

“Questions about sexuality represent the most confusing landscape for today’s Christian leaders. I am tremendously thankful for the effort and wisdom that went into creating this biblically based and practical resource! It contains a wonderful variety of voices that together will equip Christian leaders to address sexuality with integrity and compassion for years to come.”

—Juli Slattery, PsyD,
Co-founder of Authentic Intimacy
and author of *Rethinking Sexuality*

“When the topic of sexuality comes up among Christians, those who engage are often throwing Bible verses like knives at a circus show, hoping to pin anyone who disagrees with them to a wall. Instead of arming their audience with more weapons, Dr. Glahn and Dr. Barnes have curated a book that turns the words of the Bible from weapons into tools that guide thoughtful readers into a life of wisdom. Beginning with creation and a theology of the body, and working through more specific issues of sexuality, each contributor adds to a framework of sexual ethics that helps readers make order out of the chaos surrounding the topic of sexuality. If you are looking for rigorous academics and humble, gracious engagement on a seminal topic of our day, you’ll find it in these pages.”

—Kelsey Hency,
Editor in chief of Fathom

“*Sanctified Sexuality* is a treasure! It will be a go-to resource for my research and message preparation.”

—Kat Armstrong,
Author of *No More Holding Back*,
Bible teacher and co-founder of Polished Ministries

“Just a few years ago a book of this scope and depth might be critiqued as superfluous or unnecessarily ambitious, but today pastors and ministry leaders will find themselves grateful Glahn and Barnes labored to produce this relevant and exceedingly necessary resource. *Sanctified Sexuality* meets the onslaught of nuanced sexual issues emerging in the church today with clarity, kindness, and depth of expertise. The plurality of voices serve as a trustworthy guide for those hoping to avoid breaking bruised reeds. I expect to return to this deep well again and again and suspect other readers will as well.”

—Nika Spaulding,
Resident theologian at St. Jude Oak Cliff

“Christian leaders have longed for a book like *Sanctified Sexuality* for many years. This book should be on the shelf of every pastor and consulted often. It will be both for me.”

—Todd Hunter
Bishop, Anglican Church of North America

“What does the Bible really teach about sexuality? This book will help answer the question fairly and honestly. It is based on an online course (optional “at DTS”) in biblical sexual ethics. Sixteen scholars with biblical/theological, psychological, and medical training have joined to produce a comprehensive, biblical, and well documented resource book. I highly recommend it for pastors, teachers, and other interested persons.”

—Edwin A. Blum,
general editor of the Holman Christian Standard Bible

“*Sanctified Sexuality* embraces a complex and multi-faceted subject with a beautiful balance of cultural intelligence and biblical relevance. Anyone interested in countering popular perspectives about marriage, sex, and human sexuality will certainly find wisdom and direction—anchored in God’s Word—through this array of topics Glahn and Barnes have arranged. Equally critical is the tone of charity this book exemplifies—a tone the editors lay forth as essential for all relationships.”

—Mark Yarbrough,
President, Dallas Theological Seminary

“Courageous and grounded: These are the words that best describe *Sanctified Sexuality*. Drs. Glahn and Barnes have brought to bear a most outstanding array of authors in the fields of theology, psychology, sociology, and sexuality to address not only the easier topics in a biblically-grounded and research-based manner, but to ply the same tools to courageously take on the toughest and most salient issues concerning sexuality in our time. Whether you agree or disagree with some of the positions, you will find this book informative and challenging for the very topics and issues that matter most in our society. The reader will especially appreciate the poignant and helpful discussion questions at the end of each chapter to bring home and continue the important discussion. Where we have milled around for years in confusion about sex and sexuality, this book moves us forward with clarity and conviction.”

—Terry D. Hargrave,
Evelyn and Frank Freed Professor of Marriage and Family Therapy,
Fuller Theological Seminary

“A book with an oxymoron for a title is usually a book that breaks new ground. *Sanctified Sexuality* is exactly such a book because it shows that no aspect of human sexuality is beyond the reach of God’s purpose, wisdom, and passionate desire for our highest good as persons made in God’s image. With all the noisy, confused, and confusing conversations now taking place around sexuality, this collaboration offers a breath of fresh air, from experts who actually know what they are talking about and have humbly pooled their expertise to assemble a compelling vision for sex as God intends for us to steward it.”

—Bill Hendricks,
Executive Director for Christian Leadership,
The Hendricks / Dallas Theological Seminary

Sanctified Sexuality

VALUING SEX IN AN OVERSEXED WORLD

SANDRA L. GLAHN &
C. GARY BARNES

E D I T O R S



KREGEL
A C A D E M I C

Sanctified Sexuality: Valuing Sex in an Oversexed World

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The Greek font GraecaU and the Hebrew font New JerusalemU are from www.linguistsoftware.com/lgku.htm, +1-425-775-1130.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4624-5

Printed in the United States of America

20 21 22 23 24 / 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

SANDRA L. GLAHN & C. GARY BARNES

Most people don't readily recognize the names Obergefell and Hodges, but they probably remember the landmark civil rights case that bears their names—and the finding of the Supreme Court of the United States that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples. The five-four decision requires all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and the insular areas to perform and recognize same-sex couples' marriages on the same terms and conditions as the marriages of opposite-sex couples, with all the accompanying rights and responsibilities.

The case began in 2012, and it continued in headlines, on talk shows, in political campaigns, and certainly in churches and on social media. So by the time the Supreme Court handed down the decision on June 26, 2015, a lot of good people had said and continued to say a lot of unfortunate things. As professors at a theological seminary, we cringed as we watched people use Genesis out of context, say horrible things about people with same-sex attraction, and alienate people—and then describe some of the justified criticism they evoked as persecution. In the midst of all this, we had a conversation one afternoon in which we said to each other, basically, “We need to do a better job of training ministry workers in these areas of sexual ethics.”

So we created a course we titled Sexual Ethics. But we did not serve as the sole lecturers, because indeed we were not experts in all the ways the church needs input on this subject. Rather, we curated a course filmed for online use in which top Christian experts on theology of the body, same-sex attraction, addiction, Hebrew, New Testament Greek, and much more would speak in their areas of expertise and then hold a question-and-answer time with students. The lecturers were scholars—men and women from differing specialties, educational institutions, and religious traditions who addressed these issues from the perspective of theologians, exegetes, and practitioners. We chose as our textbook the late Stanley Grenz's *Sexual Ethics*, but because much of it is now outdated,

we asked each lecturer to offer a chapter on the topic addressed for this work. Laura Bartlett, director of Academic and Ministry Books at Kregel Publications, provided encouragement and support for the project, and we were aided in our task by the expert editorial direction of Shawn Vander Lugt and Robert Hand.

The work you hold in your hands is the result of this collaboration. Some contributors, like Christopher West and Wesley Hill, provided transcripts of talks they had given. Others provided deeply technical exegesis. And still others wrote in a more casual, first-person style. Some chapters came in longer than others. Some authors reached conclusions that differed from those of other authors. And we decided to keep the differences, letting each contributor speak in his or her voice, rather than making all the chapters match an imposed template. So you will find variety in tone, style, and even the number of footnotes and transliterations from chapter to chapter. Part of our goal is to help people develop a hermeneutic of charity—seeing each presentation through a grid acknowledging that good people may differ yet still engage in civil discourse. In including varying views, we hope to challenge our readers' thinking and drive them back to the text. We've been guided in this by Rupertus Meldenius (ca. 1627), who wrote, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

While we contributors may have our differences, we are most certainly united on some key points: We all desire to be faithful to the biblical text and help the body of Christ live out her calling in the world in a Christ-honoring way, full of both grace and truth. Additionally, it is our view that there is only one effective alternative to the slippery slope of demonizing sexuality or deifying sexuality, and that is an approach to sexuality and ethics that is not simply promoting a moral code of dos and don'ts. Rather, we have the much higher calling of elevating God's sacred sexuality to a place that transforms hearts and motivations as well as behaviors.

To help the church flourish in our thinking, teaching, and interaction about sexual ethics, the authors have agreed that all royalties will benefit the Institute for Sexual Wholeness. A nonprofit organization, the Institute for Sexual Wholeness is dedicated to training Christian therapists and ministry leaders to unveil God's truth about sexuality and bring healing. They believe that God has a sexual plan that promotes integrity, maturity, and passionate intimacy, and desire to partner in cultivating a sexually healthy church.

God created humans in his image as sexual beings before pronouncing his creation very good. And while we continue to witness many cultural changes relating to sex and gender, one thing that remains unchanged and timeless is the foundation for sexual intimacy—God's beautiful design for the flourishing of those created in his image. And it is our hope that the expertise in various disciplines offered here by those committed to this foundation will benefit you and those for whom you provide spiritual care—that we might all model what it looks like to imitate Jesus, who was and is full of grace and truth.

Dallas, Texas
2019

CHAPTER 1

OUR BODIES TELL GOD'S STORY

CHRISTOPHER WEST

I know some muddle-headed Christians have talked as if Christianity thought that sex, or the body, or pleasure were bad in themselves. But they were wrong.

—C. S. Lewis

In the early 1900s, a “respectable” woman wore an average of twenty-five pounds of clothing when she appeared in public. The sight of an ankle could cause scandal. Over the next one hundred years, the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Today scantily clad, hyper-eroticized images of the human body have become the cultural wallpaper, and graphic, hard-core pornography has become the main reference point for the “facts of life.”

Is it any wonder in the post-sexual-revolution world that humanity’s deepest, most painful wounds often center on sexuality? And by sexuality I mean not only what we do with our genitals behind closed doors but our very sense of ourselves as male and female. We live in a world of chaotic, widespread gender confusion, a world that seems intent on erasing the essential meaning of the sexual difference from the individual and collective consciousness.

A BOLD, BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

All of this has posed an enormous challenge to Christians. How have we responded? Those who began acquiescing to what might be called “the new morality” had to reinterpret the Bible in order to do so, a move that eventually led many believers and denominations to abandon the basic tenets of the Christian faith. On the other hand, Christian leaders who upheld traditional biblical faith and morality often found themselves without a convincing language to engage their own

congregations, who were being increasingly influenced and formed by the ethos of the secular culture. The same held true for parents with their children. The silence was deafening. “The Bible says so” and “thou shalt not” weren’t enough to prevent people from getting carried away by the tide of so-called sexual “liberation.”

In the early 1950s, right at the time Hugh Hefner launched *Playboy* magazine, a young Polish priest, philosopher, and theologian named Karol Wojtyła (pronounced “voy-TEE-wa”) started quietly formulating a fresh, bold, compelling, biblical response to this modern brand of liberation. This was a man steadfast in his commitment to traditional Christian values, but also open and attentive to the challenges being raised by the modern world. As a student of contemporary philosophy himself, he understood how modern men and women thought, and he believed he could explain the biblical vision of sex in a way that would ring true in their hearts and minds. From Wojtyła’s perspective, the problem with the sexual revolution was not that it overvalued sex, but that it failed to see how astoundingly valuable it really is. He was convinced that if he could show the utter beauty and splendor of God’s plan for the body and sexuality, it would open the way to *true freedom*—the freedom to love as Christ loves.

Over the next twenty years, he continually refined and deepened his vision via the pulpit, the university classroom, and in countless conversations and counseling sessions with dating, engaged, and married couples. (Wojtyła’s open, honest approach with young people—no subject was off-limits if sought honestly—was very similar to that of Francis Schaeffer.) In December of 1974, now as archbishop of Krakow, he began putting this bold, biblical vision to paper. On page 1 of his handwritten manuscript, he gave it the title *Theology of the Body*.

This was an altogether different kind of Bible study on sex. It was not the all too common attempt to scour the Scriptures looking for proof texts on immorality. The goal was to examine key passages from Genesis to Revelation, over a thousand in all, in order to paint a “total vision” of human love in God’s plan. In essence, Wojtyła was saying to the modern world, “Okay, you wanna talk about sex? No problem. But let’s *really* talk about it. Let’s not stop at the surface. Let’s have the courage to enter together into what the Bible calls the ‘great mystery’ of our sexuality. If we do, we’ll discover something more grand and glorious than we have ever dared to imagine.”

This was a vision that had the power to change the world—if the world only had a chance to hear it. That chance came when, in October of 1978, this little-known Polish bishop was chosen as the first non-Italian pope in 450 years, taking the name John Paul II. Having only recently completed his theology of the body manuscript (it was originally intended as a book to be published in Poland), he decided to make it his first major teaching project as pope, delivering small portions of the text over the course of 129 weekly addresses between September of 1979 and November of 1984.

It took some time, however, for people to grasp the significance of what this in-depth Bible study had given the world. It wasn’t until 1999, for example,

that his biographer George Weigel described the theology of the body to a wide readership as “a kind of *theological time-bomb* set to go off with dramatic consequences . . . perhaps in the twenty-first century.”¹ While John Paul’s vision of the body and of sexual love had barely begun to shape the way Christians engaged their faith, Weigel predicted that when it did, it would “compel a dramatic development of thinking” about virtually every major tenet of the Christian faith.²

GOD, SEX, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

What might the human body and sex have to do with the basic tenets of Christianity? There’s a deep, organic connection, in fact, between the two. As we observed above, rejection of the biblical vision of sexuality has led in practice to a rejection of the basic principles of the faith. And here’s why: if we are made in the image of God as male and female (see Gen. 1:27), and if joining in “one flesh” is a “great mystery” that refers to Christ and the church (see Eph. 5:31–32), then our understanding of the body, gender, and sexuality has a direct impact on our understanding of God, Christ, and the church.

To ask questions about the meaning of the body starts us on an exhilarating journey that, if we stay the course, leads us from the body to the mystery of sexual difference; from sexual difference to the mystery of communion in “one flesh”; from communion in “one flesh” to the mystery of Christ’s communion with the church; and from the communion of Christ and the church to the greatest mystery of all: the eternal communion found in God among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is what the tenets of the Christian faith are all about.

Hence, as we’re already seeing, the body is not only biological. Since we’re made in the image of God as male and female, the body, as we will see in some detail, is also *theological*. The body tells an astounding divine story. And it does so precisely through the mystery of sexual difference and the call of the two to become “one flesh.” This means when we get the body and sex wrong, we get the divine story wrong as well.

Sex is not just about sex. The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest-held convictions about who we are, who God is, who Jesus is, what the church is (or should be), the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and the mystery of the universe. This means John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* is much more than a biblical reflection on sex and married love. Through that, it leads us to “the rediscovery of the meaning of the whole of existence . . . the meaning of life.”³

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1. George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1999), 343.
 2. Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 853.
 3. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 46:6. This work (henceforth *TOB*) is compiled from John Paul II’s general-audience addresses on human love in the divine plan. Citation numbers are to address and paragraph number.

Christ teaches that his highest will for our lives is to love as he loves (see John 15:12). One of John Paul's main insights is that God inscribed this vocation to love as he loves *right in our bodies* by creating us male and female and calling us to become "one flesh" (see Gen. 2:24). Far from being a footnote in the Christian life, the way we understand the body and the sexual relationship "concerns the whole Bible."⁴ It plunges us into "the perspective of the whole gospel, of the whole teaching, even more, of the whole mission of Christ."⁵

Christ's mission is to reconcile us to the Father and, through that, to restore the order of love in a world seriously distorted by sin. And the union of the sexes, as always, lies at the basis of the human "order of love." Therefore, what we learn in the *Theology of the Body* is obviously "important with regard to marriage." However it "is equally essential and *valid for the [understanding] of humanity* in general: for the fundamental problem of understanding humanity and for the self-understanding of his being in the world."⁶

Looking for the meaning of life? Looking to understand the fundamental questions of existence? Our bodies tell the story. But we must learn how to "read" that story properly, and doing so is not easy. A great many obstacles, prejudices, taboos, and fears can derail us as we seek to enter the "great mystery" of our own embodiment as male and female. Indeed, the temptation to disincarnate our humanity and, even more, to disincarnate the Christian faith is constant and fierce. But ours is an *enfleshed* faith—*everything* hinges on the incarnation! We must be very careful never to *unflesh* it. It's the enemy who wants to deny Christ's coming in the flesh (see 1 John 4:2–3).

SPIRIT AND FLESH

When it comes to present-day Christianity, people are used to an emphasis on "spiritual" things. In turn, many Christians are unfamiliar, and sometimes rather uncomfortable, with an emphasis on the physical realm, especially the human body. But this is a false and dangerous split. Spirit has priority over matter, since God in himself is pure Spirit. Yet God is the author of the physical world, and in his wisdom, he designed physical realities to convey spiritual mysteries. "There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God," as C. S. Lewis wrote. "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 likes matter. He invented it."⁷

We should like it too. For we are not angels "trapped" in physical bodies. We are *incarnate spirits*; we are a marriage of body and soul, of the physical and the spiritual. Living a "spiritual life" as a Christian *never* means fleeing from or

4. TOB 69:8.

5. TOB 49:3.

6. TOB 102:5.

7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013), 64.

disparaging the physical world. Tragically, many Christians grow up thinking of the physical world (especially their own bodies and sexuality) as the main obstacle to the spiritual life, as if the physical world itself were “bad.” Much of this thinking, it seems, comes from a faulty reading of the distinction the apostle Paul makes in his letters between spirit and flesh (see Rom. 8:1–17 and Gal. 5:16–26, for example).

In Paul’s terminology, “the flesh” refers to the whole person (body and soul) cut off from God’s “in-spiration”—cut off from God’s indwelling Spirit. It refers to a person dominated by vice. And, in this sense, as Christ himself asserted, “the flesh counts for nothing” (John 6:63 NIV). But those who open themselves to life “according to the Spirit” do *not* reject the body; it’s this body that becomes the very dwelling place of the Spirit: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? . . . Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19–20, NIV 1984).

We honor God with our bodies precisely by welcoming God’s Spirit into our entire body-soul personality and allowing the Spirit to guide what we do with our bodies. In this way, even our bodies “pass over” from death to life: “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (Rom. 8:11, NIV 1984).

CHRISTIANITY DOES NOT REJECT THE BODY

The “spirit-good/body-bad” dualism that often passes for Christianity is actually an ancient gnostic error called Manichaeism, and it couldn’t be further from a biblical perspective. In fact, it’s a direct attack on Christianity at its deepest roots. If we’re to rediscover God’s glorious plan for our sexuality, it will be necessary to contend with some ingrained habits in our way of thinking that stem from Manichaeism. So let’s take a closer look.

Mani (or Manichaeus, AD 216–74), after whom this heresy is named, condemned the body and all things sexual because he believed the material world was evil. Scripture, however, is very clear that everything God created is “very good” (see Gen. 1:31). This is a critical point to let sink in. Unwittingly, we often give evil far more weight than it deserves, as if the devil had created his own “evil world” to battle God’s “good world.” But the devil is a creature, not a creator. And this means *the devil does not have his own clay*. All he can do is take *God’s* clay (which is always very good) and twist it, distort it. That’s what evil *is*: the twisting or distortion of good. Redemption, therefore, involves the “untwisting” of what sin and evil have twisted so we can recover the true good.

In today’s world, sin and evil have twisted the meaning of the body and sexuality almost beyond recognition. But the solution is *never* to blame the body itself; it’s *never* to reject or eschew or flee from our sexuality. That approach is gnostic and Manichaean in its very essence. And if that’s our approach, we haven’t overcome the devil’s lies. We’ve fallen right into his trap. His fundamental goal is

always to split body and soul. Why? Well, there's a fancy word for the separation of body and soul. Perhaps you've heard of it. *Death*. That's where Manichaeism, like all heresies, leads.

The true solution to all of the pornographic distortions of the body so prevalent today is not the *rejection* of the body, but the *redemption* of the body (see Rom. 8:23)—the “untwisting” of what sin has twisted so we can recover the true glory, splendor, and inestimable value of the body. John Paul II summarized the critical distinction between the Manichaean and Christian approaches to the body as follows: If the Manichaean mentality places an “antivalue” on the body and sex, Christianity teaches that the body and sex “always remain a ‘value not sufficiently appreciated.’”⁸ In other words, if Manichaeism says “the body is bad,” Christianity says “the body is so good we have yet to fathom it.”

We must say this loudly, clearly, and repeatedly until it sinks in and heals our wounds: *Christianity does not reject the body!* As C. S. Lewis insisted, “Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body—which believes that matter is good, that God himself once took on a human body, that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in Heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness.”⁹

Of course, it would be an oversight not to acknowledge that, in this life, our bodies are often a source of great unhappiness and sometimes terrible suffering. Genetic defects, disease, sickness, injury, and a great many other maladies and misfortunes, not the least of which is the inevitability of death, can cause us to loathe our bodily existence. Or, united to the bodily sufferings and death of Christ, our bodily maladies and misfortunes can become something redemptive both for us and for others. Suffering, as I once heard it said, can either *break us* or *break us open* to the mystery of Christ. Matthew Lee Anderson expresses the conundrum well: “This is the paradox of the body: The body is a temple, but the temple is in ruins. The incarnation of Jesus affirms the body’s original goodness. The death of Jesus reminds us of its need for redemption. And the resurrection of Jesus gives us hope for its restoration.”¹⁰

WORD MADE FLESH

Establishing the fundamental *goodness* of the body and the hope of bodily redemption is one thing. But what is it that makes the body a “theology,” a study of God?

We cannot see God. As pure Spirit, God is totally beyond our vision. Yet the Bible teaches that the invisible God has made himself visible: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes,

8. TOB 45:3.

9. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 98.

10. Matthew Lee Anderson, *Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2011), 31.

which we have gazed upon and touched with our own hands—this is the Word of life. And this is the life that was revealed; we have seen it” (1 John 1:1–2 BSB).

How did John and the other disciples *see* “that which was from the beginning”? How did they *touch* “the Word of life”? “The Word became flesh. . . . We have seen his glory” (John 1:14). Everything about our faith hinges on the incarnation of the Son of God, on the idea that Christ’s flesh—and ours, for it’s our flesh he took on—has the ability to reveal God’s mystery, to make visible the invisible.

If the phrase “theology of the body” seems odd, perhaps it’s because we haven’t taken the reality of the incarnation as seriously as Scripture invites us to do. There’s nothing surprising about looking to the human body as a “study of God” if we believe in Christmas. “Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology . . . through the main door.”¹¹

“Theology of the body,” therefore, is not only the title of a series of talks by John Paul II on sex and marriage. The term “theology of the body” expresses the very *logic* of Christianity. We must say it again (and again) until it sinks in: *everything* in Christianity hinges on the incarnation of the Son of God.

THE THESIS STATEMENT

This brings us to the thesis statement of the *Theology of the Body*, the brush with which John Paul paints the entire vision: “The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.”¹²

Think of your own experiences as a human being: your body is not just a “shell” in which you dwell. Your body is not just *a* body. Your body is not just *any* body. Your body is *somebody*—you! Through the profound unity of your body and your soul, your body *reveals* or “makes visible” the invisible reality of your spiritual soul. The “you” you are is not just a soul “in” a body. Your body is not something you “have” or “own” alongside yourself. Your body *is* you. Which is why if someone broke your jaw in a fit of rage, you wouldn’t take him to court for “property damage” but for personal assault. What we do with our bodies, and what is done to our bodies, we do or have done to *ourselves*.

Once again, our bodies make visible what is invisible, the spiritual *and the divine*. Aren’t we made in the image of God as male and female (see Gen. 1:27)? This means the very design of our sexually differentiated bodies reveals something about the mystery of God. The phrase “theology of the body” is just another way of stating the bedrock biblical truth that man and woman image God.

The body is not divine, of course. Rather, it’s an “image” or a “sign” of the divine. A sign points us to a reality beyond itself and, in some way, makes that

11. TOB 23:4.

12. TOB 19:4.

reality present to us. The divine mystery always remains infinitely “beyond”; it cannot be reduced to its sign. Yet the sign is indispensable in “making visible” the invisible mystery. Human beings need signs and symbols to communicate. There’s no way around it. The same holds true in our relationship with God. God speaks to us in sign language.

Tragically, after sin, the “body loses its character as a sign”¹³—not objectively, but in our subjective perception of it. In other words, in itself, the body still speaks God’s sign language, but we don’t know how to read it. We’ve been blinded to the true meaning and beauty of the body. As a result, we tend to consider the body merely as a physical “thing,” entirely separated from the spiritual and the divine realms. Tragically, we can spend our whole lives as Christians stuck in this blindness, never knowing that our bodies are a sign revealing the “mystery hidden in God.”

THE DIVINE MYSTERY

Paul wrote that his mission as an apostle of Jesus Christ was “to make plain to everyone . . . this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God” (Eph. 3:9, NIV 1984). What is that “mystery hidden in God,” and how can it be “made plain to everyone”?

God is not a tyrant, God is not a slave driver, God is not merely a legislator or lawgiver, and he’s certainly not an old man with a white beard waiting to strike us down whenever we fail. God is an eternal exchange of love and bliss. He’s an infinite “Communion of Persons,” to use John Paul II’s preferred expression. And he created us for one reason: to share his eternal love and bliss with us. This is what makes the gospel *good news*: there is a banquet of love that corresponds to the hungry cry of our hearts, and it is God’s free gift to us! He has *destined us in Christ* “before the foundation of the world” to be part of his family, to share in his love (see Eph. 1:9–14).

This is the “mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God” that Paul wanted to “make plain to everyone.” How did he do it? In Ephesians 5, Paul reveals that this “mystery” isn’t far from us. We needn’t climb some high mountain to find it. We needn’t cross the sea. It’s already as “plain” to us as the bodies God gave us when he created us male and female and called the two to become “one flesh.” We need only recover our ability to read God’s sign language to see it.

THE BIBLE TELLS A MARITAL STORY

Scripture uses many images to help us understand God’s love. Each has its own valuable place. But the gift of Christ’s body on the cross gives “definitive prominence to the spousal meaning of God’s love.”¹⁴ In fact, from beginning

13. TOB 40:4.

14. John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women: Mulieris Dignitatem*, Apostolic Letter (Culver City, CA: Pauline Books and Media, 1988), §26.

to end, in the mysteries of our creation, fall, and redemption, the Bible tells a covenant story of marital love.

That story begins in Genesis with the marriage of the first man and woman, and it ends in Revelation with the marriage of Christ and the church. These spousal “bookends” provide the key for understanding all that lies between. Indeed, we can summarize all of sacred Scripture with five simple, yet astounding, words: *God wants to marry us.*

As a young man marries a maiden
 So will your Builder marry you;
 As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
 So will your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:5)

God is inviting each of us, in a unique and unrepeatable way, to an unimagined intimacy with him, akin to the intimacy of spouses in “one flesh.” While we may need to work through some discomfort or fear here to reclaim the true sacredness, the true holiness of the imagery, the “scandalous” truth is that Scripture describes God’s love for his people using boldly erotic images. One need only think of the Song of Songs. This unabashed celebration of erotic love is not only a biblical celebration of marital intimacy. It’s also an image of how God loves his people, fulfilled in the “marriage of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:7).

But there’s more. Remember that pithy rhyme we learned as children: “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage”? We probably didn’t realize that we were actually reciting some profound *theology*: *theology of the body*. Our bodies tell the story that God loves us, wants to marry us, and wants us (the bride) to “conceive” his eternal life within us. And this isn’t merely a metaphor. Two thousand years ago, a young Jewish woman gave her *yes* to God’s marriage proposal with such totality, with such fidelity, that she literally conceived eternal life in her womb. This is why Christians have always honored Mary: she is the biblical model par excellence of what it means to be a believer, of what it means to surrender to Jesus, of what it means to receive him and bear him forth to others. God was revealed through Mary’s body by the fact that her body gave God a body. Astounding.

CLIMAX OF THE SPOUSAL ANALOGY

“It is obvious that the analogy of . . . human spousal love, cannot offer an adequate and complete understanding of . . . the divine mystery.” God’s “*mystery* remains *transcendent with respect to this analogy* as with respect to any other analogy.” At the same time, however, the spousal analogy allows a certain “penetration” into the very essence of the mystery.¹⁵ No biblical author reaches more deeply into this essence than the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5.

15. See *TOB* 95b:1.

Quoting directly from Genesis 2:24, Paul states, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” Then, linking the original marriage with the ultimate marriage, he adds, “This is a great mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:31–32). Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul employs the intimacy of marital union to reveal not just some aspect of the Christian mystery. Rather, spousal union illuminates the reality of our union with Christ in its entirety, the reality of salvation itself.

But let's be more specific. How does Genesis 2:24 refer to Christ and the church? Christ, the new Adam, “left” his Father in heaven. He also left the home of his mother on earth. Why? To give up his body for his bride (the church) so that we might enter into holy communion with him. In the breaking of the bread, “Christ is united with his ‘body’ as the bridegroom with the bride. All this is contained in the Letter to the Ephesians.”¹⁶

THE FOUNDATION OF ETHICS AND CULTURE

The stakes are incredibly high in the cultural debate about the meaning of sex and marriage. In short, as sex goes, so goes marriage; as marriage goes, so goes the family. And because the family is the fundamental cell of society, as the family goes, so goes the culture. This is why confusion about sexual morality “involves a danger perhaps greater than is generally realized: the danger of confusing the basic and fundamental human tendencies, the main paths of human existence. Such confusion must clearly affect the whole spiritual position of man.”¹⁷

This is why it “is an illusion to think we can build a true culture of human life if we do not . . . accept and experience sexuality and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and their close inter-connection.”¹⁸ But that will never happen unless we can demonstrate that the biblical sexual ethic is not the prudish list of prohibitions it's so often assumed to be. Rather, it's an invitation to live and embrace the love for which we most deeply yearn.

16. John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women: Mulieris Dignitatem*, §26.

17. Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II), *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 66. This is John Paul II's philosophical work on sexuality.

18. John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae*, Encyclical Letter (Culver City, CA: Pauline Books and Media, 1995), §97.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Most of us have been taught that sex is meant to be beautiful and intimate and holy. Most of us have also been taught that sex can be something dirty and perverted and sinful. How can it be both? What makes it one or the other?
2. What was the Manichaean heresy? What are some ways you see such thinking among Christians? Have you felt that your body hindered your spiritual life? Explain your answer.
3. How has the enemy's deception about sex affected everything else in our culture? How can we counter such deception and create a culture of life?

FOR FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER 2

THE “TWO ADAMS” AND SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

GLENN R. KREIDER

Jeff Buchanan, a pastor who has served on the front lines in the media and in the pastor’s study helping those with same-sex attraction, says this about identity: “Understanding our identity in Christ is essential for Christian living. When we were born again, we received a new identity, and we are complete in Christ (Col. 2:10). We will share in Christ’s inheritance, and as we grow in the revelation of our new identity, we will increasingly be enabled to live according to God’s will. If our identity is “in Christ,” can we add to this identity without implying that Christ is somehow deficient?”¹ For the Christian, understanding the relationship we have with God through the Holy Spirit because of the work of Christ is essential, and is a source of hope and comfort. We have received an incredible gift, unearned, undeserved, and unmerited. Salvation and the hope of eternal life is an indescribable gift (2 Cor. 9:15).

Yet, is our identity limited to our relationship with Christ? Do other aspects and characteristics of the person disappear or shrink in importance when one places faith in Christ? Or is our identity a complex combination of a variety of characteristics and properties? This essay argues that as important as our identity “in Christ” is, our relationship to him and his body does not supersede or replace

1. Jeff Buchanan, “The New Sexual Identity Crisis,” The Gospel Coalition, July 10, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-new-sexual-identity-crisis-2>. See also S. M. Hutchens, “Just Christians: On Homosexuality and Christian Identity,” *Touchstone*, July/August 2013, 3–4. Both of these authors argue that identifying oneself by sexual orientation is inconsistent with one’s identity in Christ.

the other elements of our identity. We are each an integrated complexity of multiple characteristics.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

Identity is defined in *Merriam-Webster* as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual.” Thus our identity is a combination of many things. I am a White, middle-aged (or maybe a bit older), married, heterosexual male, Christian, son of parents who are both deceased, married to my best friend for more than forty years (her parents are also both deceased); I am a father of two children, father-in-law of one son-in-law, grandfather of one adorable granddaughter, middle-class American, native of the northeastern United States but have now lived over half my life in Texas, professor of theological studies, owner of multiple rescued dogs, homeowner, lover of bold coffee and good music . . . I could go on. My identity is a combination of those things and many more. Some of those characteristics are a result of birth; I had nothing to do with being born a White male. Some of those characteristics have been chosen, such as rescuing dogs. Some of those characteristics have been graciously given to me; I am grateful to have the privilege of teaching theology courses at Dallas Theological Seminary. Some of those characteristics have evolved, and some have been consistent. I have always been White and male and a son. But I only recently became a son whose parents are both deceased. I have not always been married, or a father, or a grandfather, or a Christian.

My identity was formed at birth, evolves and changes over time, and will one day be consummated in the new creation. Some of the aspects of my identity will continue into that stage of the work of redemption; others will not. I will always be the son of Elvin and Thelma Kreider, the husband of Janice, father of Michael and Jeneec, and grandfather of Marlo. I expect to be able to *enjoy* dogs (as I doubt we will “own” animals in the kingdom), bold coffee, and good music on the new earth. I will not, however, continue to struggle with my own sinfulness, live in a world that is cursed by sin, or experience the effects of the curse in my own body and relationships with others.

Every person’s identity is a composite of a variety of features, including character traits; aspects of personality; skills and talents; body traits; social relations and status; personal history, religious and political persuasions and commitments; distinctive ways of thinking and acting; and many more.² Individual identity is also connected to the identity of the group of which the individual is a part, and that group identity shapes and is shaped by the individuals who are part of that group.

2. See Rom Harré, foreword to *Analyzing Identity: Cross-Cultural, Societal and Clinical Contexts*, ed. Peter Weinreich and Wendy Saunderson (New York: Routledge, 2003), xvii.

PERSONAL IDENTITY IS NOT STATIC

Identity is not static, because people age and change in many ways. Yet, in spite of those changes, there is a sense in which the person remains the same. Avrum Stroll explains:

Philosophical reflections about the nature of change, about the problem of identifying or reidentifying something or someone, gives rise to a set of issues which cluster under the name “the problem of identity.” In its simplest form, this problem may be thought of as the problem of trying to give a true explanation of those features of the world which account for its sameness, on the one hand, and for its diversity and change, on the other.³

Eric Olson helpfully explains the problem of identity:

Outside of philosophy, “personal identity” usually refers to certain properties to which a person feels a special sense of attachment or ownership. Someone’s personal identity in this sense consists of those features she takes to “define her as a person” or “make her the person she is.” . . . One’s personal identity in this sense is contingent and changeable: different properties could have belonged to the way one defines oneself as a person, and what properties these are can change over time.⁴

Another author puts it this way:

Personal identity is the concept you develop about yourself that evolves over the course of your life. This may include aspects of your life that you have no control over, such as where you grew up or the color of your skin, as well as choices you make in life, such as how you spend your time and what you believe. You demonstrate portions of your personal identity outwardly through what you wear and how you interact with other people. You may also keep some elements of your personal identity to yourself, even when these parts of yourself are very important.⁵

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3. Avrum Stroll, “Identity,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), 4:121. A variety of philosophical approaches are discussed in this essay. For a short and nontechnical discussion of the philosophical landscape see Joshua Farris, “What’s So Simple about Personal Identity?,” *Philosophy Now*, April/May 2015, https://philosophynow.org/issues/107/Whats_So_Simple_About_Personal_Identity.
 4. Eric T. Olson, “Personal Identity,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2017 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/identity-personal/>.
 5. Christine Serva, “What Is Personal Identity? Definition, Philosophy and Development,” Study.com, <http://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-personal-identity-definition-philosophy-development.html>.

In short, personal identity develops and changes, sometimes in clear and observable ways. Other changes are hidden and private. Yet, in the midst of the growth and development, there is continuity in personhood. I am no longer five years old, nor even fifty-five, but I am still the same person I was when I was those ages. I did not pass out of existence and then reappear as a different person. The visible, external changes are observable to all, and yet the continuity is visible as well. I recently met a classmate from high school whom I had not seen since graduation. Although both of us are considerably different than we were then, we each recognized the other immediately. On the other hand, some developments are not visible externally. Having been married to Janice for more than forty years, my love for her has been tested, challenged, nurtured, and is still maturing; those changes are not visible. Although they are not observable to others, those developments are no less real. Largely due to the relationship my wife and I have built over those four decades, there are elements of my personal identity that only she knows.

SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

Personal identity is the combination of characteristics that make up the person. But *spiritual identity* is more difficult to define. One way to de-jargonize spiritual identity and provide clarity is first to define the term *spiritual* or *spirituality*, because “spirituality” means something different to everyone. For some, it’s about participating in organized religion: going to a church, synagogue, mosque, and so on. For others, it’s more personal—some people get in touch with their spiritual side through private prayer, yoga, meditation, quiet reflection, or even long walks.”⁶ Within Christianity, usage of the term “identity” is sometimes unclear. Charles Ryrie observed, “Oddly enough, the concept of spirituality, though the subject of much preaching, writing and discussion, is seldom defined. Usually anything that approaches a definition merely describes the characteristics of spirituality, but one searches in vain for a concise definition of the concept itself.”⁷ A dictionary of theological terms defines *Christian spirituality* as “the believer’s relationship with God and life in the Spirit as a member of the church of Jesus Christ. Today spirituality often refers to an interest in or concern for matters of the ‘spirit’ in contrast to the mere interest and focus on the material.”⁸ Theologian Alister McGrath writes, “Christian spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian experience, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis and within the scope of the Christian faith.”⁹

6. *Psychology Today*, “Spirituality,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/spirituality>.

7. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 12.

8. Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 109.

9. Alister E. McGrath. *Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 2.

When people speak of one's "spiritual identity" in the context of sexuality, they often mean one's identity in Christ as described in Scripture. And in the New Testament "spiritual" can be defined simply in terms of relationship to the Spirit of God. John Murray states this point succinctly: "'Spiritual' in the New Testament refers to that which is of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual [person] is the person who is indwelt and controlled by the Holy Spirit and a spiritual state of mind is a state of mind that is produced and maintained by the Holy Spirit. Hence, when we say that union with Christ is Spiritual we mean, first of all, that the bond of this union is the Holy Spirit himself."¹⁰ Ryrie says something similar: "The word is, of course, built on the root word for spirit and thus means 'pertaining to the spirit.' Actually, it has a rather wide range of uses, all of which are consistent with this basic idea of pertaining to spirit."¹¹ Ryrie continues, "However, the distinctive use in the New Testament of the word *spiritual* is in connection with the believer's growth and maturing in the Christian life. A spiritual man must first of all be one who has experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit giving him new life in Christ."¹²

Spiritual identity, thus, is who the Christian is, a human being indwelt by the Spirit of God. By means of the indwelling Spirit, the believer is united to Christ, her identity is linked to his, her hope is found in him. In short, "spiritual identity" and "union with Christ" are two ways of expressing this reality. Murray notes, "Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ. Indeed, the whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ and salvation has in view the realization of other phases of union with Christ."¹³

But this union with Christ is not individualistic: "Faith union with Christ means union with other believers. When people trust Christ for salvation, the Holy Spirit links them spiritually to Christ and at the same time links them to all others who are 'in him.'"¹⁴ Union with Christ identifies the Christian as a new creation, a new person; and this union is accomplished through the indwelling of the Spirit. No longer who she was, she is not yet what she will be. This hope of new creation is the plot line of the biblical story of God's work of redemption.

10. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 166. Since the Spirit is not material, the doctrine of indwelling does not indicate his location but his control or influence over the person. The Spirit is the means by which the believer experiences union with Christ.

11. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*, 10.

12. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*, 10–11.

13. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 161.

14. Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 415–16.

TWO ADAMS IN THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Because our spiritual identity is grounded in new creation, and this new creation is, indeed, the telos of the plot line of the biblical story of redemption, it is instructive to review how the biblical story unfolds. Many of us describe it as doing so in three acts: creation, fall (and redemption), and re-creation.¹⁵ In the first act God creates a heaven and earth; God is the source of everything that is. He creates dry ground by separating the waters, and fills the earth with plants, trees, and other vegetation. He creates creatures that live in the water and fly in the skies. He creates land animals great and small and fills the earth he has made. He calls what he has made “good.” Then he creates caretakers, creatures whose responsibility will be to care for the world he has created. The creation of humanity is summarized in Genesis 1:26–28:

Then God said, “Let us make Adam in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created Adam in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”¹⁶

These first humans, named “Adam” by their Creator, are the only creatures designated as divine imagers, created in the likeness of deity.¹⁷ Since he is immaterial, God is not visible; he is invisible. Although he is everywhere present, he is not physically present in the world that he has made. But he is physically present by means of these imagers. Human beings reveal him, represent him, and rule for him in the world that God has created. In human reproduction, “be fruitful and increase in number,” humans expand and increase the presence of God in creation,

15. See Glenn R. Kreider, *God with Us: Exploring God's Interactions with His People throughout the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014).

16. All Bible citations in this chapter, unless indicated otherwise, are from the New International Version. The NIV translates the Hebrew word **בְּרִיאָה** as “mankind” in this context. As will become clear later, this unfortunately obscures the Adam/Christ pattern which is established in the New Testament; thus, I have left the word transliterated (Adam) rather than interpreted (mankind).

17. “Human significance is attached to the One who has no beginning and has no end. Any consideration, then, of human identity must consider the God who created humans in his image or suffer the consequences of denying that linkage.” Richard Lints, “Introduction: Theological Anthropology in Context,” in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1. Later, Moses reiterates that “Adam” is the name given to both the male and female (Gen. 5:1–2).

covering the whole earth with his manifestation. Ruling or subduing creation and the creatures must be understood in the context of God's having blessed those creations (v. 22). Humans are to be mediators of blessing to the creatures God has blessed, in a good world that God created, as an act of worship of their Creator.¹⁸

Because humans are created in the image of God, they have dignity. And the Scriptures teach that humans retain this dignity even after the fall, a truth we see in both the Old (Gen. 9:5–7) and New Testaments (James 3:9). Thus every human without exception deserves honor and respect, from the preborn to the Alzheimer's sufferer. Life is sacred, a gracious gift from the Creator. Only the Creator has the power over life and death.

Tragically, God's idyllic world does not last long. In a story told with little attention to detail, a serpent comes into the garden, contradicts the command of the Creator to eat from any tree in the garden except one (2:16–17), and invites Adam—male and female—to rebel against God (3:1–6). They listen. They eat. Their eyes are opened to their nakedness.¹⁹ God then comes into their world and pronounces judgment on the serpent, the man, and woman, and curses the ground (vv. 14–19).²⁰

But, surprisingly, the judgment of God does not include the immediate death of the man and woman. God responds to their rebellion in mercy. He clothes them in animal skins (v. 21) and exiles them from the garden (vv. 23–24).²¹ They do eventually die, centuries later (5:3–4), but not immediately. They live in hope, the hope of all creation, that one day all will be made new. All the descendants of this couple will also live in hope, albeit not always conscious of it.

The hope of the world to come becomes clearer and clearer as the biblical story unfolds.²² The content of that hope is Jesus, the second or last Adam.²³ His first advent introduces the new covenant, and his return will bring the plan of

18. See Eugene H. Merrill, "Image of God," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 441–45. Merrill concludes, "Humankind is *in* the image of God but also serves *as* the image. Humans have resemblance to God, even if limited, but stand in God's place in the administration of God's creation" (444). See also J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

19. "Nakedness" is more than lack of clothes. It symbolizes exposure, helplessness, humiliation, shame, guilt, and more. See "Nakedness," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 581–82.

20. The ground is cursed "because of you" (Gen. 3:17).

21. Substitutionary atonement is introduced in the beginning of the biblical story of redemption. An animal dies rather than the guilty human. Since in the Mosaic law, the sacrifice is required of the sinner, presumably, the man and woman offered the sacrifice, and God made garments from the animal skins.

22. See Kreider, *God with Us: Exploring God's Interactions with His People throughout the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), for an explanation of the unfolding of the story.

23. Jesus is not merely the one who brings that hope to fulfillment; he is the hope itself (1 Peter 1:3–12).

redemption to completion. The apostle Paul draws out the contrast between the two Adams most clearly in the book of Romans. After an extended argument that demonstrates that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), Paul celebrates the good news that we have peace with God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (5:1). He then explains that sin and death entered the world through one man, Adam (v. 12). One man’s sin brought death to all, but through one man grace comes to all (vv. 15–17). In short, “Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (vv. 18–19).²⁴ Paul concludes, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 21).

But the work of redemption is not yet complete. We wait for the culmination of God’s plan. We live in the space between the first and second coming of Christ. Jesus Christ came to earth, was born of the virgin Mary, lived a sinless life, suffered under Pontius Pilate, died, rose from the dead, and is coming back to this earth to make all things new. That newness is the final act of the biblical story (Rev. 21–22). In the meantime, all creation groans in hope of its liberation from bondage to decay (Rom 8:19–21). Those who are united to Christ also groan as we wait (vv. 22–25).

The eternal life that is promised to those who are in Christ is both a quality of life now and a quality and quantity of life to come. Eternal life is not just life that never ends. It is abundant life here and now (John 10:10; 17:3). But the life we experience now is not the fullness of the life to come. We wait for resurrection and glorification. The apostle explains that our hope is rooted in the resurrection of the Savior: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:5). And “if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (v. 8). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul argues that the resurrection of Christ guarantees our resurrection, and he calls this hope the gospel (vv. 1–8). Later, Paul asserts that the work of redemption will be incomplete until death has been defeated (vv. 25–28). So we wait, in hope for that day.

Salvation has a past, present, and future aspect. We are no longer who we were. Our identity is no longer rooted in Adam, but in Christ. Theologian Robert Peterson explains, “When Paul thinks of salvation, he thinks of faith union with Christ. . . . One of the most important consequences of faith union with Christ is that it defines believers. It gives them an identity in relation to

24. Clearly, Adam’s sin brought death to all humanity, while Christ’s obedience brings life only to those who are united with him.

Christ.”²⁵ But we are also not yet who we will be. We are in the process of being transformed into the image of Christ, and that transformation occurs in community, within the body of Christ. One day, we will be new creations, and will live with Christ and his body in a new creation. We are not there yet. But we trust the God who brought the original creation into existence and who has been at work redemptively in this fallen world to complete what he started (Phil. 1:6).

Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This salvation is a process that has a beginning. Born in Adam, inheriting the guilt of original sin, we demonstrate that we are sinners from our earliest days. We sin because we are sinners, and our sin continues to demonstrate that reality. Then, through the transformative power of the gospel (Rom. 10:17), through faith in Christ we are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God (Col. 1:13). Through the work of the Spirit, we are now united with Christ; we are in him (Rom. 8:1). Graham Cole puts it this way: “Union with Christ by the Spirit . . . is the *central* blessing of the gospel since all the blessings of salvation are found in Christ. Union with Christ by the Spirit relocates the believer from Adam to Christ. Significantly, our union with Christ by the Spirit not only brings us into relationship to God as Father but also to one another as Christ’s body.”²⁶

But the beginning is not the end. For even though we have been born again by the Spirit of God, we continue to live in a fallen world, we continue to demonstrate our sinfulness to ourselves and those around us, and, eventually, we die. If the wages of sin is death (6:23), death is proof that we are sinners. But death is not the end. Because Jesus is alive, we too shall live (1 Cor. 15). If we were united with him in his death and burial, we shall also be united with him in resurrection (Rom. 6:5–8; 8:11).

WHAT ARE THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF OUR IDENTITY “IN CHRIST”?

Numerous practical implications flow from our having been united with Christ by the Spirit. Our redemption is not yet complete. We were born in Adam “by nature deserving of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). But now, only because of God’s grace, we are “raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (v. 6). Clearly “seated with him in the heavenly realms” is not our present experience. As I write this, it is August in Dallas, where temperatures hover around one hundred degrees Fahrenheit and plants, pets, and people struggle to find relief from the heat. I love this city and am grateful to live here, but it is not heaven; it is not the new creation. I’ve recently lost two long-term colleagues and friends, watched a close friend’s marriage dissolve, and prayed fervently for a sick infant—who died

25. Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit*, 413–14.

26. Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 240–41.

just days after birth. We live in a fallen world, and we see constant and graphic reminders of its brokenness, in small and big ways. We do not live in the heavenly realms or in the new creation. Yet. In this text in Ephesians, Paul is not describing our location, but our inheritance. Because we are “in Christ” we can be assured that where he is we will be also, in the age to come (John 14:1–3). We are citizens of heaven, and we are waiting for our Savior to come back to earth for us. Then he, “by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21).

To be “in Christ” does not mean that we no longer sin. As fallen creatures who struggle with the temptations and patterns of behavior and thinking that characterize life in a fallen world, we continue to sin. The fact that we are dying and one day will die is the ultimate proof that we are still sinners. The apostle Paul’s testimony is ours as well: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:15–16). We are all sinners, being saved by grace through faith, waiting for the day of resurrection and the new creation. The new creation has come, through the indwelling Spirit (2 Cor. 5:17), but is not yet here in its fullness.

“Union with Christ” is a comprehensive descriptor; it is not merely one of our identities. But to be a Christian also does not deny all the other aspects of our identity. I remain a White, heterosexual male who is a son, father, and grandfather. None of those identities disappeared when I became a Christian, nor does the fact that I am a Christian mean that I am no longer broken and fallen. All of my desires are corrupted. All of my inclinations are self-centered, self-protective, and self-promoting. All of my decisions are rooted in my selfishness. And all the aspects of my identity need to be redeemed.

The aspects of our identity are not hierarchical. In short, we are a complex unity of all of our attributes and characteristics. All of them are broken, tainted by sin, and in need of redemption. To admit I am a sinner is not to deny Christ’s work of redemption; it is simply to confess that sinfulness is part of who I currently am, and not who I will be in the new creation. It is not negative or pessimistic to acknowledge my sinfulness. Rather, such honesty of brokenness and the need of redemption enhances hope in the resurrection, in the world to come, when all will be made new.

And God is at work in those who are in Christ, redeeming the whole person, not just the parts. When the work of redemption is complete, the whole person will be made new. Then we will love God completely (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). Until then, our hearts are not fully devoted to him, our desires are motivated by selfishness, and our wills tend to be bent in other directions than following Christ.

And as I mentioned earlier, our identity “in Christ” is not primarily individual. It is corporate. We are each members of the body of Christ, one body made

up of many members (1 Cor. 12). Sanctification—or growth in holiness—is not ultimately about me, but focused on helping the body grow to maturity. In the biblical metaphors, each Christian is part of a body (1 Cor. 12), participating in an agricultural enterprise (3:5–9), and on the jobsite of a building project (vv. 10–14). And in each of these, the focus cannot be terminated on the individual. Rather, Paul explains, by “speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ” (Eph. 4:15). Our goal must be the edification, the building up, of the body. That said, the individual is still important. After all, the health of the body is dependent on the health of each part. But the parts of the body have a more holistic goal, the health of the whole.

Being “in Christ” does not mean we have received our inheritance—yet. That God “has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (1:3) does not mean that we have already received those blessings. They are promised, and the promise is sure. But the blessings are in heaven. Those blessings are Christ himself. We have received the Holy Spirit who is not the blessing, Jesus is. The Spirit is a deposit or down payment on the inheritance (1:13–14; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22). The Holy Spirit is the firstfruit of the harvest, not the complete harvest (Rom. 8:22–25). Our inheritance “can never perish, spoil or fade. . . . [It] is kept in heaven” (1 Peter 1:4). Because God will complete what he has started (Phil. 1:6), we have confidence to wait in hope. And yet, as Cole explains, “The Spirit brings something of the future that God has in store for his people into our lives in the here and now.”²⁷ The present experience of the Spirit intensifies our longing for what is to come and is a foretaste of that inheritance.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Through faith in Jesus we have hope. In fact, he himself is the content of our hope. We are “in him” now, but our present experience is not the end; we look forward to the completion of the work of redemption. Our Savior has been here, and he is coming back. When we see him, we will be like him (1 John 3:2). The dead will be resurrected, and the living, glorified (1 Thess. 4:14–17). We have received the Spirit as a foretaste of that living hope; the Spirit is not the hope.

Our identity is in Christ. Our hope is in Christ. Our destiny is in Christ. Our past, present, and future is in Christ. One day, all will be made new, in Christ. Until that day, we walk by faith in hope empowered by the love of our Savior because “we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved” (Rom. 8:22–24).

27. Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 238–39.

28. I believe this is the way to understand 2 Cor. 5:17. We have not yet been made new creations, but the future has invaded the present in the work of the Spirit.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are some implications of seeing identity as holistic rather than hierarchical? How could one choose to grow in areas of weakness and flourish in areas of strength while retaining a holistic understanding of the aspects of identity?
2. The promise of a new creation, in which all the effects of sin are removed, is the basis of the Christian hope. One day, our hope of union with Christ will be realized on this earth. How does the recognition of this hope have an impact on the way you live your life in a fallen world?
3. Paul uses various corporate metaphors to describe our spiritual identity; for example, body (1 Cor. 12), household (1 Tim. 3:14–15), family (Eph. 1:5), building (2:21–22), temple (vv. 21–22), and nation (v. 19). Such pictures are at odds with the overwhelmingly individualistic thinking of the culture in North America. How does this corporate emphasis affect the practice of spiritual growth? How can Christians change the church culture, especially the tendency of the church in North America to adopt the individualism of the subcultures in which we live?

FOR FURTHER READING

Cole, Graham A. *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*. Foundations of Evangelical Theology. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007.

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