

The Spiritual Body

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“I believe in the resurrection of the body.” You speak these words each Sunday to confess a vital truth of your Christian faith. Without this truth your Christian faith would be a useless dream. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. You are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Co 15:17-19). We need to study this teaching often because it is essential for our own comfort and for the strengthening of our faith, and because this teaching has been one of the chief points of attack by skeptics, scoffers, and false brethren from the days of Christ and the apostles to the present day.

Most people believe in some type of life after death. People want to believe that somehow their spirits will live on after death. However, Scripture offers a much more specific hope than this. It teaches not only a continued existence for the soul, but the resurrection of the body as well.

The original text of the Apostles’ Creed expresses this truth in a very surprising way, for it speaks not of the resurrection of the body (σῶμα), but of the resurrection of the flesh (σάρξ). In this respect it is more striking than the Nicene Creed, which speaks simply of the resurrection of the dead. This term “the resurrection of the flesh” is certainly a very unexpected choice, since the Scriptures often use “flesh” as a term for our sinful nature. Our sinful nature is often called “flesh” because it is often the appetites and natural needs of our fleshly body that lead us to sin, and because we have served sin with the members of our body.

Paul can say “I know that in me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing” (Ro 7:18). Or again, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Co 15:50). “They that are in the flesh cannot please God” (Ro 8:8). [Note that in many passages that use the word “flesh” the NIV departs from a literal translation and uses such interpretive translations as “the sinful nature.” However, in the most recent edition of the NIV many of these passages are marked with notes drawing attention to the literal translation.]

Because of passages like those in the preceding paragraph some theologians have objected to the creedal term, “the resurrection of the flesh.” Generally these objections have simply been an opening ploy for a denial of the resurrection of the body. Therefore, although the exact term “resurrection of the flesh” does not occur in Scripture this creedal term is a very good one and agrees with the confession of Job, “In my flesh I will see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another” (Job 19:27). This term powerfully proclaims the continuity from our present body to our eternal body. It sets forth some important positive points, and it guards against denials of the resurrection in the strongest possible way.

This term, “resurrection of the flesh,” reminds us of the importance of this body of flesh in the Triune God’s work of creation redemption, and sanctification.

The body is more than a mere garment for the soul or a temporary prison house of the soul. The account of creation makes it clear that God intended us to be creatures with body and soul united. We were not made to live in the realm of pure spirit like the angels. Nor were we created to live on the plane of purely physical life like the animals. Man was created as a unique creature standing between, partaking of spiritual and moral responsibilities like the angels and of dependence on the physical world like the animals. God created the body and soul to go together. Both are essential parts of his creation.

The body of flesh is vital to the work of redemption. Christ became flesh to redeem our flesh. Indeed, as far as we can judge from God’s revelation, Christ’s work of redemption was impossible without a body of flesh. “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in the same so that by his death he might destroy him who had the power of death—that is, the devil ... He had to (ᾧφειλεν) be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement

for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:14,17). “For what the law could not do because it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering” (Ro 8:3).

Even when our souls are in heaven, they still have not reached their final goal until they are reunited with the body. Christ redeemed both body and soul. They belong together. For God’s plan of salvation to be complete, for the restoration of his creation to be complete, it is necessary for the flesh to be raised and reunited with the body in glory. That is why “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Ro 8:23).

The work of redemption will not be complete until body and soul have been reunited in holiness through the power of Christ’s death and resurrection. It is a testimony to the greatness of Christ’s work that even the flesh, which is so contaminated and corrupted by the sin that inheres in our nature, will be redeemed in glory and restored to holiness.

This body is also the subject of sanctification. This body belongs to Christ and it is the dwelling place of his Holy Spirit. “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body... Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself ... Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you ... You are not your own. You were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your body” (Co 6:13-20).

This body of flesh is important. The respect that we show for the body in our customs of burial is a fitting testimony of this importance. Michael, the archangel, contended with Satan for the body of Moses (Jude 9). The body is not mere food for worms, of no real value. It belongs to Christ who redeemed who reserves it to be restored and to share in his glory.

The flesh, as it is, sinful and ruled by physical desires, cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Co 15:50). But the flesh that is cleansed and glorified by Christ will live forever in glory and holiness. The characteristics and activities of this eternal “spiritual body” will be the focus of the rest this paper.

The Scriptural term “spiritual body” has been subtly misused to deny resurrection of the body. The creedal term “resurrection of the flesh” is especially useful for combating this false teaching. Sects like the Swedenborgians spoke of a “spiritual body” by which they meant a non-mate aspect of the soul. With the sly misuse of Scriptural language that so characterizes heresy, some Lutheran theologians who really deny the resurrection of the body continue to use the term in a different sense. C.J. Soedergren, an American Lutheran theologian, provides an example of this kind of sophistry in his article, “*Resurrectio Carnis.*”¹ Soedergren says that he believes in the resurrection of the body, but not in the resurrection of the flesh. For him the resurrection of the body refers to the continued existence of our spiritual body that leaves our material body when this earthly life ends. He says, “This spiritual body inhabits our material body in this life, is coterminous with it, but also independent of it, leaving it at death and continuing to serve as the habitation and medium of the immortal self. Early writers called it the ‘astral body.’” For Soedergren the term “spiritual body” really means no body at all. The word “body” is abused to mean an airy, immaterial variety of spirit without flesh and blood. In spite of his attempt to use weasel words, it is clear that Soedergren’s view and those like it directly clash with Scripture at numerous points. Soedergren’s view is simply a rehash of the heresy of Hymeneus and Philetus (2 Ti 2:18), for he too teaches that the resurrection is past. He casts aside the clear words of Christ, “Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself. Touch me and see. A spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Lk 4:39).

We take God at his Word and firmly believe that Christ will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Php 3:21). God who made the universe will have no difficulty in restoring the body that he once created. Of this we are confident. But as we look forward to the glorious day of resurrection, our eager anticipation leads us to ask, “What will this glorious body be like?”

Our resurrection body will be the same body that we had on earth, the body that was separated from the soul, which was placed in the ground and which decayed. The very term “resurrection” implies a restoration of that which existed previously. The corresponding change to glory in the bodies of those who are alive at Christ’s return also demonstrates the continuity from our lowly body to our glorious body. We need not debate or speculate about the many different cells and atoms that have participated in the ever-changing composition of

our bodies from day to day throughout our lives. We simply accept the fact that God will restore the bodies that we once had. We leave the “how” in his hands. Jesus sweeps aside every objection and quibble of the scoffer with his rebuke, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Mt 22:29).

Though we will rise with the same body that we once had, it will be very different in quality.

First of all, it will be a spiritual body (1 Co 15:44). How are we to understand this rather strange term, which seems to be a self-contradiction? Aren’t spirit and body opposites? First of all, it is plain from Scripture that we will have a material body. The passages cited above from Job 19, Luke 24 and Philippians 3 are examples of the Scriptural assertions of this truth. Although we will have a spiritual body, we will not be spirits. The term “spiritual” does not refer to the substance of the resurrection body, but to its qualities.

Theologians have centered their comments on two areas. The first is the control of the body. In I Co 2:12-14 the natural man (ψυχικός) is the man who does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. In Jude 19 the ψυχικοί (NIV translates-those who follow mere natural instincts, KJ-the sensual) are identified as those who do not have the Spirit. Therefore, we conclude that the natural (ψυχικόν) body is the body which is not controlled by the Spirit. The spiritual body, on the other hand, is the body that is completely obedient to the guidance of the Spirit. Though the Spirit is already at work in our bodies, only after the resurrection will our bodies submit completely to his guidance. The σῶμα ψυχικόν is a body filled with and controlled by the ψυχή, the principle of sensory and earthly life. The σῶμα πνευματικόν is a body filled by and controlled by the πνεῦμα. After the resurrection the whole person, body and soul, will gladly follow the leading of the new spirit, which the Spirit has placed in him. Chemnitz writes:

Bodies in this life are called ψυχικά, not because they are changed to souls or have the same substance as the soul, which is a spiritual “substance”, but because they are moved to action and governed... by the soul. So in the resurrection the bodies will be πνευματικά not because they will be changed into spirit or be of the same substance with the Holy Spirit, for they will have and retain their nature or bodily substance... but they will be spiritual because what the soul now is to the body, the Spirit will be to body and soul.²

In discussing the term “spiritual body” theologians have also considered the needs and desires of the body. Gerhard says:

Their bodies will no longer be natural (animalia) bodies standing in need of food, drink, sleep, and other supports, but spiritual in which there is no strife of the flesh and the spirit, but which are perfectly subject to the control of the spirit, are entirely ruled by the Holy Ghost and need no food or other means for their support.³

Luther shares this opinion:

The new spiritual body will not live this natural life and will require neither food nor shelter, will possess neither wife nor child, nor use any other physical necessities of life. Although it will possess life, it will no longer be an eating, sleeping, and digesting body, but will be fed and sustained by God and will find life entirely in him. It will nevermore think of eating and drinking.⁴

I am not sure that Luther is on safe ground when he jumps from the fact that we will not need food to the conclusion that we will not use food. There is Scriptural basis to say that we will not need food and drink when there is no more growth, waste, or decay in the body, and we certainly will not suffer pangs of hunger or thirst when God supplies our every need (Rev 7:16). But I believe that the question of whether there will be real eating and drinking when we sit down at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God is best left open (Mt 8:11 Lk 14:15). Some of the references to eating and drinking in the kingdom of God occur in contexts in which there is nothing to indicate that we should understand these references as merely figurative. At the institution of the Lord’s Supper Christ said, “I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God” (Mk 14:22. Also Lk 22:16). We know that Christ was capable of eating in his glorified body (Lk 24:42-43. Perhaps Jn 21:15). It seems unwise to conclude dogmatically that the frequent references to eternal life as a feast are purely figurative.

The passage generally cited in support of this view is 1 Co 6:13. “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, but God will destroy them both.” However, this passage is a parenthetical remark in Paul’s discussion of sexual immorality and does not specifically address the question of the nature and activities of the body in eternity.

This question of the activities of the body in eternity cannot be separated from the question of the nature and characteristics of our eternal home. There may well be some difference between the present place of rest for the souls of believers, which we commonly call heaven, and the eternal home where we will dwell with God forever with body and soul united. We should remember that our eternal home is called the new heavens and the new earth (2 Pe 2:13, Rev. 21:1, Is. 65:17, 66: 22). I believe that the creation of a new heavens and a new earth, the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21) and the deliverance of creation from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Ro 13:20-21) all imply some change and further development which will occur at Christ’s return.

Some of the more materialistic-sounding kingdom passages of the Old Testament, which millennialists refer to a kingdom on this earth, include references to the new heavens and the new earth. The new heavens and the new earth, in which we will dwell in glorified flesh, may well have more of a “material” nature than the present heaven where the souls of departed believers are at rest with God. To avoid the materialistic concept of the kingdom of God held by the Jews, the Moslems and to a lesser degree the Reformed, Lutheran dogmaticians have tended to emphasize the symbolical and metaphorical nature of the descriptions of our eternal home. For example, as we have seen, in most cases they have quite flatly ruled out literal eating and drinking. They have generally stated that in eternity we will be free of all limitations of space and time. I think we should be more cautious than they were in dismissing as purely symbolic such statements of Jesus as Lk 22:30, “I confer on you a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” How much of the Bible’s description of eternal life is figurative? This is probably a question that we will be able to answer decisively only when we are in the Heavenly School. We should be more cautious in the assertions that we make, than the dogmaticians have generally been. We should be cautious about defining the role which animals, nature, and activities parallel to those that we carry on in earthly life (such as administration, arts, and other skills) may have in eternal life. We will very likely have responsibilities and work assigned to us in eternity, but we will not become tired in body or mind because of them. We will enjoy a life of rest, but not of idleness.

We do best to confine our assertions to statements which have direct Scriptural testimony and which therefore are beyond question. Especially important among these are the additional characteristics of the spiritual, resurrection body, which are discussed in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. It will be an immortal (*ἀθάνατα*), incorruptible (*ἐν ἀφθαρσίᾳ*) body which will not be subject to sickness, weakness, weariness, or death. It will not be subject to the living decay of infections, pus and gangrene. It will not be affected by the diminishing physical ability and weakness which age brings in this earthly life. “There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain” (Rev 21:4).

It will be a glorified (*ἐν δόξῃ*) powerful (*ἐν δυνάμει*) body. It will be a body that is sound, strong, and beautiful. Who knows what powers of mind and body Adam may have possessed before the Fall? Who can imagine what powers of mind and body we shall possess when the crippling effects of sin have been removed? Then “they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever” (Da 12:2). “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their father” (Mt. 13:43).

On the basis of the Daniel passage it appears possible that a difference of the visible glory may be a part of the degrees of glory which will be allotted in eternity, along with differences of responsibility and differences in places of honor near Christ (Mt. 20:23, 25:23).

The resurrection body will be a body that is not subject to shame or dishonor as it is in this earthly life. The sense of shame or modesty which is often associated with sexual and excretory organs of the body since the fall into sin will no longer exist in eternity, though there is no indication we will be unclothed as the inhabitants

of the first Paradise were. No one will dismiss the body as a mere package of elements, no different than an animal's body, but it will be honored as a wonderful creation of God. It will never again suffer the dishonor of returning to the ground again.

In the characteristics mentioned above we are on the solid ground of direct Scriptural statements. When the Lutheran dogmaticians began to draw conclusions based on the term "spiritual body" and the statement that "our body shall be like his glorious body" (Php 3:21), they got unto more speculative ground. They spoke of the invisibility of the resurrection body to non-glorified eyes on the grounds that it is a spiritual body, and that after the resurrection Christ had to make his body visible for it to be seen. They said that the body would not be subject to the touch of the non-glorified (*impalpabilitas*). Although the body would be in a certain place, it would not be there in a circumscribed way (*illocalitas*). The body will be able to pass through objects (*subtilitas*) and move quickly wherever it wishes (*agifitas*). Here again I think we should be warned against being too speculative and placing too much weight on conclusions that Scripture does not explicitly state.

Although it seems to be the view of Luther, I do not find any clear Scriptural support for the view that we will share in the same freedom from time and space which God has, and that there will be no consciousness of a passage of time between death and judgment. In fact, the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, the souls kept under the altar in heaven (Rev 6:10-11) and the souls who live and reign with Christ (Rev. 20:4) can be cited as supporting the contrary view. Rev 10: 6, "There will no more time" (χρόνος), is usually cited as the Scriptural basis for the view that there is no awareness of succession or passage of time in eternal life, but as the NIV correctly translates, this verse is an announcement that there will be no more, delay before judgment, not a statement about conditions in eternal life. Another commonly cited passage, Heb 9:27, is not a statement about conditions in heaven, but a comparison of the once-and-for-all nature of both Christ's work and this present time of grace. "Just as man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people."

We should be cautious about drawing too many conclusions about our glorified bodies from the actions and powers of Christ after his resurrection. More was involved in the actions of Christ than a glorified body. Christ was not just a glorified man. He was the God-Man in his state of exaltation. How many of his abilities were due, not to his glorified body, but to the personal union he showed the ability to pass through crowds unmolested and to walk on water before his resurrection. His body is able to be everywhere in the Lord's Supper. We have no basis for assuming our glorified bodies will be like his in this respect, so we should also be cautious in drawing conclusions not stated by Scripture in other respects also. It is best to stick with the direct statements of Scripture and leave enlightenment on the other points to the Heavenly School.

We should be cautious against speculations based on reason. Such speculations have led to some absurdities like Origen's theory that since the most perfect shape is a circle, the resurrection body will be globular. This may be a comfort to those who like their snacks and a distress to dieters, but it is not very good theology. We should also be careful against demanding a strict literalism in the interpretation of every phrase in a passage. Jerome was quite certain that although there may be no eating in heaven, we will still have teeth otherwise the wicked would not be able to gnash their teeth in hell.

Concerning the "age" of the resurrection body, there have been three opinions. Augustine, among others, held that in the resurrection everyone would be a youth. On the basis of Php 3:21 some have maintained that we will all be the age of Christ. The most common opinion is that in the resurrection we will be the "age" which we were at death. The only Scriptural references which may be relevant are the fact that Christ apparently rose as he had been before death in regard to "age" and the references in Rev 11:18 and 20:12 to the small and great (μικροὺς καὶ μεγάλους) standing before God. However, there will certainly be no ravages of old age or sickness. Was the retention of Christ's wounds then a special case? I think so, because they remained as signs of his glory as the Redeemer, not as shameful results of sin. Concerning the sex of the resurrected body most believe that all parts of the body will be restored, not for their former use, but for the wholeness of the body. Luther said, "Wheat yields wheat, barely yields barley. So it will be in the resurrection." Men will rise as men, women as women.

We will apparently recognize each other in eternal life. We will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Mt 8:11). We will probably know each other by divine illumination, just as Adam understood his relationship with Eve and Peter knew Moses and Elijah on the Mount. We will undoubtedly know our loved ones for 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, points to the day of Christ's return as a happy day of reunion. We look forward to that day of reunion, just as David hoped to see his son once again (1 Sa 12:23).

As there is a glorification of believers in the resurrection, there will apparently be a corresponding degeneration in the bodies of the damned. "They shall go forth and took on the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me, for their worm shall not die neither shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh" (Isa 66:24). Though their bodies are immortal and incorruptible in the sense that they will not suffer extinction and dissolution, they will not share in the glory of the resurrection body of the saved, but they will be living in a state which is more appropriately called death than life. Though there will be two outcomes of the resurrection of the body, there will be only one resurrection of the body (Da 1:2, Jn 5:28,29).

Finally, we should remember that God has not revealed the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh and of our spiritual body, so that we may debate in a theoretical way about the activities in the new heavens and the new earth and about the characteristics of our spiritual bodies. As we see and experience the sickness and weakness of this body of flesh, and as we sympathize with the pain all around us, let us pray for the day when our lowly bodies will be fashioned like his glorious body. This doctrine is revealed so that we, as practical people, may meditate on the joys that await us. May we keep these joys before our eyes every day, indeed every hour and every moment. May an eager expectation of all that the Lord has prepared for us and loving awe at the greatness of His works keep us on the way the leads us to these joys and guard us against everything that can exclude us from them. May we pray daily,

O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect,
O sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect,
Jesus in mercy bring to that dear land of rest,
Who art with God the Father and Spirit ever blessed. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. The *Augustana Quarterly*, April 1944, pp. 111-126.
2. See Schmid, p. 642.
3. See Schmid, 642.
4. From Plass II, p. 623.

SUGGESTED READING

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*Beck, "The Resurrection of the Body," *Christian News*, March 1964.

*Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, Eerdmans, 1972, p. 170:-235.

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*Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, Eerdmans, 1979, p. 239-253, 274-288.

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Kittel, *TDNT*, I 197-208, 368-372, II 333-335, IX 608-666 esp. 622-630, 662, VII 98-151, 1024-1094 esp 1060-1062, V 364-366.

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*Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Lutheran Church*, Augsburg, 1875, p. 640-643, 660-663.

Triglotta, p. 30, 121.