

Death, Life, and Baptism (2)

Colleagues,

Last week Craig Simenson critiqued American funeral practices, Christian ones included, for their failure to take bodies with the seriousness that bodies deserve, even when they're dead. Today he starts challenging us to do better than that. See below for his cogent argument

A little more about Craig: raised in Wisconsin, he majored in Political Science and Social Work at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Then he headed for Boston, where he landed a good job with a non-profit service organization. A few years into that, he started sensing some inexplicable tugs toward theology and ministry. At some point he yielded, and landed a berth at Harvard Divinity School. Once there, he found to his own great surprise that he was being drawn to reexamine the roots of the Lutheran childhood that he had stepped away from along the way. The key mentor who encouraged and guided that reexamination was a Calvinist. Go figure. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The older I get, the more I grow in my appreciation of this, our Lord's own observation (John 3:8).

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

From "Make us Die Every Day': Baptism, Death, and Daily Prayer"

Craig F. Simenson

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Part 2. To be temples of God: life and death embodied

In truth, recent funeral trends merely reinforce a kind of

modern liturgical apathy within many mainline U.S. churches that fail to invite us into a more participatory liturgical experience with direct relevance to our everyday lives.[i] Rarely, whether in funerals or other liturgical contexts, are we actually challenged to be “temples of God,” i.e., to worship as wholly-embodied beings, encouraged to hear, see and touch a God claimed to be among us. In the last decades, much western theology has brought greater attention to the important role of the body in Christian worship, often looking back to some of the most ancient Christian liturgies, but critical liturgical reform among national church bodies and many local congregations still generally lags behind such scholarship. Worship leaders perhaps play the most decisive role in trying out new-old forms that might give a more pronounced role to the body in the ritual journey – weekly played out in Sunday services – of a people baptized into the death and life of Christ. In so far as we are all participants in such liturgy, however, we will all be better prepared for truly transformative worship with a more expansive and integrative sense of religious education in our churches, “schooling” that must be as practical as it is informative—teaching that, alongside the work of the religious ed classroom, must also fundamentally include our rehearsal of the roles and parts to be played in this baptismal pilgrimage from death to life. As a matter of definition, this “rehearsal” should not be understood as mere impersonation, but rather the whole-hearted and fully-embodied “imitation” of Christ into whom we are baptized.[ii]

Our baptism means that we have all been empowered to play invaluable roles in a “priesthood” shared and shaped by all believers. At the same time, it also means that the call towards liturgical renewal – even if it begins with only a little yeast leavening the loaf (Mt 13.33; Lk 13.21) – always includes the participation of the entire congregation communing together as

an integrated body, both worship leaders and religious educators, clergy and laity, children and adults. While Part IV will later focus our attention rather narrowly on moving step-by-step through the order of daily prayer, I believe that the renewal of our prayer and worship life towards a more baptismal view of death will require this fully integrative pedagogical approach. Therefore, both as preparation for the constructive liturgical work in the last half of my paper and as a further offering to those interested in identifying a theological starting point from which to begin broader conversations in the Sunday School classroom or adult small group, Part II endeavors to more critically examine the dualistic notions of body and soul so common in our culture that at least implicitly dismiss our bodies as irrelevant to life in the triune God.

Many theologians today attribute the disembodiment of much Christian theology and liturgy to popular forms of dualism embedded in contemporary western worldviews that sharply distinguish between the body and the soul as two essentially unrelated realities, endowing the latter with ultimate significance (i.e., the "real me") while devaluing the former as "just a shell" or, in the words of Stephanie Paulsell, merely the "prison house of the soul."^[iii] Following from this body-soul split, the soul – as it is somehow independent of and inevitably detachable from the body – frequently receives sole attention in the context of religious life, to the disparagement or, at least, neglect of our essentially embodied existence and with little consideration for incarnation's fundamental role within Christianity.^[iv] Adam G. Cooper summarily defines this false dualism as "the disruption between man and total reality, a disdain for humanity's real situation, a hatred of our inherently enfleshed, limited life, and a subsequent rejection of our supernatural calling."^[v] Such a dualistic view mistakenly conceives of Christian liturgical practices like

baptism or the funeral as acts intended, above all, to help us leave our bodies behind and free our eternal souls from the limited and empty existence of our worldly lives.

Identifying the linkages between this sharply-hierarchical notion of body and soul and some of the lingering ghosts of Christian dualism means that Christians must first acknowledge our own “ambiguous legacy about the body”[vi] and the ways in which Christians have long looked at flesh and bodies with a certain degree of mistrust and even contempt. Lest we believe that Christian traditions offer nothing of value to our discussion of death and bodies, however, much recent scholarship introduces us to a strikingly different Christian view of human beings and human bodies. As argued by Long, the predominant feature of Christian teachings on the relationship between body and soul is not belief in souls temporarily entrapped within bodies but, rather, an affirmation of human beings that are inherently embodied.[vii] Similarly, Cooper introduces his book, *Life in the Flesh*, by asserting that early Christians “knew that bodily existence exerts a gravitational pull upon our thinking and living, an inescapable force with which we must somehow come to terms.”[viii] Understanding our bodies, therefore, has long been an integral key for helping Christians properly understand ourselves in relation to God and to the material world in which we live and die. More specifically, Christians have traditionally situated themselves within the junction of three distinct but deeply inter-penetrating bodies in order to describe their relationship with the realities of life and death: the textual or canonical body of divine revelation (i.e., the Christian scriptures), the physical body of Christ, and the liturgical body of the church.[ix]

The canonical body

Though not in the precise language of “souls” and “bodies,” Long

contends that the second creation account in Genesis 2.4b-25 conceptualizes living human beings as formed by an “inseparable unity” of God’s breath and the dust of the earth.[x] As Cooper asserts, the Tanakh never speaks of the human person simply in terms of the body in itself.[xi] Rather, the human being is identified as *nephesh*,[xii] a word that can be translated as “life,” “vital energy,” or “person.” Not to be overlooked, however, *nephesh* in its literal sense of “throat” is intrinsically tied to the physical breath of the body,[xiii] which the Genesis account explicitly associates with the breath of God itself. Some biblical passages certainly employ the word *nephesh* in ways that approximate another Hebrew word, *ruach*, often translated as “wind” or “spirit,” and which Cooper defines as roughly equivalent with the Greek psyche as a “spiritual life-force... capable of extension beyond the immediate and physical.”[xiv] Nonetheless, taking Genesis 2 into account, I would argue (and, I think, Cooper would agree)[xv] that *nephesh* likely never speaks to any kind of eternal soul detachable from the life and death of the body. Instead, the Old Testament witnesses to the *ruach* or Spirit of God breathing into and out of a human *nephesh* or “soul” that is inseparably bound up with embodied existence in the act of creation, and, therefore, bound to death just as the body is.[xvi]

Though Hebrew and Greek thought are often treated opposite each other, the languages of the Old and New Testaments at least both distinguish between a “body”- and “soul”-like element to the human person.[xvii] This distinction, however, does not necessarily equate to an unqualified dualism inherent to the emergent Christian tradition, or any spiritual goal of loosening the soul from the grasp of the body.[xviii] Rather, several early strands within the tradition suggest that, even in death, one’s person is bound to the body in highly consequential ways.

Paul, for instance, warns: “All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor 5.10).[xix] In other words, we might say that what we do as embodied beings has enduring consequences – before death and in death – for our relationship with God, neighbor and self. Not incongruous with the life of the soul, the body is rather properly treated as spiritual matter. Appealing to the assembly at Rome, Paul exhorts the Romans to present their bodies as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,” an offering of the whole body that Paul subsequently describes as our “spiritual worship” (Romans 12.1).[xx] Earnestly taking heed of Paul’s counsel here, I think, would surely change the way Christians in the U.S. today reflect on both troubling funeral practices like embalming and the typically-disembodied liturgical patterns of our prayer and worship lives. Worship of God, like love for God, is a fully embodied way of being—a “whole burnt offering” to God requiring all of the heart, soul, mind and strength inherently carried forward by our bodies. In turn, both Paul and Christ play on the greatest commandments of Torah to re-interpret the fulfillment of God’s law in terms of loving our neighbors as ourselves, inevitably fleshed out in the honoring of others’ bodies.[xxi]

The incarnate Christ

For Christians, this love for the world is vividly and tangibly modeled in God’s own embodiment—in Jesus Christ who is God’s love for us enfleshed, dwelling among us and within us. Consistently throughout the New Testament but especially in his death and resurrection, Jesus’ own body represents the definitive site in which atonement for the world’s sin and God’s reconciliation to creation actually happens.[xxii] Undoubtedly, there is an incredible amount of mystery in the various gospel accounts of the bodily-resurrected Christ.[xxiii] Nonetheless,

early Christian traditions that have endured and prevailed over more dualistic elements in the church still testify to the most basic Christian conviction that God has come to us in a human body dead, buried and resurrected.[xxiv] In the gospels of Luke and John, Jesus insists on his body: "Look at my hands and my feet. See that it is myself. Touch me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24.39-40).[xxv] In the words of the Nicene Creed, the church affirms that we believe in "one Lord, Jesus Christ" who:

For us and for our salvation...came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human.[xxvi]

Perhaps most profoundly, the bodily resurrection of Christ substantiates the claim that bodies matter in God's redemptive work. Refuting the idea of salvation reserved for the soul alone and a merely symbolic resurrection, Tertullian asserted that the salvation of our souls is deeply wed to the flesh; we only realize the spiritual blessings of God's grace in that which is physically done to us in rituals such as baptism, the signing of the cross and holy communion.[xxvii] In baptism and the subsequent enactment of word and sacrament, by our very incorporation into and identification with Christ's body, we come to participate in the redemption effected bodily by Christ in his physical death.[xxviii]

The centrality given to embodiment in the Christian tradition, in fact, reflects the everyday ways in which we experience our selves and others. In truth, we only know each other through a "lifetime of small embodiments." [xxix] Illustrating this point and commenting on the popular usage of the word, "soul," Long writes that:

When we say we know our friend's "soul," we do not mean

something apart from his body; we are describing the character and personality we have seen through his cumulative embodied actions.[xxx]

Furthermore, the brother or sister in Christ – known in embodied ways, washed in baptism, fed at the table of communion – is known sacramentally in the body, a body in which we receive God’s unique and sacred gift of life in this or that person.[xxxi] This sacramental experience of bodies, however, should by no means be construed as limited to Sunday mornings. Rather, the Gospel according to Matthew suggests that our experience of Christ in the body is likely to happen anytime we encounter those who are hungry, thirsty, unclothed and unsheltered, sick or imprisoned. In other words, to honor bodies is to tend to Christ himself: offering food and drink, welcoming the stranger or immigrant, sheltering the homeless, visiting the prisoner (Matthew 25.31-46). In her book, *Honoring the Body*, Paulsell even invites us into expanding this kind of Christological experience of the body to include the bodily gestures of our everyday lives: bathing and dressing, eating and drinking, working and resting, exercising, caring for our children, loving and suffering. Sharing in our common vulnerability, the incarnate Christ calls the church to great and profound compassion for all of our bodies – not just church bodies – that are at all times sacred gifts in which God might indeed dwell.[xxxii]

Body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit

Commonly cited in recent scholarship on the role of the body in Christianity is Paul’s characterization of the body as the “temple of God.” Paul, for example, sharply inquires of the Corinthians: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?” (1 Cor 6.19).[xxxiii] Not to be overlooked, Paul masterfully constructs

this “temple” language by earlier naming Jesus Christ as the “foundation” already laid for “God’s building” (1 Cor 3. 9b-11). Thus, Paul’s imagery closely aligns with John’s gospel account of Christ. Pitching its tent in the company of the Hebrew tradition,[xxxiv] the gospel’s prologue proclaims that “the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us” (John 1.14).[xxxv] Later in Jerusalem, Christ boldly asserts that God dwells not ultimately in the Jerusalem Temple, but in the temple of Christ’s own human body destroyed and raised up again (2.21). Read alongside Paul’s imagery in 1 Corinthians, we might relate our identity as “temples of the Holy Spirit” to our baptismal assimilation into what John identifies as the temple of Christ’s physical body. Identifying our bodies as members of Christ, Paul teaches that we are not our own (1 Cor 6.15, 19-20). Rather, we belong to the body of Christ that is God’s.[xxxvi] Simultaneously, we belong to each other, members of one body suffering and rejoicing in common together (12.26).

Importantly, honoring the body involves not only celebrating the joys that we might experience everyday as embodied beings, but also recognizing the severe vulnerabilities of the body—and confessing that sin, or the “sting of death” and worldly decay, inevitably exerts a disfiguring power over our bodies and souls.[xxxvii] Such an acknowledgment is, of course, ever held in tension with the victory promised for us through Christ in baptism. Yet, only after Paul fills in the tensions of death and life, of what is perishable and imperishable, in 1 Corinthians, can he properly exhort the work given to us as the church: “Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor 16.13-14).

This exhortation to love for each other (emblematic of Paul’s writings and consistent throughout the entire New Testament) in a world stung by sin and death re-affirms a Christian understanding of life and death that is radically communal: in

life and death, our union with the body of Christ binds us to each other as a church body, but also conceivably to our family, friends and neighbors. In truth, all of humanity (and all creation, too) shares in common these fragile and vulnerable bodies[xxxviii]—our frailty seen most starkly in bodies dying or already dead. And, yet, just as Christ shared a body like ours, we must die a death like his if we are, like him, to live a life made alive to God.[xxxix] In 1 Corinthians, Paul defends the true and good news of resurrected bodies with an illustration of what everyone apparently already knows: that “what you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (1 Cor 15.35). Admittedly, the corpse of the one who has died is not exactly the same body to be raised.[xl] Yet, picking up this Pauline argument, Cooper asserts that the “holiness” of the body resides in its very nature as “seed,” a body that “while lifeless, still speaks of life, still anticipates its own transformation.”[xli] According to Christian teaching, Cooper continues:

If death apparently presents to my experience the end of the body-as-subject, the end of ‘me’; if it forces flesh to its most humble, ‘material’ ebb; if it represents humanity in its weakest, most vulnerable aspect, then, paradoxically, it also presents the conditions for it to be at its strongest and most sublime.[xlii]

Sown in dishonor, we are raised in glory; sown in weakness, we are raised in power (1 Cor 15.43). Paul helps us to see each person as a “bare seed,” body and soul born in the image of dust, enlivened by the breath of God, and united now through baptism with Christ to bear the body and image of heaven.[xliii] Such recognition of bodily vulnerability and embodied transformation empowers Christians to understand our personal solidarity with every other body, seeing every body as “a fragile temple of God’s Spirit and worthy of care.”[xliv]

[i] Ronald L. Grimes helpfully suggests that we must move beyond the notion that “the meaning of a ritual consists of the ideas that theologians and pastors thought when they first constructed them” (1995: 8). In other words, we must pay attention to the performance of liturgy as much as we do to the words used. Thus, as I think Long recognizes, the work of reforming contemporary Christian funerals and other liturgical practices should not be seen as simply modernizing the “script.” Instead, we must also pay attention to the ritual “pathologies” of our practices—what Grimes describes as the ways in which rituals sometimes “fail gesturally, posturally, and ‘actionally’” (Ibid. 8-9).

[ii] See Long 2009: 102-103; Merton 1969: 84-85.

[iii] Paulsell 2002: 16. While Long characterizes this modern dualism as a “pop form of Platonism” (2009: 22-23) and Adam G. Cooper associates it with a resurgence of certain forms of Gnosticism (2008: 2-3), the work of those like Karen L. King has done much to problematize the use of such overarching labels. In relation to our discussion of dualism here, see especially King 2003: 192-201 for a critical re-examination – based on several “Gnostic” texts themselves – of the tendency to define Gnosticism as always and essentially dualistic.

[iv] Long 2009: 23.

[v] Cooper 2008: 3.

[vi] Paulsell 2002: 5.

[vii] Long 2009: 24.

[viii] Cooper 2008: 3.

[ix] Ibid. 32.

[x] Long 2009: 24. Genesis 2.7, 9 and 19 together further suggest that God brings all of life (human, plant, and animal) into existence out of the dust of the earth.

[xi] Cooper 2008: 13.

[xii] Importantly, Cooper argues that verses such as Psalm 63.2-3 (“My soul [*nephesh*] thirsts for you, and my flesh [*basar*] yearns for you”) do not evidence a biblical division between the psychic and the physical, but rather a “two-tiered synecdochal, poetic intensification” in which *basar* refers to and embodies *nephesh*. Citing Johannes Pedersen, Cooper further points out that other biblical passages freely speak of the heart as soul, blood as soul, bones as soul, bowels as soul, or the eyes as soul—demonstrating that the OT generally identifies the whole person with any bodily organ in which psychic energy is intensified or concentrated (Ibid. 12-13).

[xiii] Ibid. 13.

[xiv] Ibid. 13.

[xv] Indeed, citing Pedersen and Eichrodt, Cooper generally seems to agree with Long: that a human soul or *nephesh* from the biblical perspective “indicates a personal, subsistent force, in principle inseparable from the flesh, always manifested outwardly ‘in the whole carriage of the body’, ‘a vital potentiality indissolubly connected with the body’ and therefore ‘susceptible to the grip of death’” (Ibid. 13).

[xvi] See also Ezekiel 37.1-14.

[xvii] Bucking much of modern biblical scholarship that treats Hebrew and Greek thought as “though they were two independent, monolithic views of reality,” based on the work of Barr and Eichrodt, Cooper actually draws out several points of alignment

between them (Ibid. 11-13).

[xviii] Cooper, for example, interprets the binary, dualistic terms of the NT not as “strict ontological opposites” but rather as “contingent, functional dualities, eschatologically ordered towards a certain unitary goal” (Ibid. 39).

[xix] See also Matthew 5.30.

[xx] I.e., “Christianity is to have one’s body shaped, one’s habits determined, in such a manner that the worship of God is unavoidable” (Stanley Hauerwas, cited in Cooper 2008: 36).

[xxi] Compare Romans 12.1-21, 13.8-10 with Matthew 22.34-40, Luke 10.25-28, and Mark 12.28-34, paying particular attention to the way in which totalizing love of God is used in Mark to re-describe worship of God (presumably among a community at the time of the gospel’s composition trying to make sense of a world outside the sacrificial system of a Temple that had been leveled by the Roman empire).

[xxii] Ibid. 42. Also, see 1 Pet 2.24, Col 1.22, 2 Cor 5.18-19; as well as Hebrews 10.10, 20 in relation with Mark 15.38.

[xxiii] Considering Christ’s ability to enter through locked doors or be physically present in multiple and distant geographical locations in a short span of time, Cooper notes that Christ’s “physical body seems to possess a fluidity that defies the ‘normal’ limits and boundaries of bodily human existence” (Ibid. 46). For Cooper’s full discussion of the relationship between Christ’s flesh and his resurrection, 45-49. I would add, however, that in the context of the miracle stories so commonplace in all of the gospel accounts (e.g., in which Christ quite naturally heals the blind and lame, walks on water or physically multiplies loaves and fishes), the stories of Christ’s body resurrected in the flesh and yet still capable of

the miraculous are in no way inconsistent with the gospels' general physiology.

[xxiv] Paulsell 2002: 17. The NT "shows us that we may believe in [Christ] only if we believe in his corporeal resurrection. For life without a body is not human life. This is the content of the New Testament" (Barth, cited in Cooper 2008: 48).

[xxv] Cited in Paulsell 2002: 180. See also John 20.19-20, 27.

[xxvi] ELW 2006: 104, based on materials prepared by the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), published in *Praying Together*, 1988 (see "Acknowledgments," ELW 2006: 1169).

[xxvii] Cited in Cooper 2008: 65.

[xxviii] Ibid. 42.

[xxix] Long 2009: 25.

[xxx] Long 2009: 25.

[xxxii] Long 2009: 31.

[xxxiii] See Paulsell 2002: 3, 9-10.

[xxxiiii] See also 1 Cor 3.16-17.

[xxxv] As Cooper points out, John's language seems to quite intentionally evoke the OT imagery of God's long-established physical presence among the people of Israel, represented in the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle, and the Temple of Jerusalem (2008: 50-51).

[xxxvi] Cooper's translation, Ibid. 50.

[xxxvii] In the context of 1 Corinthians as a whole, of course, we should remember that Paul's letter begins with an appeal to

the assembly at Corinth to stop its in-fighting about who each of its members belongs to (1 Cor 1.11-12).

[xxxvii] See 1 Cor 15.56.

[xxxviii] Paulsell 2002: 13.

[xxxix] See Romans 6.5-11.

[xl] See 1 Cor 15.37-38.

[xli] Cooper 2008: 5.

[xlii] Ibid. 5.

[xliii] See 1 Cor 15.45-49.

[xliv] Paulsell 2002: 13. See 1 Cor 6.19-20.