



Episcopal Diocese

— OF CENTRAL FLORIDA —

The Body of Jesus Christ:
Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, Ascended, Returning

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“That which he has not assumed he has not healed.”

—Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101

“The flesh is the very condition on which salvation hinges.”

—Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8

“Every manifestation of the truth of our Lord’s humanity is an exhibition of the reality of our redemption.”

—B. B. Warfield, “The Emotional Life of Our Lord”

Why the Church Contended for a Body

The creeds tell the story of a body.¹ He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. He will come again. Every verb is about a body. The church did not compose these lines to settle abstract puzzles. It composed them because people were already saying that the body was not real, or not quite his, or not permanent, and the church saw that if the body of Jesus is compromised, so is the gospel. The attempts to explain the body away have never stopped. Neither has the church’s answer.

Before the Apostles’ Creed, before Nicaea, before Chalcedon, before any council met, the apostle John wrote that every spirit confessing “that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,” and that every spirit refusing to confess it is not (1 John 4:2–3). Ignatius of Antioch, a generation later, wrote a confession marked by the emphatic repetition of a single word: “truly.” Truly born. Truly

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979). The Apostles’ Creed: Morning Prayer I, 53–54; Evening Prayer I, 66; Morning Prayer II, 96; Evening Prayer II, 120; Easter Vigil, 292–93; Holy Baptism, 304; Confirmation, Reception, and Reaffirmation, 416–17. The Nicene Creed: Holy Eucharist I, 326–27; Holy Eucharist II, 358–59; Ordination of a Bishop, 519–20; Ordination of a Priest, 529–30; Ordination of a Deacon, 541–42. The Definition of Chalcedon: Historical Documents, 864. The Catechism teaches that “What Christians believe about Christ is found in the Scriptures and summed up in the creeds,” and that “This Church uses two creeds: The Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed” (851). Article VIII of the Articles of Religion states, “The Nicene Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles’ Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture” (869).

ate and drank. Truly crucified. Truly raised. He was writing against teachers who found the body embarrassing. The Greek word for their view was *dokein*, “to seem.” Jesus seemed to have a body. He seemed to suffer. The Docetists wanted a Savior who was spared the indignities of flesh, and the church answered that a Savior spared the flesh could not save anyone who had it.

The temptation has never left. It takes subtler forms now. Stephen Nichols observes that much popular Christian piety still imagines Jesus “floating six inches off the ground” as he walked through Galilee.² Others keep the earthly body but let go of the risen one, so that Easter becomes a metaphor for the persistence of his influence. Others grant the resurrection but treat the ascension as a graceful exit from embodiment, as though the humanity were a garment worn for thirty-three years and then laid aside. And there is a newer version. Some now say that the particular body Jesus had in Nazareth, including its sex, was a kind of provisional assignment, and that the resurrection corrected it, so that the one who walked out of the tomb had shed what he was and become at last his true self.

Each of these is an old error in a new name, and the church’s answer to all of them has been the same since the apostles. The body is real. The body is his. The body is forever. This essay concerns his natural body, the one born of Mary, and not the church, which Scripture also calls his body (1 Cor 12:27). What follows moves through the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds in order: incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, returning. At every point the question is the same, whether the body is real and whether it is his. At every point the answer is yes.

Christians rightly confess that God is beyond sex and gender. Gregory of Nazianzus ridiculed anyone who concluded from the word “Father” that God must be male.³ The Father has no body. Neither does the Spirit. The Son had none until Mary. That is the whole point of the incarnation, and it is why the doctrine of God, rightly held, leads straight to the doctrine of the body. The One who is beyond every creaturely category entered one. He did not do it in general. He did it in particular, in a womb, in a manger, in a town, in a body that could be held. His maleness is not a divine attribute showing through the flesh. It is the flesh.

Incarnate

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). John chose his words deliberately. He did not write that the Word appeared in flesh, or clothed himself with flesh, or made use of flesh. He wrote *egeneto*, “became,” the same verb he had used earlier when he said that all things came to be through the Word. The one through whom everything came to be now came to be flesh. And John did not write *sōma*, “body,” or *anthrōpos*, “man.” He wrote *sarx*, “flesh,” the blunt word for what is born and bleeds and dies. This is the one word the Docetists could not bear to apply to him. The eternal Son, without ceasing to be what he was, took to himself a complete human nature, body and soul, and was a man.

² Stephen J. Nichols, *For Us and for Our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 26.

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 31.7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (1894; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 320. Gregory answers those who argued from the names of the persons by pressing their logic to an absurd end: if “Father” made God male, then grammatical gender would make the Deity feminine and the Spirit neuter. He writes: “Or may be you would consider our God to be a male, according to the same arguments, because He is called God and Father, and that Deity is feminine, from the gender of the word, and Spirit neuter, because It has nothing to do with generation.”

Nothing in what follows qualifies his deity. The Word who became flesh is the Word who was with God and was God (John 1:1), and he did not stop being so in the manger or on the cross. The church settled that at Nicaea. The controversy this essay follows is the other one, over whether the flesh he took was real and whether it is his, and the church settled that with equal firmness.

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 said what John said, at greater length and under pressure. Christ is “truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body,” of one substance with the Father in his deity and “of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin.” The two natures are united “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation,” and “the characteristics of each nature” are “preserved.”⁴ The bishops at Chalcedon were building fences around a mystery, and every fence was there to keep out a specific error. “Without confusion” and “without change” kept out Eutyches, who taught that the humanity was swallowed by the deity like a drop of vinegar in the sea. “Without division” and “without separation” kept out Nestorius, who so divided the natures that he nearly ended up with two Christs. The council wanted it understood that a human nature was not something Christ occupied. The God-man was a man, like every other man, except without sin.⁵

The reason this mattered was never academic. Gregory of Nazianzus explained why: “That which he has not assumed he has not healed.”⁶ Gregory was writing against Apollinarius, who taught that the divine Word replaced the human mind in Jesus. Gregory saw that this left part of us unredeemed. If the whole of Adam fell, the whole of Adam must be taken up and saved. The author of Hebrews had already made the argument. Since the children share in flesh and blood, “he himself likewise partook of the same things,” and he “had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb 2:14, 17). He had to share our nature in order to save it.

This is where the particularity of the body matters, and Chalcedon shows why. The eternal Son did not assume a human person alongside himself, and he did not assume humanity as an abstraction. He assumed our nature. He became a particular human being, a first-century Jew of the house of David, with a face, a voice, a family, and a sex. Through the union of the Logos with our humanity, as Michael Horton writes, “the particular Jewish male, Jesus of Nazareth, was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin’s womb.”⁷ Gabriel told Mary she would bear a son (Luke 1:31). On the eighth day the child was circumcised and named (Luke 2:21). Paul says he was “born of woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4) and “descended from David according to the flesh” (Rom 1:3). None of this was assigned by Mary or by anyone else. It was the humanity the Son assumed, and Chalcedon says the union left that humanity unchanged.

This is where the newer error shows its ancestry. To say that the maleness of Jesus was an appearance that concealed a truer self beyond male or female is to say that at least one feature of his humanity was not real, and that is Docetism. To say that the divine nature, which is beyond sex,

⁴ “The Definition of Chalcedon,” in Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 56.

⁵ Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*, 56–57.

⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101, “To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinarius,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1894; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 440.

⁷ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 468.

overrode the human nature in this respect is to confuse the natures, and that is Eutyches. The old errors did not die. They moved to a different part of the body.

The objection runs the other way, and it deserves an answer. If the Savior was male, how is he the Savior of women? If he was a Jew, how is he the Savior of Gentiles? Gregory's point is that what is healed is what is assumed, and what is assumed is human nature. Christ saves women not by sharing their sex but by sharing their nature. He saves Gentiles not by sharing their nation but by sharing their nature. Every human being who has ever lived has had a particular body with a particular sex in a particular place. A Savior with no particulars would have no body, and a Savior with no body heals no one. The scandal of particularity is not a flaw in the incarnation. It is the incarnation.

C. S. Lewis put it plainly. "God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it."⁸ The God-man's body is the proof. The One who made flesh was not ashamed to take it, and he did not take it the way an actor takes a role. He became a man. He was born. He grew. He got tired at wells and hungry in deserts. He wept at a grave. B. B. Warfield devoted a long essay to the emotional life of our Lord, and he opened it with the principle: "It belongs to the truth of our Lord's humanity, that he was subject to all sinless human emotions."⁹ He then went through the Gospels and found compassion, indignation, and joy, strong enough that "if our Lord was 'the Man of Sorrows,' he was more profoundly still 'the Man of Joy.'"¹⁰ None of it was performance. Warfield drew the conclusion. "When we observe him exhibiting the movements of his human emotions, we are gazing on the very process of our salvation: every manifestation of the truth of our Lord's humanity is an exhibition of the reality of our redemption."¹¹ This is the humanity the church confesses. It was truly assumed, and it was assumed for us.

Crucified

The atonement is a bodily event. Peter says it without ornament: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24). Paul says the Colossians have been reconciled "in his body of flesh by his death" (Col 1:22). Isaiah saw it centuries before. "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Isa 53:5). Pierced, crushed, wounded. These are things that happen to bodies.

The Docetists could not bear it. The apocryphal second-century *Gospel of Peter* has Jesus on the cross keeping silence "as one feeling no pain."¹² Another Gnostic text goes further. The real Christ never touched the cross at all. Simon of Cyrene was crucified in his place, and Christ stood by, laughing at the soldiers who thought they had him.¹³ They did not retell the story this way because

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2001), bk. 2, chap. 5, 64.

⁹ B. B. Warfield, "The Emotional Life of Our Lord," in *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 93.

¹⁰ Warfield, "Emotional Life," 123.

¹¹ Warfield, "Emotional Life," 141.

¹² *Gospel of Peter* 4.10, cited in Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Heretics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 56.

¹³ "The Second Discourse of Great Seth," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 473–86. In this Sethian text Christ says, "I did not die in reality but in appearance," and that the executioners

they found the cross distasteful. They did it because their doctrine of God required it. If flesh is beneath God, then God did not suffer in it, and if God did not suffer in it, then the cross is a misunderstanding rather than a sacrifice. They rewrote the ministry of Jesus to free Christ from human weakness. What was left was a teacher who imparted secrets, not a Lamb who bore sins.

Ignatius of Antioch answered the Docetists on his way to the arena. Around the year 110 he was arrested in Syria and taken under guard to Rome to be executed by wild animals, and he wrote his letters to the churches along the route. He warned the churches to be deaf to anyone who spoke of a Christ who was not truly born of Mary, who did not truly eat and drink, who was not truly crucified and did not truly die, and who was not truly raised.¹⁴ Elsewhere he joined suffering and resurrection in a single sentence: “He truly suffered just as he truly raised himself.”¹⁵ Then he turned the argument on himself. If the Lord suffered in appearance only, Ignatius wrote, then he was bound in chains in appearance only, and his coming death by wild beasts would be an appearance too.¹⁶ He was not willing to die for a phantom. Polycarp, his friend and fellow disciple of John, was more direct. Whoever will not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist, and whoever will not confess his suffering on the cross is of the devil.¹⁷ Polycarp finished where the gospel finishes, quoting Peter that Christ “bore our sins in his own body on the tree” and adding that he “endured all things for us, that we might live in him.”¹⁸ Only a real death can carry real sins.

This is why substitution requires a body. The Bible speaks of the cross in several languages at once. There is the language of the battlefield, where Christ defeats the powers. There is the language of the marketplace, where he pays the ransom. There is the language of exile, where he is cast out so that we can be brought home. There is the language of the temple, where he is the sacrifice that makes us clean. There is the language of the law court, where he takes the sentence we deserved.¹⁹ Roger Nicole argued that one theme runs beneath every one of these, and it is substitution.²⁰ In every grammar, Jesus does for us what we could not do for ourselves. He accomplishes salvation, and we contribute nothing. But a substitute must stand where we stand. He must be the kind of thing we are. Paul calls him “the man Christ Jesus” when he calls him the one mediator (1 Tim 2:5), because a mediator who shares only one side of the quarrel mediates nothing.

“nailed their man unto their death,” while he was “laughing at their ignorance.” The man was Simon of Cyrene, the bystander who carried the cross (Mark 15:21). Irenaeus reports the same teaching from Basilides, who held that Simon was transformed to look like Jesus and was crucified while Jesus, in Simon’s form, stood by and laughed (*Against Heresies* 1.24.4, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:349). See Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 81.

¹⁴ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Trallians* 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 69–70. Ignatius writes that Christ “was truly crucified, and [truly] died” (70).

¹⁵ Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 2, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 249.

¹⁶ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 4, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:88.

¹⁷ Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians* 7, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:34. The passage reads: “For whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist; and whosoever does not confess the testimony of the cross, is of the devil; and whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and says that there is neither a resurrection nor a judgment, he is the first-born of Satan.” Polycarp is quoting 1 John 4:3.

¹⁸ Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians* 8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:35; cf. 1 Pet 2:24.

¹⁹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 128–30.

²⁰ Roger Nicole, “Postscript on Penal Substitution,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 445–52.

Writing against the Gnostics, Irenaeus refused to treat the incarnation as a preliminary to the cross. The incarnation was itself redemptive. Christ had to be made of the same substance as Adam in order to undo what Adam did, and in his flesh he recapitulated the whole human story and brought it to a different ending.²¹ The exchange runs in both directions. The Word “became what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself.”²² Redemption, for Irenaeus, was never an escape from creation. It was creation restored by its own Maker from the inside.

Fleming Rutledge reminds us that crucifixion was designed to be the most degrading death the Roman world could devise, a death stripped of every dignity, a death for people who did not count.²³ That is the death the Son of God died, in a body, with nails. The church has never softened this and should not start. He died in his humanity, because God in his own nature cannot die. But the one who died is the Son of God, and because of the unity of his person the blood he shed can be called the blood of God (Acts 20:28).²⁴ Tertullian answered Marcion, who found the crucified body beneath God, with a sentence that refuses the embarrassment: “The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed—because it is shameful.”²⁵ There is no gospel in a cross that did not hurt. There is also no deeper love. Paul’s whole argument in Romans 8 rests here: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32). When Paul says that God is for us, he does not ground it in God’s sympathy for our situation. He grounds it in a body given up. The cross is where “God for us” stops being a sentiment and becomes a fact.

Risen

The tomb was empty because the body left it. This is the plainest fact of Easter and the one most often skipped. The women did not find the body transfigured or dispersed or spiritualized. They found it gone, because it had gotten up. Everything the apostles preached afterward depended on this: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses” (Acts 2:32). This Jesus. Not a successor, not a sublimation, not a truer self that is released from a false one. The same Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

The Gospels go out of their way to establish the identity. In the upper room the disciples thought they were seeing a spirit, and Jesus corrected them with his hands and feet: “Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39). Then he asked for something to eat and ate a piece of broiled fish in front of them (Luke 24:41–43). A week later he told Thomas to put his finger in the nail marks and his hand in the wound in his side (John 20:27). By the Sea of Galilee, he cooked breakfast (John 21:9–13). These are not the details one invents for a vision. They are the details one records when the point is that the body is the same body.

²¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.14.2, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:541. See Holcomb, *Know the Heretics*, 59.

²² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, preface, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:526.

²³ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), chap. 2, “The Godlessness of the Cross.”

²⁴ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 470, 474. Horton reads Acts 20:28, “according to the best manuscript traditions,” as saying the church was purchased by the blood of God, and notes that the Syriac version used by the Nestorians substitutes “Christ.” Some English versions read “obtained with his own blood” or “the church of the Lord.” The ESV renders it “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

²⁵ Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 5, in *Tertullian’s Treatise on the Incarnation*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1956), 19.

The wounds settle the question. If the risen body were a different body, the wounds would be a deception. Jesus offers them as the opposite. They are the credentials of his identity, the proof that the one standing in the room is the one who hung on the cross. John saw the same thing at the end of the age: a Lamb “standing, as though it had been slain” (Rev 5:6). The marks remain. The resurrected glory did not erase them. It kept them.

It is true that the risen body is also changed. Paul says so in 1 Corinthians 15, and the church has never denied it. It is “sown in dishonor” and “raised in glory,” “sown a natural body” and “raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:43–44). But Paul’s own image for the change is a seed and the plant that grows from it, and whatever the difference between an acorn and an oak, it is the same substance.²⁶ Horton explains that the contrast in Paul is not between this body and another body but between this body in its lowly condition and this body raised into the condition of Christ’s own glorified flesh. Changed, not replaced.²⁷ C. S. Lewis made the same observation about the Gospel accounts: “If the truth is that after death there comes a negatively spiritual life, an eternity of mystical experience, what more misleading way of communicating it could possibly be found than the appearance of a human form which eats broiled fish?” The newness is real. So is the continuity.²⁸

The texts about non-recognition need to be read as the evangelists wrote them, because they are sometimes pressed into saying that the risen Jesus looked like a different person. He did not. In every case the evangelist locates the failure in the perceivers, and in every case the recognition comes through something continuous. On the Emmaus road, Luke tells us that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16), and when the moment came, “their eyes were opened” (24:31). The passive voice is the point. God was doing something to their sight, not to his face. And they knew him in the breaking of the bread, the thing they had watched him do a hundred times. Mary Magdalene, weeping in the half-light, took him for the gardener until he said her name, and the voice was the voice she knew (John 20:14–16). The disciples in the boat were a hundred yards offshore at dawn (John 21:4, 8). Matthew says plainly that when the eleven saw him on the mountain, they worshiped, “but some doubted” (Matt 28:17). Grief, distance, dawn, and the sheer impossibility of what they were seeing explain every one of these scenes. None of them says the body was different. All of them end with the body being his.

There is an alternative story that wants the resurrection to be a revelation of a hidden self. The Gnostic gospels told it. In those texts the body of Jesus was a shell, the real Christ was the spark within, and salvation meant the spark getting free. The *Gospel of Thomas* has Jesus promise that the disciples will enter the kingdom when they make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male is not male and the female is not female.²⁹ This is not a resurrection. It is an escape, and the thing escaped from is the body. The church rejected it in the second century for the same reason it rejects it now. The resurrection does not reveal a truer Jesus beneath the Jesus of Nazareth. It vindicates the Jesus of Nazareth. Everything he was, God raised. The body that was baptized in the Jordan, that touched lepers, that slept in the stern of a boat, that sweated in a garden and bled on a hill, is the body that came out of the tomb and the body Jesus told Thomas to touch.

²⁶ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 917.

²⁷ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 916–17.

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (1947; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2001), chap. 16, “Miracles of the New Creation,” 243.

²⁹ *Gospel of Thomas* 22, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Meyer, 142.

Paul calls this body “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). The firstfruits are the first of a crop, the same kind as the rest. What was done to his body will be done to ours. That is why the continuity is not a technicality. If his risen body were a different thing, we would have no idea what God intends for the bodies we are living in now.

Ascended

The incarnation was not a thirty-three-year assignment. The Son did not take a body for the duration of the mission and lay it aside when the mission was done. He took it forever. This is the doctrine of the ascension, and it is the one most Christians have thought about least.

Luke describes the event twice. Jesus led the disciples out to Bethany, lifted his hands, blessed them, and “while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:50–51). In Acts the angels add the promise: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). The body that went up is the body that will come down. Nothing was shed on the way.

The New Testament speaks of Christ’s present existence in the flesh without embarrassment. Paul, writing decades after the ascension, says in the present tense that “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). Not was. Is. Hebrews says that we have a high priest who “always lives to make intercession” for us (Heb 7:25), and that this priest is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). The sympathy is not a memory. It is the standing disposition of a man who still has the nature in which he was tempted. Stephen saw him. “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). The Son of Man is a title for a human being.

Chalcedon’s fences hold here too. The natures were united “without change.” Leo’s *Tome*, which the council received as its own teaching, says the Son “assumed ‘the form of a servant’ without the defilement of sin, enriching what was human, not impairing what was divine.”³⁰ What was enriched was not discarded. If the Son laid aside his humanity at the ascension, the humanity was changed into something else or abolished, and the definition is broken. The fathers understood that the Son who ascended is the Son who descended, and that what he carried up with him was us. Augustine preached that Christ ascended in the flesh so that the head might go before and the members follow.³¹ Our nature is in heaven. That is not a figure of speech. It is where the body of Jesus is.

The Reformed tradition made this a point of confession. Calvin insisted that Christ’s body, being a true human body, is in one place, and that place is heaven, where it remains until he comes again.³² The Heidelberg Catechism asks what benefit we receive from the ascension and answers, among other things, that “we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he, our head, will also take us, his members, up to himself.”³³ Our flesh. The catechism is not talking about our spirits. It is talking

³⁰ Leo the Great, *Tome*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1900; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 255.

³¹ Augustine, *Sermon* 264, cited in Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 119–20.

³² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.26–30, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1393–1403.

³³ Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 49.

about the stuff we are made of, which has already been received into the presence of God in the person of Jesus.

This is why the church has always resisted the idea that Christ's departure in the flesh was a promotion to something better. Origen is the root of it. He fought the Gnostics, and he still read the ascension as a summons to the mind. The believer rises from the flesh of Jesus to the eternal Word, and the humanity becomes a rung on the ladder rather than the place where God has chosen to stay.³⁴ On this reading the departure of Jesus is not a loss, because he did not really depart. He is more fully present now, in and as the church. The irony is that the man who did more than anyone to refute the Gnostics carried their impulse to leave the body behind into the church through his Platonism. Schleiermacher followed him at a distance. Some recent theologians have followed him closely, proposing that the body of "the gendered Jew" has been displaced into the church, so that the church simply is the expanded Christ and there is nothing left to wait for.³⁵

There is no substitute for Jesus Christ in the flesh. His absence from us in the flesh is as real as his return in the flesh will be.³⁶ The Spirit does not make up for a vanished body. The Spirit unites us to a present one, seated at the right hand of the Father, and feeds us on it at the table.

The pastoral stakes are high. If the incarnation were a costume, then the compassion Jesus showed in Galilee was a performance for a season, and the one who now hears our prayers has moved on. If the incarnation is permanent, then the one who hears our prayers is the one who wept outside Lazarus's tomb and who was hungry in the wilderness, and he has not forgotten what it was like. Hebrews says we can draw near with confidence because of this (Heb 4:16). The confidence rests on a body that is still there.

Returning

He will come back the way he left. The angels said "in the same way" (Acts 1:11), and John says what that will look like: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him" (Rev 1:7). Those who pierced him will recognize what they pierced. The return is not the arrival of a principle or the spread of an influence. It is a man coming back.

The creeds end the story of the body with our bodies. The Apostles' Creed confesses "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting," and the Nicene Creed "the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." Horton notes how striking it is that the Apostles' Creed names our final hope this way and not as going to heaven when we die.³⁷ We do go to be with Christ when we die, and Paul calls that far better (Phil 1:23). But it is the intermediate state, not the end. The end is our own resurrection, the same thing that happened to him: "He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom 8:11). We groan now, Paul says, waiting for "the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23). Not redemption from our bodies. Redemption of them.

³⁴ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 87–164, citing Origen, *On First Principles*.

³⁵ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 115–16, 154–72.

³⁶ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 843.

³⁷ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 915.

Paul is specific about the pattern. Christ “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). The same perishable body puts on the imperishable; the same mortal body puts on immortality (1 Cor 15:53). Job, wasting with disease, hoped for exactly this: “after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (Job 19:26–27). My flesh. My eyes. Not another. The hope of the Old Testament saint and the hope of the apostle are the same hope, and it is a hope for the body one has.

This is where every link in the chain pulls at once. Christ is the firstfruits, and as goes the head, so go the members. If his natural body vanished at the resurrection, ours will too, and what is left is a cloud of spirit. If his body was a provisional appearance corrected in glory, then our bodies are provisional appearances, and the resurrection is not the raising of what we are but its replacement by something else. As Horton argues, a docetic Christ means a docetic consummation.³⁸ The hope of the gospel is not that we will be freed from what we are. It is that what we are will be raised and made new, as he was.

The Platonist longs to be stripped of the body. Paul longs to be “further clothed” (2 Cor 5:4). Jesus himself said he would not drink the fruit of the vine again until he drinks it new with us in his Father’s kingdom (Matt 26:29). There will be eating and drinking at the end, at a marriage supper (Rev 19:9), in a city with a river and a tree that bears fruit every month (Rev 22:1–2). None of this is metaphor for something more spiritual. It is the goodness of creation restored by its Maker in the flesh and shared with those he has made like himself.

The one who returns will be recognizable. He will have the face that Mary knew, the hands that broke bread at Emmaus, and the side that Thomas was invited to touch. He will be the same Jesus. That is the promise. It would not be good news if he were someone else.

What Is at Stake

Every age has tried to remake Jesus Christ in its own image, and the habit is older than any example of it. Jaroslav Pelikan traced the images of Jesus through the centuries. The Platonists had a Cosmic Christ, the Enlightenment a Teacher of Common Sense, the Romantics a Poet of the Spirit.³⁹ Stephen Prothero found the same pattern in America, where Jesus has been an Enlightened Sage, a Manly Redeemer, and a Superstar.⁴⁰ What each age keeps is whatever in Jesus resembles itself. What each age loses is the particular body, because a particular body cannot be filled with anything. It is already full. A first-century Jewish man with a mother, a trade, a dialect, and scars does not flatter the ideals of any century, including this one, and that is why the church has kept insisting on him.

³⁸ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 825–26.

³⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Pelikan’s eighteen images, each a chapter, are The Rabbi, The Turning Point of History, The Light of the Gentiles, The King of Kings, The Cosmic Christ, The Son of Man, The True Image, Christ Crucified, The Monk Who Rules the World, The Bridegroom of the Soul, The Divine and Human Model, The Universal Man, The Mirror of the Eternal, The Prince of Peace, The Teacher of Common Sense, The Poet of the Spirit, The Liberator, and The Man Who Belongs to the World.

⁴⁰ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). Prothero’s eight American figures are Enlightened Sage, Sweet Savior, Manly Redeemer, Superstar, Mormon Elder Brother, Black Moses, Rabbi, and Oriental Christ.

Tertullian said why: “The flesh is the very condition on which salvation hinges.”⁴¹ Everything the gospel promises turns on whether the body of Jesus is real, his, and permanent. Four things are at stake.

The first is salvation itself. A substitute must share the nature of those he stands for. If the body was an appearance, the cross was theater and the sins stayed where they were. If the humanity was partial, the healing is partial. If the humanity was laid aside, the mediator has stepped out of the room. The fathers were not defending a philosophical nicety at Chalcedon. They were defending the possibility that anyone could be saved. Every heresy about the body of Christ, from Docetism to Apollinarius to Eutyches, finally compromised the atonement, because each one left some part of us outside the reach of what he did.⁴²

The second is your body. Gnosticism taught that the real person is a spark of spirit held in the prison of the body, and that salvation is the spark getting out.⁴³ This idea has outlived every Gnostic sect. It appears whenever someone says that the body is a costume over a truer self, that the self within is what God made and the flesh is what the world assigned, and that freedom means shedding the one to release the other. The gospel says something harder and kinder. The body is not a prison and it is not a costume. It is you. God made it, the Son took one like it, and the Spirit will raise it. You are not waiting to be released from your body. You are waiting for your body to be made new, as his was.

The third is suffering. Christians who are sick, disabled, aging, abused, or dying do not need to be told that their bodies are unimportant. They know that is false, because the suffering is in the body. What they need is a Savior who has a body, who has suffered in it, and who still has it. The one who intercedes for us was pierced. The one who hears the prayers of the chronically ill knows what it is to be in pain. The one who hears the prayers of the abused was stripped, humiliated, mocked, and beaten by people who held power over him. God's answer to bodily suffering was not to leave the body behind. It was to take one, to bear the worst that can be done to one, and to raise it with the marks still on it. That is the only kind of comfort that does not evaporate.

The fourth is hope. If Jesus walked out of the tomb a different kind of thing from what went in, we have no idea what is coming for us. If he walked out the same Jesus, glorified, we know exactly what is coming. We will be raised. We will be recognizable. We will have our own eyes and our own hands, and we will see him with them. Lewis warned that the dullest person we meet may one day be a creature we would be tempted to worship.⁴⁴ He meant bodies. The resurrection of Jesus is the first installment of that, and the shape of it is already visible in the Gospels, eating fish by a lake.

There is one more thing. Many people are exhausted from justifying themselves. They spend their lives presenting a self to the world and to God and waiting to hear whether it is acceptable. The

⁴¹ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 551. The Latin is *caro salutis est cardo*, often rendered “the flesh is the hinge of salvation.”

⁴² Holcomb, *Know the Heretics*, 128.

⁴³ Holcomb, *Know the Heretics*, 34–35, adapting Birger A. Pearson's categories as given in Carl B. Smith II, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 11–12.

⁴⁴ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 46; cited in Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*, 30.

gospel does not ask anyone to locate a true self and offer it up for approval. It announces that God has already come in the flesh, has borne our sin in that flesh, has raised that flesh, and carries it now at his right hand, and that he did this for people who were still his enemies (Rom 5:8). The approval comes first. It comes from outside. It is not earned by honesty or authenticity or any other achievement. It is given, in a body, on a cross. Paul's question is the only one left: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8:31). The answer does not rest on God's sympathy with our situation. It rests on "Christ Jesus the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom 8:34). Died, raised, seated, interceding. Four verbs, one body.

God for Us in a Real Body

The Nicene Creed says that the Son "was made man." It does not say that he appeared as a man, or inhabited a man, or passed through manhood on the way to something else. It says he was made man, for us and for our salvation, and the creed then follows that man through suffering, burial, resurrection, ascension, and return without ever changing the subject. The baby in the manger, the man on the cross, the one in the garden whom Mary took for the gardener, the one at the right hand of the Father, and the one who will come with the clouds are one and the same, in one and the same body, and that body is the center of the Christian faith.

The church has defended this body for two thousand years because it is where God met us. Not in an idea, not in an experience, not in a hidden self revealed to the enlightened, but in flesh that could be born, could be held, could be nailed, could be touched after death, and could be carried into heaven. Athanasius explained why the Word took one: "He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection."⁴⁵ That is the whole gospel in one sentence, and every clause of it is about a body. Athanasius could then say that the Word "was incarnate that we might be made god,"⁴⁶ and he could say it without danger because the body was the whole means of it.

The end of this saving work is our glorification. The theologians of the East call it *theosis*, or deification, and the word needs guarding. Calvin was willing to use it, with a caveat. Commenting on Peter's phrase "partakers of the divine nature," he wrote, "Let us then mark, that the end of the gospel is, to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us."⁴⁷ Then he said what the word does not mean: "the word nature is not here essence but quality." It does not mean that God's essence merges with ours or ours with his: "The Manicheans formerly dreamt that we are a part of God, and that, after having run the race of life we shall at length revert to our original." The apostles meant nothing of the kind. They "only intended to say that when divested of all the vices of the flesh, we shall be partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God as far as our capacities will allow."⁴⁸ As far as our capacities will allow.

⁴⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 9, in *On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. a Religious of C.S.M.V. (1944; repr., Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 35.

⁴⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54, trans. John Behr, *Popular Patristics* 44a (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 107.

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 371; on 2 Pet 1:4. Reprinted in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Catholic Epistles*, 371; on 2 Pet 1:4.

We will be made as much like God as it is possible for a creature to be, and the line between Creator and creature is never crossed. God became flesh not to make us more than human but to make us fully human, sharers in his glory.⁴⁹

What glorification does mean is that Christ has so united us to himself that he will not be glorified without us. Calvin again, on Ephesians: “This is the highest honour of the Church, that, until He is united to us, the Son of God reckons himself in some measure imperfect. What consolation is it for us to learn, that, not until we are along with him, does he possess all his parts, or wish to be regarded as complete!”⁵⁰ And the union runs through the body, not around it. Plato, Calvin observed, was the only philosopher who saw that the chief good consists in union with God, and he still “could not form even an imperfect idea of its true nature,” because “he had learned nothing of the sacred bond of that union.” The bond is the incarnate Son, who joins us to himself by his Spirit, in the body he took. “None participate in the benefits of Christ,” Calvin concludes, “save those who raise their minds to the resurrection.”⁵¹ The exchange runs through the flesh or it does not run at all.

God is for us. That has been true from eternity. But we know it, and can rest on it, because the Son took a body and did not give it back. He is for us the way a man is for his friends, with hands and a face and wounds he can show (John 15:15; 20:20). He is for us the way a priest is for his people, appearing in the presence of God on their behalf in the nature he shares with them (Heb 2:17; 9:24). He is for us the way a firstborn is for the family, having gone first where the rest will follow (Rom 8:29; Heb 6:20). The kindness of God that leads to repentance is not an abstraction. It is the God-man. Born, crucified, buried, risen, ascended, and coming back.

⁴⁹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 692. Horton writes that Reformed theology “maintains that God became flesh not to make us God but to make us fully human,” and that on this point it stands “closer to Irenaeus than to Athanasius.” He places Calvin’s use of “deify,” the passage quoted here, within the Reformed emphasis on the forensic element of salvation, which he says separates Reformed glorification from the Eastern doctrine of *theosis* (692–93). He reads Calvin’s remark that “the word nature is not here essence but quality” as a sharing in God’s energies and not his essence (693). For Calvin on deification he recommends J. Todd Billings, “United to God through Christ: Assessing Calvin on the Question of Deification,” *Harvard Theological Journal* 98, no. 3 (2005): 315–34, as the more reliable guide (693 n. 18).

⁵⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), 218; on Eph 1:23. Reprinted in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

⁵¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.25.2, trans. Henry Beveridge (1845; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).