become creator, source of life, fountainhead of the knowledge of good and evil. It alone by itself, it lives out of its own resources, it no longer needs any others, it is the lord of its own world, even though that does mean now that it is the solitary old and despot of its own mute, violated, silenced, dead, ego-world.”

— Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*

Chapter 4 | Incarnation after the Fall: The Revelatory (Dangerous) Potential of Life Together

From nothingness God created a world, binding the new creation to its Maker.

The God who from eternity exists in Trinitarian relationship granted humans the *imago*,

setting them in relationship with their Creator and with one another. But the story of

Scripture is not the story of an unbroken center. The humans in the garden ate the fruit of

the forbidden tree. The boundary was transgressed.¹ In pushing past the limit, the first

¹ In his commentary on Genesis 1:4b-5, Bonhoeffer takes up the “scientific” (factual) question that surely lingers behind this thesis — “Where the Bible speaks of the ‘day,’ it is not at all the physical problem that it is discussing. Whether the creation occurred in rhythms of millions of years or in single days, this does no damage to the biblical thinking...the question as such does not concern us. That the biblical author, to the extent that the author’s word is a human word, was bound by the author’s own time, knowledge, and limits is as little disputed as the fact that through this word God, and God alone, tells us about God’s creation” (Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 49). Though “little disputed” may itself be a point of contention, the greater theological truth stands. Whether the world was created in six days or six million years, whether two people alone lived in a garden, whether a snake spoke to a woman, the question as stated does not concern this thesis, nor the work of Christian proclamation. God speaks through Scriptures to address a fallen humanity. God tells us that there was a garden and a center, and that humans transgressed their boundaries. The heart of the text is not a slithering serpent, it is the human will-to-power in contradiction to God’s purpose-for-humanity. Asserting that the word is “neither fiction nor fairy tale nor myth,” Bonhoeffer wants Christians to approach Scripture as a means through which we re-enter the world,

humans rejected the life for which they had been created — life in unbroken connection with God and in relationship with other humans. The implications for embodiment are profound. The gift of creatureliness, with its embodied limit and sustained center, is rejected. And the *imago*, conceived of as the capacity to live in freedom with and for the other, is distorted (though surely not lost).

While theological anthropology is rooted in God’s free gift of creatureliness, a rendering of human embodiment without sustained attention to the many ways in which humans appropriate their own bodies and the bodies of others is a dishonest rendering. Where humans exist for themselves, the mutuality of self-giving relationships meant to reflect the character of the Godhead becomes an impossibility. Rather than returning to the “middle,” humans choose in disobedience to reach for the margins, resulting in distorted egos and broken communities. When the body becomes a weapon to achieve power and self-actualization, it is no longer capable of fully reflecting the image into the created order. A return to the Creed is in order. By the time of its codification, the increasingly large church saw it necessary to affirm a belief in the “communion of saints.” The “communion” is God’s image at work in the world: relationships of difference bound and sustained by God and the faithful across time and place, those who, *like God*, exercise freedom with and for one another and the world. Christians who recite

as a child might when learning to read. The story of Scripture gives humans a framework by which they are able to “rethink completely” the presumptions, axioms, and narratives that undergird human life (Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 23). I do not mean to suggest that we ignore questions of science entirely, or embrace willful ignorance, only that in answering a theological question (what does it mean to be creatures of the Creator), we turn to God’s self-revelation, acknowledging that though all is surely not as it was created to be, there is a way forward in seeking our beginnings and acknowledging God’s promised ends.

the Creed proclaim the goodness of a community oriented around the first intentions of God in creation. When humans reject their limits, the central and intentional boundedness of their being, they attempt to confound God's intention for a community of free persons embodied with and for one another in this and the life to come.

Rooted in the reality of the fall — as an event in the theological history of humanity — this chapter will explore the relationships through which humans are formed and the consequences of rejecting the limits of creatureliness and the limit of other. The rejection both implicates and involves human bodies. My last word, though, is not one of alienation. Exploring the fall is not an end in itself. God works to correct humanity and reorient it to the shared center. Only by attempting to making sense of humanity's quest to abandon its creaturely center will we be able to make sense of God's abiding preservation. Thus, following an exploration of humanity's rebellion and the consequences of broken inter-human relationships, I will turn (once again) to God's response to human rejection: the gift of the Incarnation that culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross is God's final "no" to a humanity that persists in the margins. To explore the nexus of relationships that maintain the *imago*, I will finally consider transcendence. Throughout this thesis, I have offered a critique of traditional theories of transcendence and contingency. It is my contention instead that human beings encounter the divine image whenever they encounter the other. In turn humans, by the power of the Spirit, are met by God in the mundanity, ecstasy, and grief of life *in this world*. Reimagining transcendence — both divine and human — within the plane of the created order is key to understanding the redemption of creation. Humans cannot return

to the garden, but we can sustain relationships of mutuality that reflect our beginnings and disrupt the cycles of violence that haunt our history.

4.1 *The Fall: Confrontation and the Experience of Oneness*

“And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’... But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,^{*} knowing good and evil.’”
— Genesis 2:16-7, 3:4-5 (NRSVUE)

Calvin begins his *Institutes* by acknowledging that one must know God in order to know one’s self and, in turn, one must know one’s self in order to know God. “This knowledge,” writes Calvin, “is twofold: namely, to know what we were like when we were first created and what our condition became after the fall of Adam.”² To this point, I have turned my attention to human likeness in creation. I have claimed that our beginnings are a critical starting point for understanding God’s promises for human life and for discipleship in the present. However, focusing on life as it was created to be cannot distract us from the searing truth of life “after the fall of Adam.” In order to adequately speak of human life in its fullness, theological somatology must account for the fall. Humans live apart from their center and in hostility toward one another. Hostility, in turn, affects our bodies and the body politic. Human lives, human churches, and human institutions do not reflect the goodness of human beginnings. Instead, they reflect the chasm between how we *ought* to be and what we have attempted to become. Affirming the goodness of creation is not a warrant to ignore the catastrophic result of having lived outside of and in ignorance of our center.³

² Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.1.

³ Migliore, 106.

In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer frames “the fall” as an attempt to “get behind” the word of God. By means of the divine command, God instructs Adam, ““You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die”” (Genesis 3:17, NURSVUE). God circumscribes human choice based on God’s will for human flourishing. The act of disobedience comes not when Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree, but when they submit to the temptation to interpret the word beyond its givenness. Rather than living under the command of God — which is a limit — human beings, by eating the apple, choose ““to be like God,”” transgressing their boundary and seeking truth outside of their origin (Genesis 3:4-5). The fruit of the tree is borne out in the choice. Commenting on the Hebrew “tob” (generally translated “good”) and “ra” (“evil”), Bonhoeffer notes,

The words tob and ra speak of an ultimate split in the world of humankind in general that goes back behind even the moral split, so that tob means also something like ‘pleasurable’ and ra ‘painful’ ... The essential point about them is that they appear as a pair, that in being split apart they belong inseparably together. There is no tob, nothing that is pleasurable/good/beautiful, without its being always already immersed in ra, in that which is painful/evil/base/false ... That which is good, in the sense of tob, is for us always only something that has been torn from evil, that has passed through evil, that has been conceived, carried, and borne by evil.⁴

Disconnected from the center, evil always appears alongside good. The good of creation is not gone but it is metamorphosed.

For human beings, the attempt to become “like God” means the death of unbroken creatureliness. Bonhoeffer draws attention to the two trees and the repeated

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 88.

usage of “life,” “knowledge,” and “death” in God’s instructions to Adam in Genesis 3.⁵ The life that flowed from the center was disrupted when the couple ate. The resulting “knowledge” led to a particular death: not the withdrawal of breath but the reordering of their lives. In attempting to *know* what God knows and exist as God exists, humans approach their Creator with hostility, as a boundary to human will. The decision is, to use Wirzba’s framework, “dishonest,” because it denies the truth of limited creaturely existence. It is simultaneously “damaging” because individual willfulness sets humans against God and one another.⁶ Adam continues to live, but his life is no longer experienced as a gift. God stands before him as the one Adam attempted to overcome. God’s very existence is a judgment against a humanity that is set against its center:

What does it mean to be dead? It does not mean the abolition of one’s being a creature. Instead it means no longer being able to live before God, and yet having to live before God. It means standing before God as an outlaw ... It means receiving life from God no longer as grace coming from the center and the boundary of one’s own existence but as a commandment that stands in one’s way and with a flaming sword denies one any way of retreat. Being dead in this sense means to have life not as a gift but as a *commandment...To be dead means to-have-to-live...Being dead is not deliverance, salvation, or the final possibility of fleeing*⁷

“Death” is life-as-obligation rather than life in-community-as-gift. Death does not abolish creatureliness, but it is monadic singularity in a world built for relationships.

For Bonhoeffer, judgment is both God’s judgment against human willfulness and humanity’s judgment of one another. Eating the apple “requires humankind to sit in judgment on God’s word instead of simply listening and doing it.”⁸ The first humans

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 83.

⁶ Wirzba, “The Art of Creaturely Life,” 14.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 90.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 108.

consider the apple in view of their singular desire. The eating itself is not sinful, nor is questioning writ large. At issue is the distrust that stems from choosing to live apart from God's will, "according to *their own* possibilities."⁹ Adam and Eve choose what is right for them as individuals, based on their limited knowledge, and apart from the unity of their shared center.¹⁰ That choice, rooted in individual desire, gets to the core of human dysfunction, and can rightly be expressed as willfulness.¹¹ In this context, willfulness is the singularly willed quest to push past one's limit in order to realize one's ends, regardless of the presence of the concrete other or the limiting will of God. The choice that the first humans make demonstrates a rejection of the limit, manifesting a human preference for self-justification and limitlessness aside from God's intention in creation.

Willfulness as an expression of unlimited desire has catastrophic consequences for embodied humans who are called to exercise freedom on behalf of the other. Where the individual singularly pursues her own ends, using her freedom for satiation, self-advancement, or simply the thrill of acquisition, those others whom she encounters become collateral *en route* or objects to be used. Self-advancement has little room for the exercise of the image as freedom-for. The disruptive breakdown in human relationships is of profound concern because it signals a troubling willingness to cast aside embodied others to realize individual fulfillment. Bantum draws attention to the fall as a "failure to negotiate difference:"

Theologically speaking, the problem of humanity's fall is the failure of negotiating our fundamental difference from God. This failure reverberates within the lives of one another as domination. Domination is on the one hand the brutal

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 215-216. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Wirzba, "The Art of Creaturely Life," 17.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 217.

enslavement, murder, or devaluing of particular bodies; on the other hand, it is also refracted through the believer's subtle but nonetheless tragic misapprehension of difference as deviation from a constructed or false center.¹²

Throughout "The Limits that Make Us" I have acknowledged that though human essence is grounded in divine intention, we are nonetheless formed in society. Flesh is porous, and humans come to being in in a world of bodies different than their own.¹³

Ontologically, we are created by a God who is in every way *other*, different by virtue of God's being. Even in view of the Incarnation, God's difference is maintained. But it is not only God who confronts individuals in fully formed difference. Humans come to being in relationship with different cultures, environments, and bodies. They are dependent on seen and unseen others to maintain their being.

Difference is embedded in God's good creation and, as shown in the creation of Eve, reflects God's will for human life. Eve limits Adam. Her being demands recognition, and her preferences are taken in as a part of his life. After the fall, though, Eve's needs — her difference — are a tertiary concern to Adam's will. In his supposed singularity, Adam assumes that his needs, desires, and preferences are universal, or at least paramount: "Without the other," writes Bantum, "Adam or Eve begins to imagine that the purpose of this world is to feed his or her own tastes...."¹⁴ When Adam is the center of his own life — unimpeded by any god or other — confrontations with difference are received as threats to autonomy. Difference calls Adam's choices into

¹² Brian Bantum, "Discipleship and Identity: A Theological Consideration of Race, Gender, and the Human Situation," in *Sex, Gender, and Christianity*, ed. Jack Levison and Patricia Pope-Levison (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 147.

¹³ Griffiths, 14.

¹⁴ Bantum, *The Death of Race*, 28.

question and presses him with the needs of others. The limiting, formative communion between two beings who share freedom and mutuality is broken.¹⁵ Bodies, already porous to outside influence, are made all the more vulnerable because of their perceived difference. Self-serving pursuits deny the reality of limits and, in so doing, lay waste to the integrity of the other.

Though it is difficult to substantiate the claim outside of the malaise, animosity, and anxiety that haunts modernity, it is my contention that the human preference for willfulness demonstrated in Adam's disobedience, on a global scale, resulted in a devastating and consequential loss of community. The loss of community signals an inability to live from the shared center and has led, throughout history, to the growth of exploitative systems built on power exercised against human bodies . Where human systems are built on willfulness rather than shared life, they are expressed in terms of singularity and normativity. In *The Touch of Transcendence*, Rivera refers to "the logic of oneness" in a discussion of totalizing systems:

A subject shaped by the logic of oneness and universality tends to conceive himself or herself as the center of a world that is apprehended and assimilated into the self. Such a subject is thus likely to approach other human beings as objects to be accommodated within the subject's schemes and purposes instead of seeing other people as true others.¹⁶

Bonhoeffer's development of willfulness resonates with Rivera's dismantling of subjectivity in a totalizing system. For Bonhoeffer, the scope is narrowed but the

¹⁵ "Adam" and "Eve" are used here as generic markers to denote an individual divorced from their center. What Adam is to Eve, Eve is to Adam. Humans after the fall exist in opposition to one another precisely because they assume themselves unencumbered by otherness and suppose their needs are more pressing than the needs of other.

¹⁶ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 57.

implications are no less profound: “one person claims a right to the other, claims to be entitled to possess the other, and thereby denies and destroys the creaturely nature of the other person.”¹⁷ Oneness disallows communion because it approaches the other as something to be grasped in pursuit of individual desire or collective power. Oneness is the soil from which violence, oppression, and subjugation take root.

4.2 God’s Preservation: Another Tree in our Midst

In the center of the garden stood two trees. But the humans were cast out of the garden. In the biblical story Eden remains, untouched by humans and guarded by sword-wielding cherubim. Wherever the garden might be, humans are no longer able to access the tree of life or the tree of knowledge. The life that flowed from the center, filling Adam and Eve with connection and animating them in their creatureliness, was ruptured. However it is conceived of, the margins, the limits, or the edge of the garden are violated. East of Eden, the way of being in God’s world is utterly transformed. Both physically and spiritually, as a God-breathed body, “Adam now stands in another place.”¹⁸ God remains amidst God’s creation, but, because Adam lives apart from the tree, God is outside of Adam’s direct access. Adam, living from his own center, finds himself thrust into a world of disunion and despair. Violence reigns. Scripture narrates a disruptive, though predictable, pattern: humans are caught in cycles of brutishness, there is no good without evil, nor pleasure without pain. Adam’s son, full of jealousy, kills his brother, cities are built on inhospitality and thrive in economies of violation, covenants are agreed to and

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 123.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 144.

covenants are broken. Selfish pursuits of power split the communities that God attempts to form. And all the while there is God.

As humans built a world without God at its center, they increasingly lost sight of their identity and vocation. Their freedom was exercised in willfulness, obscuring the freedom-for that marks the *imago*. Human history, retold in parable in Benjamin's epigraph above, is a story of life apart from its center — the debris of violence and brutality and the myth of progress divorced from creaturely limits and ontology. Humans push past Eden, ignoring God and one another. Even so, human history remains a testament to God's faithfulness. The Maker refuses to be cut off from that which has been made. In the culmination of the Christian story, God reestablishes the center through the Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. The restoration is not by might of fiat. To return humanity to its center, God becomes *flesh*. So it is that Christians can claim that the center of history there stands a third tree: hewn for humiliation, an instrument of Roman power and state-sponsored torture. The tree of crucifixion restores the life that humans rejected. The tree at Golgotha and the empty tomb stand as the center point of human life.

Human flesh is eternally in conversation with the divine one who became flesh and restored the center. Disciples of Jesus Christ will find life-giving meaning the story of the Nazarene: those with whom he dined, his circle of friends, his relentless invitations and searing indictments. But we must also contend with Jesus' death. The violence that stands at the center of the Incarnation is an indictment of human willfulness. Golgotha is the end of Eden. That it is the Son of the Father who was violently crucified, the Son of the Father who entered the world of human willfulness in order reconcile humans with

their center, the Son of the Father who was joined by the Spirit at his baptism, the Son of the Father who taught and acted with authority, and the Son of the Father whose faithfulness challenged both religious and state officials, cannot be blithely overcome. The Son, who retained the center and received life at every moment from the Spirit and the Father, finally falls victim to human willfulness. Human rebellion is the self-centeredness that pushes the center toward *its* end, “with the death of Christ on the Cross the nihilism negative broke its way into God’s own being. — O great desolation! God, yes God, is dead.”¹⁹ The crucified God stands at the center of history as an indictment on every human attempt to be “like God.” The one who was God, who came to being to restore the center and bring together the community, gasps for breath on a Roman tree. He suffered. He was crucified. He died, he was buried. Human willfulness is forever linked to God’s death. Death — nothingness — is taken into the heart of the Triune God on behalf of God’s material creation.

God is faithful, and neither Eden nor Golgotha are the end. The story of creation is not only the story of a God who creates from nothing, it is the story of the God who abides in the face of nothingness. From nothing, God created the earth; then, from the vacuous darkness of the tomb, God worked to create life again. Bonhoeffer’s final word in *Creation and Fall* is one of affirmation, connecting the new creation wrought through the resurrection of Christ to the paradise in which humanity was first placed:

under the whirling sword, under the cross, the human race dies. But Christ lives. The trunk of the cross becomes the wood of life and now in the midst of the world, on the accursed ground itself, life is raised up anew. In the center of the

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 35. Bonhoeffer is quoting a Lutheran hymn familiar to Hegel, who “discusses the idea of the death of God as meaning that there is suffering, pain, and negation in God.” (Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 35 footnote 35).

world, from the wood of the cross, the fountain of life springs up... What a strange paradise is this hill of Golgotha, this cross, this blood, this broken body. What a strange tree of life, this trunk on which the very God had to suffer and die. Yet it is the very kingdom of life and of the resurrection, which by grace God grants us again... The tree of life, the cross of Christ, the center of God's world that is fallen but upheld and preserved — that is what the end of the story about paradise is for us.²⁰

Readers would be wise to direct their attention to the viscera of the scene. “Paradise” — which exists on the earth — is marked by the broken body of the God who was raised to life. The dirt under the cross and the spring that bursts from the earth are vividly described. The end of the story of creation is neither rebellion nor escape. The end is resurrection in God's creation. The end is the restored center. Matter is not left behind, it is redeemed. God's preservation of our world takes shape in God's redemption of human bodies.

4.3 Life from the (renewed) Center: Preservation, Transcendence, and Relationships of Difference

Bonhoeffer is committed to God's preservation of the material world. The divine presence is not withdrawn after Adam eats the apple, even if God's presence is, for Adam, a continual reminder of God's judgment. God is active in the cross, in the covenants, and in creation. But there is a troubling aspect in *Creation and Fall* that mirrors more traditional metaphysical thinking. God's grace, by Bonhoeffer's reckoning, holds humanity over “the abyss of nonbeing, nonliving, not-being-created.”²¹ Though framed as a gift, the thought of the abyss is profoundly alarming. God, from an otherworldly realm, dangles humanity over nothingness. The tenderness of a God who

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 146.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 87.

seeks to share being and creates from abundance is lost in the face of an indifferent God for whom humanity is a burdensome regret. Presence in the created order is reduced to the whims of the Spirit. God remains, but God is *elsewhere*.

Acknowledging, as Bonhoeffer would surely require, that God is ontologically “other” to God’s creation, Rivera distinguishes between a view that insists that God is “in all things,” as an animating (otherworldly) possibility, and one that understands the trinitarian God to be ““*intrinsic* to all things.””²² According the former view, which Bonhoeffer shares, God *externally* sustains all being and is present in all life. Without God, there is only non-being, and God could rightly choose to end creation by withdrawing the divine presence. In the latter, God freely chooses to bind God’s self to creation *while retaining divine difference*. In Rivera’s view, “things are inherently linked to the divine—not to nothingness.”²³ While it is certainly true that without God humans cannot come to being, it does not follow that God only sustains creation from a distant, neutral space. As has been noted, the Scriptures attest to a God who is persistently present, binding God’s self to creation even when humans rebel. In granting the *imago*, God “linked” divine life to human persons. God, the Almighty Maker affirmed in Canon and Creed, freely bound God’s self to the creation, to the woman Mary, to the church, and to the communion of saints through the life everlasting. The peculiar God who chose to be incarnate in human flesh could no more choose to the plunge the world into the abyss than to leave Jesus in the darkened tomb. It would be dishonest to God’s particular character, attested to in Scripture.

²² Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 46.

²³ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 46.

Throughout this thesis I have quarreled with the traditional view of transcendence. An aloof god *over* creation can too easily become an abstract god *against* creation. God elsewhere is otherworldly and impersonal, capable of forsaking that which was created. Seeking to protect God from the chaos and decay of earthly life, those who advocate for transcendence deny the power of God's preserving grace — framed as both *life* and *image*. As we saw in earlier chapters, the consequences of transferring the essence of being from this world into a nonmaterial heavenly realm are disastrous for the church. A church focused on otherworldly transcendence is not able to proclaim the uniqueness of the God revealed in Scripture. Though God is present in the stories of creation, covenant, and Incarnation, the traditionally proclaimed transcendent God is abstracted in a world of ideas onto which most anything can be projected. No longer is the church attentive to the God who created the world and preserves it by the power of the Spirit; instead, a church focused on transcendence casts its glance elsewhere. The church is distracted from its core vocation of following God in the world and unable to act in freedom on behalf of those with whom we are set in relation. Rivera points to the way in which traditional articulations of transcendence call human value into question:

If the basic assumption were rather that God is preeminently external to the cosmos, rather than affirming divine sustenance this model instead intensifies the ontological gap—not only delimiting God to a space outside the world, but also placing creatures perilously close to nonbeing. This was clearly an aspect of Aquinas's teaching: being was not essential to creatures. Creatures' worth is thus placed in something other than the creatures—in a realm external to and independent of all cosmic life.²⁴

²⁴ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 24.

If human worth is outside of the creature, then there is no impetus for ethical action *in this world*. Humans do not need to exercise freedom for the other, since the other's needs are not related to their being, which lies elsewhere alongside the fullness of God.

On the contrary, God's intrinsic presence, which grounds the possibility of life and thus of relationality, sustains and preserves creation from *within* creation. Human value is grounded in having been made by the Maker and granted the *imago*. God is not trapped within creation, as advocates of the traditional model of fear.²⁵ Rather, God freely chooses to be "for us." That I bear the divine image allows me to better understand how the other with whom I am set in relationship is sustained by the very same God and bears the same image. Transcendence in this world is rightly understood alongside relational models of the *imago*. God, who is ontologically other, sets humanity in relationship with those who are phenomenologically other. Human freedom consists in acting on behalf of the divine other and the human other, neither of whom can be fully known and both of whom call for the subject's attention.

Bonhoeffer turned traditional conceptions of the *imago* on their sides by linking the image to God's Trinitarian life-in-relationship. Rivera similarly transforms transcendence using a relational framework: "*Transcendence designates a relation with a*

²⁵ Migliore notes that "transcendence" comes "From the Latin *transcendere*, 'stepping over' or 'going beyond.'" In the context of divine being, transcendence attempts to ensure that "God's being and power surpass the world and are never identical with, confined to, or exhausted in the world" (Migliore, 469). Rivera will explore a model of transcendence grounded in difference and revealed in the created order. In his entry on transcendence, Migliore suggests that Karl Barth refined his definition of transcendence across his academic career: "The early Barth reclaimed the importance of the transcendence of God by speaking of God as radically free and 'wholly other,' while the later Barth spoke more often of God's transcendence as God's freedom to be 'God for us.'" (Migliore, 469). For both Rivera and the later Barth, transcendence conceived of outside the revelation of God of the covenants and the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Incarnation is nothing more than an abstracted concept, and shares more with Plato than with the Trinitarian being.

reality irreducibly different from my own reality, without this difference destroying this relation and without the relation destroying this difference."²⁶ Originating in God's primordial revelation, transcendence-as-relationship better matches what God has revealed of the divine purpose and the divine being. Consider Bonhoeffer's description of Eve, "Eve, the other person, was the limit given to Adam in bodily form. He acknowledged this limit in love, that is, in the undivided unity of giving himself; he loved it precisely in its nature as a limit for him, that is, in Eve's being human and yet 'being another human being'."²⁷ God is Adam's limit. So too, despite their likeness, is Eve.²⁸ She is *alterior* to him even as she stands in his presence as the one like him. Her presence cannot be reduced to his being. She does not serve a function for him. On the contrary, she presents an opportunity for him to exercise his freedom. In her fullness, she calls on him and limits him. Transcendence, whether divine or exercised in relationships of difference, is never abstracted to realms beyond God's created world. It is a relationship, and as such, an opportunity to act on behalf of the other. Transcendence conceived of as

²⁶ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 82.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 122. In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer conceives of the relationship in "I-You" terms: "The other can be experienced by the I only as You, but never directly as I." In so doing, Bonhoeffer expresses a contemporary concern — namely that the concrete other never be reduced to his relationship with the subject. "I" can never fully comprehend or conceive of the divine or human other. She is always outside of me, confronting me in her fullness and confounding my attempts to categorize her. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhard Krauss, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Joachim von Soosten, vol. 1, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

²⁸ Rivera (following Levinas) would quarrel with my usage of "limit" to describe Adam's relationship to Eve (Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 61). To name that the other is a limit is to reduce them to their manifestation vis-a-vis my subjectivity rather than to allow them to confront us in their fullness. We must acknowledge the fullness of the other even as we understand the ways in which they limit us. Both can be true.

the presence of the concrete other is, therefore, ethical demand.²⁹ The presence of the other presents an opportunity to limit one's own will and attend to the needs of the other with whom the individual is set in relationship.

4.4 Difference and Freedom-For

Before I turn to Christian discipleship, it will be helpful to explore the ethical demands of difference and the place of God in an intra-cosmic model of transcendence. God confronts us as one who has chosen in freedom to be with and for us, but who is utterly different than us. Humans can conceive of God as God has given God's self to be known, but God can never be fully comprehended.³⁰ Such is God's essential "irreducible" being, "always beyond our grasp."³¹ Likewise, those with whom we are set in relationship come to us as fully-formed others, impressed on by God, their own histories, and their particular being. The other calls the subject into question by her difference. Her call is a call to faithful action. As in Eden, when Adam first meets Eve, the subject is no longer able to prioritize her own needs when she meets the other. Her freedom is now given focus — she acts on behalf of this other, ensuring that her will is attuned to the

²⁹ McBride captures the ethical complexities of a traditional view of transcendence and is subsequently unable to conceive of transcendence-as-relationship when she calls readers to task for their failures to take their own bodies and the bodies of others seriously, "If everything is sacred, if matter is valuable to God, then we have to start treating the earth differently. Believing that spirituality is about transcendence alone allows us to excuse ourselves from intervening in the ongoing oppression and marginalization of certain bodies. If bodies are not sacred, then there is no need to ensure that certain bodies are not devalued and erased." (McBride, 218). In Rivera's view, transcendence is precisely the means by which we recognize what is sacred in flesh, and act according to that sanctification.

³⁰ I am reminded of Augustine's famous dictum, repeated in translation by one of my first instructors in theology, "if you know it, it is not God." (*"Si comprehendus, non est Deus"*). God has not given God's self to be known *in toto*, and therefore we cannot fully comprehend God. Neither, of course, can we know the sum of the other, no matter our proximity to her. There is always more to be unveiled.

³¹ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 2. We can touch and know God by the Spirit and in the Incarnation, but never fully grasp, or limit, God, assimilating God into our own comprehension.

other's flourishing. Rivera calls the fullness of the other her "luring excess," and relates it to the unknowable aspects of divinity. In both, what is revealed obscures what cannot be known. To see a human is to know there is more — more than her history, more than her flesh, more than the eye can capture.³² As with God, what is unknown to the subject is not a barrier. Precisely that which is unknown draws subjects into relationships of mutuality. The boundary is the lifeline of the relationship. The relationship between flesh and touch is here instructive. When one human touches another they are drawn into relationship, even while maintaining their own subjectivity. Writes Wirzba:

Our immersion in touch should not be taken to mean that the difference between self and other is therefore obliterated. When I reach out to another, as when I grab another's hand, there is still a gap....Besides being a warning against all claims to complete comprehension, this distance or gap is of the highest significance for understanding the character of our relationships.³³

Difference is precisely that which allows Christians to affirm a belief in the communion of saints (a communion, it is worth nothing, that *transcends* space, time, and history). Bodies are bound to one another not in order to obliterate difference but that they might reflect divinity in their preservation and care for one another.

Precisely the relational quality of transcendence is instructive for humans seeking a robust theological somatology, which is to say a theological understanding of our Spirit-flesh. Transcendence as articulated by Rivera names the reality of social formation. Human formation hinges on encounter — originally and primarily, the encounter with the divine that forms the creature, but also, as poststructuralists began to articulate,

³² Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 2, 138.

³³ Norman Wirzba, "The Touch of Humility: An Invitation to Creatureliness," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 2 (April 2008), 238.

encounters with other humans (and our social, political, and physical environments). Encounter implicates human bodies. We meet one another in our limited, fleshy reality. We encounter one another though the space we share. Relationships with God and with others are imprinted on our bodies. We are formed by others even as we contribute to the formation of others (for good and ill, *tob* and *ra*). The flesh that encloses us is precisely the place in which we encounter one another and live into the calling of the *imago*.³⁴ In relationships of transcendence we recognize our own boundaries and our limits, which is to say we come to understand the character of our creatureliness *and* the ways in which we are connected to the divine.

4.5 Grasp, Touch, and the Potential for Life Together

In the same breath in which she reminds us that God is always beyond human grasp, Rivera acknowledges that God is never “beyond our touch.”³⁵ The distinction is critical. In Jesus Christ God has made God’s self available to humanity. God has re-established the center that was lost. By acknowledging the election of grace at the cross, humans relieve themselves of the need to grasp at the opportunity to be like God, “Instead, as those who are chosen and thus no longer able to choose at all, having chosen already in being chosen, they stand in the freedom and unity of doing the will of God.”³⁶ The will of God is the ethical imperative underlying inter-human transcendence.

Once again, the Incarnation is our starting point. The God who has given God’s self to be known and touched did not *grasp* at divinity, but freely took on flesh that he

³⁴ Griffiths, 14.

³⁵ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 2.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 231.

might restore humans to their enfleshed center. As creatures of the Creator, made in the image of the one who was born, taught, ate, gathered, suffered, and died, humans too are called to release their grasp, to

Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,
who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8, NRSVUE).

Being reconciled to our center means becoming like Christ, exercising freedom for the utterly alien, wildly different other whom God has given us as gift and task. Re-establishing our limit invites humans to encounter with open palms the concrete other, who we can touch but never fully grasp, and who acts as a human boundary even in the sustaining intimacy of touch.

The church begins to establish a robust somatology when it turns its eye toward the Incarnation. All claims to superiority or self-interest are cast aside when pursuing the God who takes on flesh to heal humans and restore them to right relationship with the other and the divine. There is no better example of embracing limitation than that which is celebrated in the Philippian Christ hymn. In freedom, the second person of the Trinity chose to be among creation that creation might be reconciled. Christians look to Christ's "self-emptying," not to divest themselves of power, but to better model living for the other's flourishing. Eden may be lost, but the center, by the grace of the transcendent ever-active God, has held. In the next chapter I will turn to ethics as a way of exploring

the particular embodiment of those who belong to the larger Body of Christ. For now, it is enough to note that humans who live as creatures do so by and embracing the limit of God and one another and by releasing the self-serving willfulness that grasps at becoming “like god” in order that we might better become that which we were created to be.

“I’ve been told that when FBI agents are learning to detect a counterfeit bill, they do not spend most of their time studying counterfeits. Instead, they memorize the original. By internalizing the weight, smell, and look of a real dollar bill, they can spot a fake almost intuitively, without having to stop and analyze it. Christian formation requires a similar familiarity with the God-story of Jesus Christ: young people who know the shape, feel, and look of the gospel can discern the cruciform pattern of God’s activity in the world—just as they can readily spot spiritual counterfeits that masquerade as vaguely comforting creeds, communities, calls, and hopes, but that fall short of the gospel.”

— Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*

“Christian flesh ought to show what it is to the world, ought to make its glorification of the LORD evident.”

— Paul Griffiths, *Christian Flesh*

Chapter Five | Bodies at Work: Ethics in an Embodied Church

Over the course of the previous four chapters, I have labored to show the myriad ways the body is rendered absent in the public discourse and the worshipping life of the church. By sustaining attention on the inward “true” self and the sovereign individual, bodies — both the individual and the collective — have receded from focus, even becoming objects of derision. The recession is especially true for bodies coded “normative” in any given cultural climate. The inheritance of the millennia has created an atmosphere ripe for Gnostic renewal. A church that has moved away from the peculiarities of the Creed — the meddling Maker who is also the sovereign Father, the enfleshed Son born into the world and killed by its violences, the ever-present Spirit who binds communities and enlivens future hope — has instead mirrored the individualistic claims of Western culture. By focusing on inwardness, whether the salvation of the individual or the presumed heaven to which disembodied souls flee, the church has lost its connection to one of its first doctrines: the material goodness of creation and of the sanctity of created bodies.

In this chapter I will sustain attention on the body and on embodied Christian discipleship. What might it mean to return to a community conscious of its body? How can following the Incarnate God help us better understand the demands of discipleship?

Before building a positive argument for *discernibly different Christian flesh*, I will examine the present state of the mainline church, both the simmering Gnosticism that sits unarticulated in its pews and the dire consequences of Platonic dualisms. Finally, I will turn to the ways in which such dualisms might be overcome: namely, by returning to an embodied, Edenic discipleship responsible to God, self, and other. Doctrines of creatureliness, rooted in Scriptures first stories, call Christians to an embrace of ethical living, formed in response to (and imitation of) the Incarnation.

Attending to the Incarnation and its proclamation in the Creed grants the church a path toward creation-centered “somaform” discipleship — a way of being in the world that is discernibly different from other commitments. Somaform discipleship is a way of living shaped by the intentions of God in creation and the witness to God’s ongoing work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The positive articulation of “cruciform” discipleship is coupled with doctrines of creation and preservation to attend to the experience of being embodied, both in this life and in the life to come. Somaform discipleship gives language to the ways Christians are formed within the Body of Christ (the church), by the embodied Christ in the Incarnation, and in our particular socially-located Spirit-flesh. The church is fully the Body of Christ when it embraces its peculiar witness and the enfleshed bodies that lie at the heart of God’s good creation.

5.1 | The State of the Church: Near-Christianity and the Hope of the Creed

The incapacity of the Protestant church to adequately communicate its theological uniqueness has created a crisis of near-belief. The inward focus on “the soul” coupled with a lingering dualism that has little regard for the goodness of the body has — across the ages — fostered a sense of spirituality with little recognition of the formative nature

of flesh, and by, extension, the concrete body of the neighbor. In light of the ubiquitous American myth of an autonomous unaffected individual, the problem has only been exacerbated. Brown and Strong suggest that sustained attention on inwardness has, like a “strong magnet [drawn] modern religious perspectives almost inevitably toward Gnosticism.”¹ Nowhere is the pull better reflected than in the spiritual lives of American youth.

The 2003 National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) explored the religious beliefs and spiritual practices of American youth across denominational lines. In her analysis of the data, Kenda Creasy Dean reminds readers that youth are a canary in the church’s coal mine – their attitudes and practices reflect those of the broader churches by which they are formed. If there is a rejection of orthodoxy (whether intentional or not), it will be reflected first in the faith of adolescents. After all, teenagers parrot what they have been taught at home and in their churches.² Their reflections are enlightening and troublesome:

When asked to describe what they believed, many youth defaulted and just said they had no religious beliefs, **or they unknowingly described beliefs that their own churches deem heretical.** . . . These patterns were consistent even in teenagers who regularly attend church, without mainline Protestant young people being among the least religiously articulate of all teens.³

The youth surveyed in the NYSR appear to have learned little from the Creed. Their inability to articulate the peculiar story of Christian faith is an indictment of the church at large. Teenagers are not hostile to religion, they are simply unable to name what makes

¹ Brown and Strawn, 23.

² Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4-5.

³ Dean, 19. Emphasis mine.

the Christian story unique. Dean notes that the participants claim a “do-good, feel good spirituality” fueled by a “consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism.”⁴ Nothing of the Triune God, the power of creation, or the redeeming Incarnation is reflected in such vague “Almost” Christianity.

Referring to the faith of American youth as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” Dean identifies five marks of the belief system: God exists, God wants people to be moral, happiness is the goal of life, God is transcendent *elsewhere* (“except when I need God to resolve a problem”), and those who are good go to heaven on their death.⁵ Troublesome overtones of an immaterial, otherworldly realm reassert themselves in the heart of the church. While it is important to clarify that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not problematic *in se*, it is critical to distinguish it from orthodox Christianity. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is individualistic. Its overly-spiritualized overtones discourage attending to the community, much less the pursuit of self-emptying freedom. Nevermind that a focus on abstracted “goodness” apart from the life of Jesus Christ is a sign without a signifier, a feel-good slogan rooted in individual will. When ethics is reduced to goodness, the Christian story is whitewashed in favor of a remote, impersonal deity.

The prominence of Therapeutic Moralistic Deism points to a near-universal problem for the church. Christians have lost their identity because churches have diluted the message of the Gospel. The searing, redemptive story of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate God who hovered over the waters at creation and through whom all matter came to being,

⁴ Dean, 4-5.

⁵ Dean, 14. It should be noted that Dean borrows the phrase “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” from the researches at the NYSR.

has not been robustly proclaimed. Instead, Christian churches have absorbed and reflected Western dualistic ontologies without correction. The church has not only failed to proclaim the goodness of creation, it has utterly lost the uniqueness of its central affirmations: the transformative affirmations of bodily resurrection, the communion of saints, and the catholicity of a diverse Kingdom.

If indeed American Christianity has lost its historical “coherence,” the answer is not to further abstract the proclamation, mucking it up with philosophical concepts and pop spirituality.⁶ Attention to the Incarnation and the Creed offer a needed corrective. Preachers must repeatedly tell the story of creation, covenant, and Incarnation, in all its materiality. The Creed ought to be explored, not as an opportunity to stretch after the sermon, but as a means of entering into the story of God’s faithfulness in the world. Doing so will aid Christians who seek align their thinking with a biblical worldview whose end is active discipleship. In the Incarnation Christians learn, as Bonhoeffer noted, how to better be creatures of the Creator. Believers “mimic Jesus...not because we have somehow chosen to be like him, but because, incredibly, God has chosen to become like us.”⁷ Discipleship — the ever-present process of being made to conform to the image of Jesus — is a response to God’s self-giving in the Incarnation by the power of the Spirit. To build a community able to respond to the call of Jesus Christ requires bold proclamation that attends to the story of God’s work in the world from Creation through the final reconciliation.

⁶ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

⁷ Dean, 104.

Because discipleship is a pursuit of the peculiar God who is revealed in canon and Creed, it, in turn, takes a peculiar form, attending not only to the spiritual wellbeing of the community, but most especially to the Spirit-flesh encountered along the way. Christians who seek to imitate Jesus will note his attention to other bodies — the leper whom he touches, the feet he washes prior to his crucifixion, the way he mixes spit and dirt to make a mask of clay, the crowds whose hunger he alleviates. They will also, perhaps surprisingly, draw their attention to the divine-human body — not only Jesus’ birth, suffering, death, and resurrection (as attested in the Creed), but his flight to rest and pray when the crowds pressed him, his acceptance of the gift of oil as a preparation for his trial, his resurrected wounds, his grief after the death of his friend, and the joy he shares with his disciples. Consistent proclamation that turns the gaze of the community toward the enfleshed Jesus and explores the God-centered story of the Creed will become scaffolding for a well-articulated faith and enacted, embodied discipleship.⁸ If the church intends to form disciples, it must learn, proclaim, and embody its unique story.

In the memorable vignette that opened this chapter, Kenda Dean describes the ways FBI agents are trained to spot a counterfeit bill, drawing a comparison to the process of becoming more like Christ:

I’ve been told that when FBI agents are learning to detect a counterfeit bill, they do not spend most of their time studying counterfeits. Instead, they memorize the original. By internalizing the weight, smell, and look of a real dollar bill, they can spot a fake almost intuitively, without having to stop and analyze it. Christian

⁸ Dean reminds us that the Creed is not a story about humans. It is, at every turn, a story about God. The proclaiming community that forms the “I believe” becomes a secondary, responsive character in the drama, formed and moved by repetition and sustained attention, “The Apostles’ Creed is a dramatic, sweeping description of God’s widest ideas...Deism sounds like the Declaration of Independence in Sunday School...The Apostles’ Creed never mentions requiring us to be good simply because the creed is about God, not about us.” (Dean, 39).

formation requires a similar familiarity with the God-story of Jesus Christ: young people who know the shape, feel, and look of the gospel can discern the cruciform pattern of God's activity in the world—just as they can readily spot spiritual counterfeits that masquerade as vaguely comforting creeds, communities, calls, and hopes, but that fall short of the gospel.⁹

Canon and Creed are visceral things. God gives Christians an imagination through which they may track Jesus as he moves through Galilee. One's olfactory senses are overwhelmed when Lazarus is called from the grave or when the jar of ointment is poured over Jesus' hair. The grass of Eden can be felt beneath a disciple's toes as instinctively as the burn of hot coal on Isaiah's tongue. We feel John jump in Elizabeth's belly and rejoice with Mary at the unlikely pregnancy of her cousin. Paul's shackled ankles rub against our joints, even as we are enlivened by his radiant joy on receiving greetings from old friends. Telling the stories — boldly proclaiming them in their material oddness — is the only way to cultivate an authentic knowledge of God's ongoing work. Only by building a biblical vision of the world of the Maker can Christians come to understand themselves as those who are made and begin to live into their strange, other-oriented freedom.

Telling these stories also requires a community. Christianity is passed down and proclaimed. It is told, heard, repeated, and embodied. Having heard the story of God's free condescension to the created order, the disciple — in, with, and among the community — responds with attention and care. The type of mystical, amorphous Christianity that haunts American teenagers, despite requiring “goodness,” has no meaningful call to action because its essential compass is aligned to a subjective sense of

⁹ Dean, 90.

rightness. Disincarnate spiritualism is self-centered: concerned with individual fate, God's interventions on the individual's behalf, and individual happiness. Brown and Strawn remind their readers that, once again, dualism lies at the heart of the crisis:

We act as if the 'real me' is not our own body, or even our own behavior, but is something spiritual (not physical) inside — our mind or soul. Thus, it is considered possible to be spiritual inside without being religious in what we do — without participating in a communal religious life. We believe we can be good persons inside, even though we are often inconsiderate, unethical, or even immoral in what we do.¹⁰

When human bodies are affirmed as essential to God's will, part of the work of the religious community is attending to the wellbeing of those bodies. Emphasizing God's role as Maker and God's ongoing preservation by the power of the Spirit spurs an embodied response among those who have been given access to the story. Affirming that we are raised in our bodies, not as a rote affirmation of faith but as a cornerstone of God's will for the world, will help Christians better care for themselves and for the world they encounter. Participating in life alongside others and caring for those others becomes a core commitment rather than a secondary hobby. The presence of embodied others, who both communicate the good news of the Gospel and compel ethical action, is a task for those who seek to live into the hope of the Incarnation and the promise of the Creed.

5.2 | *The Task of Discipleship: God, Neighbor, and Self*

That God created from nothing implies that God cares deeply about matter — that God *intended* matter — and that God is particularly concerned with bodies made in the divine image. God has chosen that humans *be* as we *are*, limited and bound to a place,

¹⁰ Brown and Strawn, 4.

time, and community. In his beginning, Adam exists in communion with God and the world. But he is not settled until he is in relationship with Eve, the one who is like him but utterly other. God is Adam's center, and Eve is Adam's limit. Returning to the garden can help Christians understand the matrix of relationships that form humans as persons and center human responsibility. Ethical action is not only a matter of the other before whom the subject is set. It is a response to God's ordering of the world and God's work in individual lives. Before turning to somafom discipleship, I will briefly consider the ethical realm of responsibility that includes God, other, and self.

The Reformed tradition shares with Lutheranism an affirmation that grace alone is requisite for salvation. No human work — even the work of faith — is salvific. The same grace that grants being and reconciliation assures faithfulness.¹¹ Critics might complain that “grace alone” requires little by way of transformed living. While there is merit to the critique, it is essential to persuade the community that the same grace that justifies the Christian ignites discipleship. Those who recognize the grace of God in their lives are responsible for an *embodied* answer that grace, which is to say that gratitude for God's work is reflected in the relationships that make up both the Kingdom and the body (in

¹¹ The idea that the same grace that reconciles also makes faithful response possible may require some unpacking. Reformed thinkers affirm that God both reconciles (the doctrine of justification) and makes holy (the doctrine of sanctification). Salvation and the Christian life are equal gifts of God, distinct yet inseparable (Migliore, 250-51). For Calvin, faith is partaking in the grace of God through the works of Jesus Christ. Justification and sanctification are a “double grace,” two sides of the same coin (Calvin, 3.11.1). Calvin's view is unsurprisingly legalistic. Justification is imputed righteousness. The “sinner” is granted the grace of the sinless one, Jesus Christ, and as such no longer lives before God as the guilty one. Turning to Bonhoeffer both softens and better reflects the biblical view. Through Christ the center is restored (justification). The work is therefore God's. But even the work of sustaining faith and making holy is not one Christians “do.” By participating in the life of Christ, Christians are made holy, such that even discipleship is a gift of God. Being conformed to Christ's image is a joyful acceptance of a reality already received.

both senses of the word). Discipleship responds by following long before orthodoxy is affirmed, it is a lived response to the gift of the restored center.

The justification of the disciple thrusts her into a realm of relationships that, by virtue of the presence of the divine and human other, prevents a collapse into individualism. In turn, sanctification is a joyful reply to the justifying grace of God. The effects of sanctification — a theological doctrine reflecting the process of being made to conform to the image of the Holy One — cascade into the realm of everyday life and clarify the meaning of salvation. In view of the restored center, salvation cannot be assumed to be a singular moment shared between God and the believer, nor the reconciliation of the amorphous “soul” and the disembodied deity. Neither is salvation a mental exercise, as if merely acquiescing to a doctrine or praying the sinner’s prayer suffices as a response to God’s grace. Glimpsing the scope of God’s work in the individual allows believers to see the ways in which God is at work in the larger world.¹² A right response to that work is turning with God toward the community, the neighbor, and the body politic. It is allowing oneself to reflect the divine image *already present by virtue of being*. The praise believers offer is transformed into the work of relationships-for, not because those works save, but because the practice of relational freedom is a proper response to the transformative grace of God. Ethical action is not rooted in a political system or catalogue of need. It is a way of giving praise to God by imitating God’s free works in creation, Incarnation, and reconciliation.

¹² Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Humanity,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Handbook to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 113.

Sanctification also requires honesty. Being made holy is a process of self-examination, whereby the believer confronts the myriad ways she has missed the mark. In the Creed, Christians affirm belief in a God who judges and who forgives. Surely the early church had eschatological judgment in view, but we who are made in a world that lives apart from God must also wrestle with God's corrective judgment in the present order. Receiving judgment is critical to the work of ethics. Sanctification without correction is empty, and the church misses its calling when it fails to see that God's judgment *in this life* is good news. After all, Christians cannot be aligned with the Kingdom if they persist in pushing past the limit. If the body is to be made into a cruciform image (molded into the form poured out by the second person of the Trinity), and indeed if we are also to be formed by that very Incarnation (a somaform pedagogy informed by the life of Jesus the Nazarene), then we must subject ourselves to the judgment of the God who has made us and persevered with us throughout all our days.¹³ God judges and rejects the way of life lived on the margins and calls Christians to repent of their attempts to transgress their fleshy limits that they may experience forgiveness, the transformation of living life in pursuit of community, wholeness, and reconciliation. Without transformative judgment Christians can neither *be* the Body of Christ *nor* adequately reflect the image.

In the concrete circumstances of everyday living, judgment involves interrogating the damaging, dualistic ways of thinking that have formed us in society and exposing them as counter to the purposes of God. Allowing God to lay one's prejudices,

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 41.

assumptions, and selfishness bare creates space for pursuing God’s will. Rivera frames the paradigm shift in terms of “learning and unlearning.” If one is to truly welcome the other and take responsibility for her flourishing, then that individual is responsible for preparing herself to receive someone utterly different — learning the systems that have contributed to that person’s coming-to-being and unlearning any thinking that discourages difference or attempts to comprehend her.¹⁴ Welcoming the other, one of the primary tasks of discipleship, always involves accepting judgment against one’s self.¹⁵

Leder’s “dys-appeared” body is here relevant — the bodies that we encounter *and objectify* are problematized and classified as if they can be discarded (or as if their needs are tertiary to the subject’s). Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the changing approach to “mission” in local churches. Congregations in the West must unlearn missional practices rooted in settler colonialism that treat those they serve as objects of pity and derision unable to choose for themselves. Such models of “benevolent god playing” have, for decades, relied on assumptions that Western Christians both know what other communities need and can meet those needs in sweeping displays of generosity divorced from relationships of mutuality.¹⁶ Whether acknowledged or not, such “missional” thinking is fueled by myths of superiority that result in dehumanizing

¹⁴ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 101.

¹⁵ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 107. McBride makes a similar point, “Embodiment in the social domain also requires addressing the socio-political context that marginalizes certain bodies. If you have social power, you have a responsibility to both acknowledge your privilege—the social stories and systems from which you have benefitted—and widen those stories and systems to make them inclusive for everyone.” (McBride, *The Wisdom of Your Body*, 43). Especially for those bodies coded “normative,” those most like to experience physical recession of the material phenomenon, embodiment calls for responsible acknowledgment of the ways in which one has fallen short of the aims of the Kingdom.

¹⁶ Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2013), 73.

objectification and dys-appearance for those the church seeks to serve. The other is not encountered in her fullness; she is encountered as one to be pitied and overcome. While the benevolence may be applauded, its means must be unlearned. Those who participate in such systems, realizing that they share a center and are responsible for the flourishing of the other as Spirit-flesh, must repent before relationships can truly flourish. For the church to succeed in serving the world, it has had to unlearn colonial settler mission and seek the judgment and forgiveness of both God and the other.¹⁷

Judgment, though, is not the end. The disciple unlearns old ways to better embody discipleship in the present. It is truly remarkable that the Creed only acknowledges sin in view of its forgiveness. If Christians are to seek after the God who forgives, they must also be able to accept the judgments of that very same God. To be conformed, to express a discernibly different Christian ethos toward life, we must first be transformed from old ways of being — from the dualisms and dominions that rule Western thinking. Only then is the church able to be the Body of Christ, breaking down systemic barriers and ensuring that all bodies, despite perceived cultural, physical, or cognitive difference, are able to participate fully in their own hallowed creatureliness and with the gathered, embodied community.

Much has been made of Jesus' "second commandment," that one "shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39, NRSVUE). While the primacy of love for neighbor is well attested in both Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, it is worth noting that

¹⁷ For more see Hunter Farrell and Balajiedlang Khylllep, *Freeing Congregational Mission: A Practical Vision for Companionship, Cultural Humility, and Co-Development* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2022).

Jesus also commands a measure of love for one's self. The story of God's ongoing intervention in the world requires an honest reckoning of the human condition: its beginnings, its break with the center, its liminal present, and promised future. Hatred and indifference toward human bodies, or the assumption that they are unnecessary to the true self, is tantamount to hatred and suspicion of God's good creation. It is also a rejection of God's grace. McBride suggests that accounting for the goodness of human incarnations is an antidote to the harmful dys-appearance and dualism that lingers in Western imagination, "Embodiment is a way to heal the mind-body divide we experience within ourselves and, more systemically, within Western cultures. To do so we need to understand the self as a body. Our body and our personhood are so intimately connected that they can never be separated."¹⁸ The story of God's intervention in the world allows believers to see themselves in a new light, not as hated sinners beset by an angry God, but as sheer gifts, sacred in our Spirit-flesh, and precious in the sight of the Maker. Human incarnation is a profound rejection of the immaterial, disinterested narratives that trap humans in self-centered enmity. Attention to the creation narratives, from God's first work to God's provision east of Eden, helps Christians comprehend themselves as beloved by God.¹⁹ Without knowing ourselves in our limited, vulnerable, fleshy, unity, we cannot understand the call of God on our lives, and we cannot effectively attend to the needs of the other. Humans who recognize the ways they have been formed by society and in nature, and most particularly by the Creator, can embrace themselves *in their limitations* so that they can exercise their vocation in the world.

¹⁸ McBride, 13.

¹⁹ Bantum, *The Death of Race*, 8.

Discipleship is enacted in relationship with the concrete other, and the limit of the other differentiates almost Christianity from Christianity. Rather than interior faith that prioritizes salvation and self-improvement, Christianity-following-Christ responds to the other. Migliore summarizes it well, “Christian hope is not an abstract theory but a living practice.”²⁰ Where disciples recognize the needs of those whom they encounter, they are obliged to act on their behalf — not in a quest for goodness, but because humans learn from and reflect the goodness of God when in relationships of mutual upbuilding. The ground of ethical action is not, therefore, abstracted goodness or a promise of salvation, it is the Christ who connects humans, reconciles them, and is made alive in relationships of transcendence between them.²¹ What begins with a recognition of God’s grace and human limitation is unfurled in a response of gratitude — Miriam’s bravery ensuring baby Moses’s wellbeing in Pharaoh’s house, the Jerusalem church in Acts pooling their resources for the poor among them, the saints visiting Paul in his Roman cell, Lydia opening her home to the burgeoning church in a city hostile to Christian congregations, Rahab acting against the ruling powers in Jericho to house Joshua’s spies, and Zaccheaus giving away half of his fortune after meeting Jesus (to name only a few). In one way or

²⁰ Migliore, 367.

²¹ Michael Mawson, “Creatures Before God: Bonhoeffer, Disability and Theological Anthropology,” in *Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer’s Theology and Ethics*, ed. Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (London: T&T Clark International, 2016), 134. Mawson framed the neighbor-obligation in terms of the material presence of the other, “We respond to the concrete neighbor as and where we encounter them, and not in terms of their *telos* toward something higher.” (Mawson, 132). The response of discipleship is not about guaranteeing salvation. It is acting in freedom and love as God has acted toward us.

another, each act reflects the grace-filled *imago*.²² Being made holy is always a communal act and, at each turn, a gift of God.

5.3 | *Christian Discipleship: Flesh Discernibly Different*

The Triune God stands as our center. How then, should we live? Christians — by virtue of the acknowledged unity of their Spirit-flesh and their Christ-centered pursuits — live lives discernibly different from the lives of those who have not yet acknowledged their reconciliation. The difference lies not in the material of flesh but by virtue of the way “Christian flesh,” as Griffiths calls practicing Christians, exists in the world. Discipleship is active discernment, following after the work of God rather than pursuing the needs of the self, the nation, or the group.²³ It is oriented, as human life was at *the* beginning, around a center and a limit — circumnavigating the revelation of God and, however one is able, following after the ever-active Spirit.

In order that the work not be diluted or spiritualized, believers must constantly attend to the story of Jesus Christ proclaimed in Canon and Creed. The promise that the bodies with whom we interact, the bodies that form us, the bodies that make up our communities, will, alongside our own, be present in the life to come changes the character of everyday life. The ones whom we encounter will be encountered again. They will bear the wounds and the care of the world. The resurrection promise — a singular,

²² More recent examples are abundant: the bravery of the Huguenot Church that took in Jewish children in Le Chambon during the Vichy collaborationist regime, Rosa Parks refusing to relinquish her seat as an act of political and religious resistance, Bonhoeffer’s relentless work with the Confessing Church, the faith leaders who shielded protesters after the murder of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and the innumerable number of Christians who each day commit to visiting the imprisoned, staffing free medical clinics, and living out Jesus’ command in Matthew 25 to care for “one of the least of these who are members of my family” (v. 40).

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 231.

unique affirmation, ought to inform every aspect of our living. Bodies appear in front of us as those responsible for our wellbeing and those for whom we are responsible. They are a limit, and a reminder of our orienting center. The call to ethical living is part of the resurrection promise. Affirmation of the bodily resurrection and the communion of saints is a way of orienting oneself in the world. When we, in our incarnations, serve others, we offer praise to the risen Jesus Christ and care for the church in every time and place. We serve the one who has set our lives into motion and who preserves us in our being.

Christian communities acknowledge their love and gratitude when they provide for the material needs of those with whom they are set, when they feed those with whom Christ dwells and provide them shelter, when they sit at table with sinners and publicans and hear the good news, when they rejoice at a feast where the wine comically overflows. “Cleaving” to Christ, as Griffiths insists that Christian flesh must do, is cleaving to the material world in which Christ dwells.²⁴ By virtue of its broad, inclusive, caring welcome, it forms a Body discernably different from all the objects in an otherwise dispassionate world.

More than any other signifier, full participation is the mark of the Body of Christ. It is clear when you follow Jesus’ ministry through Galilee, Samaria, and Jerusalem that bodies matter to the Son of God. Jesus addresses the social stigmas that keep humans ostracized from the community and provides for their return, Jesus addresses physical ailments that bar full participation in the Temple community, Jesus even rebukes death, returning a man to his grieving sisters. Bodies, our unified Spirit-flesh, are the material of

²⁴ Griffiths, 76.

the Kingdom which God is building. The inclusion of bodies is a matter of great importance in the Gospels both for life on this side of the eschatological revelation and the life to come. Without the concrete others whom Jesus meets along the way, the body-as-fellowship is incomplete. Belonging, then, is not only a matter of making welcome, it is a way to ensure that we, those who are already following, are also made complete in the presence of the once-alienated other.²⁵

5.4 | *Aliveness, Joy, and the Hope of Life to Come*

Our bodies, our concrete incarnations in all of their socio-historical complexity, are honored, even as we honor the other with whom we share a center. As with Adam and Eve, none of us is complete without the other, and we are only whole when we are seen and understood in the complexity of our Spirit-flesh. Our being is contingent on the grace of God and the gift of difference, and our difference is carried into God's everlasting, material Kingdom. To conclude this thesis, I will offer a sermon centering on the hope of the Creed — that our faith is made real when we take seriously our carnality, and that our diverse embodiments are honored when we take truly believe — in our speech and our action — that we will be raised in the unity of our Spirit-flesh to dwell with God forever. But the hope of our bodies is not only a promise for the future. It is an agenda for discipleship in the present. Together, as the Body of Christ, we face the limits of our being – both the vulnerable limit of “aliveness” (“loss, grief, pain, aloneness, illness, the pang of hunger or fullness, the grip of fear, and death”), and the joys of incarnation.

²⁵ Wirzba, “The Art of Creaturely Life,” 20.

²⁶That we experience limit is not an indication of something gone wrong. It points to God's intention in creation. Those of us who are not God are still granted a measure of the divine image in our relationships, and we are offered the grace of judgment that we might be better aligned toward our center.

But it is not only our limitations that mark us as beloved creatures of the Creator. Our bodies also carry the possibility of joy. We experience joy in the presence of God and when we encounter the other in her fullness. Joy, which is felt in the unity of our Spirit-flesh marks our bodies as hallowed. Without our bodies and their myriad encounters, humans would live devoid of joy. Writes Bonhoeffer, "if the body is an end in itself, then there is a right to bodily joys, without subordinating them to a further, higher purpose. Part of the very essence of joy is that it is spoiled by thoughts about purpose."²⁷ God marks God's transcendent presence in experiences of joy, and we approach God when we experience joy with one another. There is no higher end to our embodiment, only the will of God for a life lived reflecting God's own image. There is joy, there is limitation, and there is the gift of life, all through and in and with the bodies God has called "very good."

Our bodies call us to one another and remind us of God's final promise. The God who ushered us into being from nothingness and who has preserved us despite our attempts to push past the margins, calls us finally to "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." Both are sheer gifts, which we comprehend in gratitude by following after Christ and attending to Christ's body in this life. Our bodies, a unity of Spirit and flesh,

²⁶ McBride, 210.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 117.

breathed into being and molded in matter, are the sites where we enact our discipleship, and they are the site of our sure and certain hope, an “eschatological promise and moral task.”²⁸ In order to rightly apprehend the promise and the task, the church needs to attend to its first vocation: proclamation. The Creed and its ancient hope should take center stage in our attempts to make Christian faith real in the lives of believers. Its attention to God’s work in the world offers hope for preachers attempting to make sense of human lives and human hope. Only after hearing the peculiar story can Christians enact the drama of reconciliation in our own communities, with and for those others with whom God has called us into being. The church is the Body of Christ and we are members of it most especially when we follow after the Incarnate Lord, and allow his body, and those bodies he encountered, to inform our own living, both now and forevermore.

²⁸ James F. Keenan, “Christian Perspectives on the Human Body,” *Theological Studies* 55, no. 2 (June 1994), 333.

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.
— *1 Corinthians 15:12-19*

Epilogue | If, Then (A Sermon for Westminster)

I have been thinking recently about numbers. That statement on its own should make y'all nervous. Trust me when I tell you that you do not pay me to think about numbers — after all, I found finite math at Presbyterian College so ... well let's say "nice," that I was absolutely required to take it twice.

Still, I have been thinking about numbers.

Not the logic of them, exactly — I've been thinking about the theology of them.

Now — and I hasten to add this — I am not telling you that every number in Scripture has a hidden meaning corresponding to some secret truth. That's *The DaVinci Code*. But it's fair to say that there *are* certain numbers and certain periods of time that convey meaning beyond numerals.

Twelve tribes of Israel, twelve disciples.

Seven days in the first creation story, seven circles around Jericho,

seventy times seven calls to forgive.

Forty years in the wilderness, forty days tempted after the baptism.

A God who is one-in-three, three-in-one.

Some months ago, right when I started paying attention to numbers, I found myself, for perhaps the third time, teaching an adult Sunday school series exploring Christ's resurrection appearances. Over the course of four weeks, I noticed something

interesting. In all of Jesus' passion predictions — those moments when Jesus talks about facing his own death — there is a repeated refrain about the third day.

In Matthew, the religious elite stand before Pilate and remind the governor that Jesus told gathered crowds he would be raised “after three days.” In Luke the women at the tomb are reminded that while he was in Galilee Jesus announced “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Again and again the authors of scripture repeat the refrain — the coming “third day” is foretold throughout Jesus' teaching ministry and in the moments leading up to Easter Sunday. The phrase is, of course, a marker of time between the horror of the crucifixion and the hope of victory on Easter. In fact, the phrase “the third day” was ubiquitous enough that the church under Constantine codified it in our creeds.

Jesus was “crucified, dead, and buried.” descending to hell.

He was, as my Southern grandmother may say, “done gone.”

And then what? Many of y'all know it by heart: “on the third day he rose again.”

There it is again, the third day.

The gospel writers and early church fathers anticipate and build towards the third day — marking time by the moments of physical terror, forsakenness, and pain on the cross. But then, come the third day, their language shifts.

In Matthew 28, the writer sets the scene for Easter. The women approach the tomb “as the *first* day of the week was dawning.” Luke and John echo Matthew. In Mark the morning light is already broken, but pains are taken to note that it is the *first* day.

Now those of you who succeeded in finite math the first time around will be quick to remind me that “the first day” signifies nothing other than what it is — Sunday, the first day of the week. And perhaps you’re not wrong. But given how interested Gospel writers of the earliest church were in anticipating “the third day,” and the pains that they took to note the accuracy of Jesus’ predictions, it is remarkable that each of them, recalling the moment the women witnessed the empty tomb, speak in *firsts* —

*Easter is not the third day since,
it is the first day of.¹*

It is almost as if, in this Easter confrontation, we bear witness to the genesis of an entirely new creation. The first day of Easter is the victory of God over the forces of Empire, over the forces of sin, over the forces of violence and oppression. The first day of Easter calls us back to Genesis where, if we listen well enough we just may hear God’s footfall rustle in the garden, calling forth life and connection where before there was nothingness, molding Adam’s flesh from the clay of the ground, breathing Eve into being.

Easter is the restoration of the *first* day, that *first* life, a sheer, unasked for gift in the perfect present tense. Each Sunday we gather to receive the word and affirm our faith we proclaim to one another the Easter news. Christ is risen. The world is made new.

As has been established, I am not great at numbers. But I will stake this claim. The firstness of Easter morning matters more than just about anything else we Christians proclaim. It matters for our everyday living, it matters for our future, and it matters for our communities; it matters for our bodies and for the Body of Christ that is the church.

¹ I am indebted to D. A. Carson’s *The Gospel According to John* for this revelatory insight.

That firstness is the ground of our hope and the fruit of our faith.

Way back at the beginning God separated light from darkness and called the separation good. The gospels guide us to a similar place — gazing tentatively into an impossibly empty tomb. Light is dawning and from the depth of the cave life once again emerges from dust. It is good indeed.

Easter is the *first* day. Christ has been raised. The resurrection is a miraculous act of a miraculous God. And that matters. It matters not simply because it is an article of our faith — no, it matters because the empty tomb is the guiding principle of our lives. By my estimation there is no lesson more important than what we hear from Paul and the early church:

the first day presses on us and calls us, it is as real today as it was that first Easter.

The tomb is empty.

*Jesus Christ has been raised and has promised to return this blue planet,
our broken bodies, and the community of faith, back to its everlasting center,*

and that single fact, forcefully proclaimed by Paul

— the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come —

changes everything.

In lectures delivered to his first class at the University of Berlin, as the Reich was being overtaken by the incumbent Nazi power, Dietrich Bonhoeffer urged his students to consider the end...not the end of Germany, or of democracy, but the end of human history. For him there was no article of faith more important for present discipleship than the coming eschatological redemption, “The church of Christ,” argued Bonhoeffer, “witnesses to the end of all things. It lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts

from the end, it proclaims its message from the end.”² “Christ is risen,” Easter’s triumphant affirmation, is a singular and all-encompassing truth claim. In its proclamation we do not mean to say that some people are in and some are out — *just the opposite, in fact* — only that Easter Sunday is the fundamental truth of a Christian’s being, and the only way we know the world to be ordered. Resurrection is *the end*. And that matters.

Easter — the first day — is our beginning, our middle, and, thanks be to God, the end. It is the math by which we measure the world. Easter Sunday is our defining identity. We are *Easter* people, first day folks. Before we establish political, gender, and familial identities, indeed before any other thing we are defined *first* by the empty tomb. Whether in Galilee, Berlin, or here in Greenville, the *first day* matters for how we live, where we place our hope, what we believe about God, and just about everything else.

That is why Paul forcefully notes in today’s text that “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”

*If the first day did not dawn,
if the Father did not overcome the powers of sin and death that drove Christ to his cross,
if Jesus still rests in a Palestinian tomb,
then all of my preaching is in vain,
all of our good works are in vain,
and the sum of our faith —
every bit of it — love your neighbor, turn the other cheek, give generously —*

² Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 21.

is in vain.

We are to be pitied for it.

Now I know that sounds harsh — Paul is not known for his subtlety. Perhaps there's a better way at it.

Back when I was in seminary I had to take an intensive Hebrew class over the course of the Summer. I was learning roots, tenses, and patterns but it was all I could do to remember that a Hebrew text is read from right to left. As I sat for the final exam, I began to feel desperate. But then I got to the extra credit question.

For 20 points — that was the kind of test it was — we had to translate a random text plucked from the Hebrew Scriptures. Across five lines of text I recognized four words: *elohem*, *leket*, *hesed*, and *mispat*. Now, I grew up in a little neighborhood Presbyterian church that talked a lot about good theology but didn't require much Bible memorization. We didn't have Bible tests like so many of my dear Baptist friends or memorization drills like the Methodists down the road. It's fair to say that though I knew *about* scripture, I could not recite more than four or five passages.

This one, though, I knew. I'd heard it time and again. All I needed were those four words to call the full text to mind: *the Lord, justice, loving kindness, and walk*: "It was told to you, man, what is good and what the Lord demands of you — only doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NRSV). If you asked me back in seminary what I believed Christianity was about, I'd start with Micah: God's demand that the covenant people act ethically, fulfilling Torah obedience: welcoming the stranger, caring for the orphans, providing for the poor, forgiving debts, and moving always toward freedom. On the back end of all that, to round out my answer,

I'd tell you that Christianity had to do with the cross, too, that moment in which the sin of the earth was taken into the heart of God.

*Listening to the early church in Corinth changes that for me —
or at least adds an important clarification.*

You see the God we serve is not just the author of a fine moral code — a good set of ideas for daily living. Read apart from the Torah and, for Christians, apart from the empty tomb, Micah 6:8 can mean anything the reader wants it to. Who is *this* God? What does following *this* God mean? What exactly is *this* God's justice?

To understand what the demand of Micah means for Christian living we have to understand Paul's admonition to the Corinthians, which is to say that we have to understand the particular character of the God who creates life where there is none, life in our tombs and in that tomb; we have to understand the odd reality of the God of firsts and lasts, the God who so loved the world that he did not leave it to its demise, but instead, through Christ, took on humanity, suffered, died, and was buried — rising on the *first* day to new life. We have to consider who we are in this life, and who God calls us to be in the life to come.

Which is why it is not enough for Christians to “do justice,” if it is not the justice of the Father who raised the Son *in his flesh* — a protest against every idol, every death-dealing power in our world. It is not enough “do justice” if it is not the justice of the God who was dead and was himself raised, bearing the wounds of the world as his witness. It is not enough to “do justice,” if it transgresses the flesh of our neighbors, disregarding the first gift of our being...it is not enough if it is not the justice of the God who gives us life,

secures our *embodied, peculiar, resurrected* future and restores us to the communion of the garden.

It is not enough to “love kindness” if it is not kindness that actively works toward the right ordering of the world, an Easter world of embodied resurrection and first days. It is not enough if it is not a loving kindness that mirror’s God’s own, that calls out evil and destructive ways of being and awakens to life breathing forgiveness. It is not enough to “love kindness” if it is not the kindness of the God who calls for protection of foreigners in our land, the kindness of a God who ensures provision for disadvantaged women and widows, who values living religion over preforming it.

It is not enough to walk humbly if we walk past those embodied others in our midst, those with whom we share the divine image and who will themselves rise in glory at the end. It is not enough to walk humbly with God if we are always trying to outwit God and get around the demands of discipleship and the limits of our being. ... It is not enough to “do justice” or to “love kindness” or to “walk anywhere” if it is not the peculiar love of the God who has declared that how we treat one another matters, because we will see one another again.

Any other god, a god who makes few demands on our living, who justifies our worst instincts, who keeps us insular from one another and prefers one nation, one people, or one way of being over the way of the Kingdom is nothing more than a mirror of our worst selves, a god in *our* image — not the God of the empty tomb in whose Triune image we have been made.

It is not enough to proclaim Easter faith as a dogma if we do not live as Easter people, sure of the God who is bending the world toward the Kingdom,

*challenging us to new ways of being,
and restoring us to our created center*

A decade after he gave his first lectures, as he was preparing to die in a German prison, charged by the Reich with conspiring to rescue the Jews, misusing intelligence to support the Confessing Church, and, later, plotting to kill Hitler, Bonhoeffer, for whom ends were so important, found himself reflecting on the meaning of Easter. It had been his Easter faith, after all, that drove him to establish a seminary to train pastors who refused to swear allegiance to the Reich or any other national government, his Easter faith that demanded he work to save Jewish lives, his Easter faith that denounced white nationalism and the cycles of violence that an ethos of supremacy wrought. Before he died, knowing full well what was ahead of him, Bonhoeffer wrote this:

It's possible for a human being to manage dying, but overcoming death means resurrection. It is not through [the art of dying] but through Christ's resurrection that a new and cleansing wind can blow through our present world . . . If a few people really believed this and were guided by it in their earthly actions, a great deal would change. To live in light of the resurrection—that is what Easter really means.³

“To live from resurrection,” Jesus' and — critically, ours —that indeed is the meaning of Easter.”

We Christians proclaim that *every* Sunday is Easter Sunday. That's why Sundays in Lent don't count toward the forty days. Because having heard the good news of the empty tomb (the news of the *first* day), we cannot live in a Friday world — we cannot live as if Christ has not been raised, and we can't ignore the singular ethical demand on

³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Paper from Prison*, 333.

our lives: we will be raised too. The tomb is empty and it changes everything! Every Sunday is Easter Sunday, every day is an Easter day. We are *first* and fundamentally an Easter people!

Now I'll grant you that Easter is difficult to find these days. Our society is soaked in violence, division, and hatred. We are selfish and self-obsessed, we too often seek after our own good and the good of people who look and think like us over the good of our neighbor. And Lord knows, the Christian Church, called to be a light, is all too often is a black hole: mirroring the culture's self-serving idolatry, propagating division in the name of holiness, excluding those whom God calls, and promoting a rhetoric that denies God's good image in all humans.

That is a Good Friday church and a Good Friday culture. We are an Easter people, living into the promise of that *first* day, certain in the promise of the empty tomb, certain that the God of firsts and ends is still up ahead of us calling us on, certain that in this life and the resurrection to come we *belong* to God. Now, this can be heady stuff so I want to offer you a practical plan. Perhaps this week when you interact with your family or with colleagues and strangers, while at the grocery store or watching TV, you can consider this question:

is my life, my hope, my attitude, my spending, my voting,

reflecting the first day?

Am I proclaiming the empty tomb?

If we learn anything from the early church, from Paul and later Bonhoeffer, it's this: resurrection is not only a promise for the future, it is a demand on our daily living. *If*

the tomb is empty *then* everything changes. We know our end. The challenge now is to live that way.

6.1: Works Consulted (If, Then)

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*. Translated by Douglas Stephen Bax. Vol. 3. 17 vols. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

———. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens. Vol. 8. 17 vols. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.

Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991.

Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

Proctor, John. *First and Second Corinthians*. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2015.

Bibliography

Ashwin-Siejkowski, Piotr. *The Apostles' Creed*. New York: T&T Clark (International), 2009.

Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*. Translated by John Behr. Yonkers: New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011.

Bantum, Brian. "Discipleship and Identity: A Theological Consideration of Race, Gender, and the Human Situation." In *Sex, Gender, and Christianity*, edited by Jack Levison and Patricia Pope-Levison, 140–59. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2012.

———. *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. Vol. 4. 4 vols. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010.

Bethke Elshstain, Jean. "Bonhoeffer on Modernity: 'Sic et Non.'" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 345–66.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*. Translated by Douglas Stephen Bax. Vol. 3. 17 vols. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

———. *Discipleship*. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. Vol. 4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

———. *Ethics*. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Charles C. West. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works — Reader's Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.

———. *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Edited by Joachim von Soosten. Vol. 1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

Bordo, Susan. "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought." *Signs* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 439-456.

Bradatan, Costica. "Platonism." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by Andrew Louth. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

- Broadie, Sarah. "Soul and Body in Plato and Descartes." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101 (2001): 295–308.
- Brown, Sallie A. *Sunday's Sermon for Monday's World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020.
- Brown, Warren S., and Brad D. Strawn. *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Bynum, Caroline. "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective." *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 1 (1995): 1–33.
- Calvin, Jean. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Reissue. Vol. 1. 2 vols. The Library of Christian Classics. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2006.
- Coakley, Sarah. "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God." *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (January 2000): 61–73.
- Creamer, Deborah Beth. *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*. AAR: Academy Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- . "Embracing Limits, Queering Embodiment: Creating/Creative Possibilities for Disability Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 123–27.
- . "John Calvin and Disability" in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, edited by Brian Brock and John Swinton, 216–50. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.
- Crouch, Andy. *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2013.
- Danker, Frederick William. *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Edwards, Jonathan. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, August 2017, 1. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=21212307&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

- Elders, Leo J. *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors: The Philosophers and the Church Fathers*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018.
- Farrell, B. Hunter and S. Balajiedlang Khylllep. *Freeing Congregational Mission: A Practical Vision for Companionship, Cultural Humility, and Co-Development*. Downers Grover, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2022.
- Foucault, Michel. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D. F. Bouchard, 139–64. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Gaffin, Jr., Richard B. “Resurrection” in *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, edited by Donald K. McKim. The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984.
- González, Justo L., and Catherine Gunsalus González. *Heretics for Armchair Theologians*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008.
- Griffiths, Paul J. *Christian Flesh*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018.
- Hays, Richard B., and Roger E. Van Harn. “The Resurrection of the Body: Carnis Resurrectionem.” In *Exploring and Proclaiming The Apostles’ Creed*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- Heim, Paul. *John Calvin’s Ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Jenson, Robert W. *Canon and Creed*. Edited by Patrick D. Miller. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2010.
- Johnson, Mark. “Mind Incarnate: From Dewey to Damasio.” *Daedalus* 135, no. 3 (2006): 46–54.
- Keenan, James F. “Christian Perspectives on the Human Body.” *Theological Studies* 55, no. 2 (June 1994): 330–46.
- Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: One World, 2023.
- Kukkonen, Taneli, and Pauliina Remes. “Divine Word and Divine Work: Late Platonism and Religion.” *Numen* 63, no. 2/3 (2016): 139–46.

- Langdon, Adrian E. V. "Embedded Existence: Bonhoeffer, Barth, and Ecological Anthropology." *Didaskalia* 25 (2015): 58–76.
- Leder, Drew. *The Absent Body*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- . "The Absent Body (and Beyond)." *The Philosopher* 108, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 5–11.
- Leith, John H. *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981.
- Mathewes, Charles T. "A Tale of Two Judgments: Bonhoeffer and Arendt on Evil, Understanding, and Limits, and the Limits of Understanding Evil." *The Journal of Religion* 80, no. 3 (July 2000): 375–404.
- Mawson, Michael. "Creatures Before God: Bonhoeffer, Disability and Theological Anthropology." In *Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics*, edited by Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler. London: T&T Clark (International): 2016.
- McBride, Hillary. *The Wisdom of Your Body: Finding Healing, Wholeness, and Connection through Embodied Living*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2021.
- McClintock Fulkerson, Mary. "Humanity." In *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, edited by Donald K. McKim. The Westminster Handbook to Christian Theology. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- McGrath, Alister. *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*. New York: HarperOne, 2009.
- McNay, Lois. "The Foucauldian Body and the Exclusion of Experience." *Hypatia* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 125–39.
- Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.
- Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth. *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment*. Translated by John Bowden. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995.
- Pearson, Birger A. "Gnosticism as Platonism: With Special Reference to Marsanes." *The Harvard Theological Review* 77, no. 1 (January 1984): 55–72.

- Pew Research Center, "Spirituality Among Americans." Beliefs and Practices. Updated December 7, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans/>.
- Placher, William C., and Derek R. Nelson. *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2013.
- Plato. "Gorgias." In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, translated by Donald J. Zeyl, 1838. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.
- . *Phaedo*. Translated by David Gallop. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Rivera, Mayra. *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2007.
- . "Unsettling Bodies." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 119–23.
- . "Thinking Bodies: The Spirit of a Latina Incarnational Imagination." In *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, edited by Ada María Isasi Diaz and Eduardo Mendieta. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011.
- Rohr, Richard. *Near Occasions of Grace*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*. 5th ed. Vol. 2. 8 vols. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, n.d.
- , ed. *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*. 6th ed. Vol. 1. 3 vols. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007.
- Sigurdson, Ola. "How to Speak of the Body? Embodiment between Phenomenology and Theology." *Studia Theologica* 62, no. 1 (2008): 25–43.
- . "Theology in the Middle of Things: Existential Preconditions of Systematic Theology." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22, no. 4 (October 2020): 473–93.
- Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Snider, Alvin. "Cartesian Bodies." *Modern Philology* 98, no. 2 (November 2000): 299–319.

- Sorell, Tom. "Matter and Metaphysics." In *Descartes: A Very Short Introduction*, edited by Tom Sorell. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Sowle Cahill, Lisa. *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part I: Book of Confessions*. Louisville, Kentucky: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016.
- Todd, Matthew. *Pride: The Story of the LGBTQ Equality Movement*. London: Welbeck, 2021.
- Treanor, Brian. "The Human Place in the Natural World (Introduction)." In *Being-in-Creation: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World*. Groundworks: Ecological Issues in Philosophy and Theology. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.
- von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles' Creed*. Translated by David Kipp. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.
- Wirzba, Norman. "The Art of Creaturely Life: A Question of Human Propriety." *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 1 (2013): 7–28.
- . "The Touch of Humility: An Invitation to Creatureliness." *Modern Theology* 24, no. 2 (April 2008): 225–44.

Biography

The Reverend Amelia Alice Stuckey has served Presbyterian (U.S.A.) congregations since 2010. Prior to her ordained service, she obtained a B.A. in History and Philosophy from Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. Following college, she received both an M. Div. and Th. M from Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. While in seminary, she was honored with the Jagow Award in Homiletics and Speech (2008). Leigh, as she is called by everyone who knows her, is presently serving Westminster Presbyterian Church in Greenville South Carolina, a congregation full of folks whom she is extraordinarily grateful for.