An Issue with Embodied Resurrection

by Stephanie M. Cherpak and Bernadette K. Raspante

As female, Catholic, aspiring theologians, we are acutely aware of the limits that may be placed upon our career paths (and other aspects of our lives) in comparison with those of our male counterparts, solely on the basis of gender. If differences in biological make-up affect our existence so significantly during life, do they also maintain this ability to differentiate and divide in life-after-death? Whether this question can even be asked relies largely upon one’s image of the afterlife. As Catholics, we profess to believe in “the resurrection of the body,” but just what does bodily resurrection mean in reference to our biological make-up?

Our intuition is that our mental imagery pertaining to life-after-death is reflective of how it has been represented in popular culture, regardless of how it is described in scripture and doctrine. For instance, it becomes obvious that cinematic depictions of life-after-death often disagree with scriptural descriptions of bodily resurrection. Filmmakers cannot be blamed entirely for this as they are required to fill in details that the Biblical authors have left ambiguous. “We should always remember that we cannot visualize what . . . the resurrection body will be like. We can only think of [it] in terms of our present experience, from which by definition [it] will differ.”1 Where a text can simply say that there is a bodily resurrection, a screenplay must creatively re-imagine the form of this resurrected body. Thus, even knowing theologically that the resurrected body will inherently differ from the present body, filmmakers must depend on imagery drawn from present experience.2

However, sometimes, even though the way in which the deceased person is represented is similar to the way s/he is shown during life, bodilessness is suggested by transparency or extraordinary powers (e.g., walking through walls, teleportation, flying, invisibility). While this representation actually suggests bodiless resurrection, since corporeality is lost, it is still connected to the image of the body and therefore suggests that existence after death is reminiscent of one’s earthly existence. While these representations of life-after-death in visual imagery are more likely meant to amuse and entertain than to reflect or shape one’s theological understandings, the power of visual imagery to inform one’s conceptions remains significant.3

1 Keith Innes, “Towards an Ecological Eschatology: Continuity and Discontinuity,” Evangelical Quarterly 81, no. 2 (April 2009): 141.
2 Some films that depict the resurrected body as the same as the earthly body include What Dreams May Come (Ward/USA, 1998), Ghost (Zucker/USA, 1990), Toothless (Mayron/USA, 1997), All Dogs Go To Heaven (Bluth, Goldman, Kuenster/USA, 1989), and Hercules (Clements, Musker/USA, 1997).

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Pauline Thought and Body-Soul Dualisms

Many theologians look to Paul for an insight into bodily resurrection. But where did Paul’s ideas of body and soul come from? In 1 Corinthians it can be assumed that Paul is addressing the Corinthians’ concern about what will happen to them after they die. Therefore, we must consider the belief system that Paul was up against. Corinthians were not only preoccupied with the apocalyptic thought introduced by Paul, but were also unfamiliar with the Hellenistic and Jewish idea that the human spirit was simply the divided Divine Spirit dwelling in humans. They were more familiar with the Gnostic idea of Spirit, which only included God. Thus, Paul draws distinctions between these (S)pirits. In doing this, Paul gives a new importance to the body by claiming that the human body also contains Divine Spirit. The body, which the Corinthians had considered disposable, now had worth and, to Paul’s later deductions, participated in the resurrection.

Paul writes of a “glorified body” in 1 Corinthians, though, as can be expected, he only gives metaphorical descriptions of what this glorified body will be (e.g., seed metaphor in 1 Cor 15:35-50). “If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44), taken out of context, is a quotation often used to support notions of body-soul dualism. However, when studied in context, it becomes clear that the distinction between body and soul is not meant to imply a difference between a living human’s material body and immaterial soul but between one’s earthly body and heavenly body, since this is the distinction made between the other claims leading up to this one.

Greek philosophical anthropology, from which many Western interpretations spring, and Semitic anthropology, from which Paul presumably writes, differ in their understandings of “body” and "soul": “Although in English these terms each denote a component of the human being, in biblical usage they each denote the whole person from some perspective or under some aspect.” Therefore, distinguishing between a “physical body” and a “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44) does not highlight parts of one’s existence, but highlights one’s existence from various perspectives. Dualist thought tends to think of the spirit rising out of the body once the body has died, but Semitic anthropology paired with Paul’s metaphorical explanations of resurrection suggest that the entire person dies and transforms into a new way of existing, instead of one part (i.e., soul) of one’s current existence persisting through death and living on with hope for reunion with the other part of one’s existence (i.e., the body) at a future event.

Feminist Questions and Methods

Though Montague doesn’t speak of gender in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, he answers the spiritual body question in a way that requires a gendered response: “My risen body will be my own, not someone else’s. One does not lose one’s personal identity by resurrection: one finds it in a new way.” What way? How? Does it matter? These

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4 1 Corinthians 15 deals with resurrection in five parts: first the resurrection of Christ (vv 1-11); resurrection of all the dead, in which Paul makes the important point "for if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile." (vv 12-19); his logical argument that Christ’s resurrection means resurrection for all believers (vv 20-28); warning against a lifestyle that may lead one down a path in which one would not be resurrected (vv 29-34); and how thedead are raised based on the sections above (vv 35-58).


7 Clark-Soles, 66.


questions have mattered to feminists in the past and are still cause for wonder. Kari Elisabeth Borrenson, after outlining the history of thought concerning the redemption of women, finds that “Paul’s theology excluded women from creational Godlikeness as image of God, but included women in the redemption of Christ through an androcentric neutralization of femaleness.”12 This glorified body would be androcentric, which is not genderless at all.

“Overcoming” the femaleness with which women are born seems odd in a number of ways. The first concern that arises is one of transitive logic. If, as Paul states, we have use for a body on earth, we will have use for a body in heaven; thus, if we have use for gender on earth, we will have use for gender in heaven. If gender is not important to the coming reign of God, or of living out the vision of the reign of God on earth, why would it be necessary at all? Gender must have some importance outside of reproductive uses as gender has not only been and is the cause of many worldly struggles but also the hermeneutic from which many theologize.

Our opinions and the opinions of those with which we have spoken on the question of whether it is important that our glorified bodies be gendered or not are mixed. For some, it is hard to conceive of any existence that does not include being female. For these women, their femaleness ties into their other identities, including that of being Christian. Having lived and struggled as a Christian woman means something very particular; that identity cannot be removed from our redemption as a Christian, let alone become neutralized and androcentric to reach redemption.

Paul, as demonstrated in the section above, “subverts all status markers in the Greco-Roman world…by invoking the ethic of the cross. That a condemned and crucified man—one of lowest possible status in the world—is God’s vehicle for salvation reveals that the status markers of God’s realm are not those of the world.”13 Paul asks the Corinthians to take up this logic and inverted hierarchy in dealing with each other, which would allow them to be more Christlike in their behavior. He points out that worldly distinctions are not part of the world Christ envisions.14

In this those employing any feminist hermeneutic (suspicion, liberation, difference, etc.) may take comfort. Using Paul’s own rhetoric as a method for answering the questions asked by the feminists in the first groups above, and the questions of those who feel that holding onto the embodied part of existence should not be a main concern when fathoming resurrection, we see that glorification of “body” is beyond what both the limits of our earthly mind and body can allow us to conceive.

Using commentary closer to Paul’s time to look at the glorified body questions, Caroline Walker-Bynum calls upon a second century response to 1 Corinthians as well as Justin Martyr’s writing to provide an analysis of the seed metaphor that sheds some light on the questions that have been asked of Paul since the letter was written. In this second century “Third Letter to the Corinthians,”15 the writer acting as Paul states, “resurrection is of all of our particular flesh; it carries with it our identity…we also rise without a single hair or eyelash lost, and the flesh that rises bears the specific marks of our suffering as Christ’s bore his wounds.”16 This shows that some second century Christians questioned and believed that glorified bodies would resemble earthly bodies, even though they would be composed of a different matter. Justin stresses some material continuity as well but explains that it is

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14 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28 (NRSV).
16 Bynum, 29.
only through God that we can affect the process of glorification. Paul held that identities follow us in some way but never explicitly claimed these were in physical appearance or corporality. Paul was writing to the Corinthians who put too much emphasis in their spiritual state; maybe we are, centuries later, putting too much emphasis on the body.

In this vein, Karl Rahner provides a conceptual framework for resurrection that rejects the embodiment piece entirely. Insisting upon corporeally embodied resurrected existence, complete with gender distinctions, suggests an obsession with bodiness characteristic of earthly life and a resistance to the freedom from limits of this life that God offers us through death and resurrection. Instead of fretting about in what form our resurrected bodies will exist, should we not proclaim the “faith which knows itself to be a divinely effected liberation from all the powers of finiteness, of guilt and of death, and knows itself to be empowered for this by the fact that this liberation has taken place in Jesus himself and has become manifest for us” in all of our various ways of existence—Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, slave, free, adult, child, man, woman?

No matter how much the issue is theologized, like many of the big questions that plague our faith, we will never have an answer. It is nice to think of a heaven where our friends and family are waiting there with open arms to greet us so that we are reunited in the way that we lived on earth or a heaven where we can look down on the people we have left behind. Maybe we will be able to recognize one another in a way that differs from how we recognize each other on earth so that gender won’t be part of that equation. Maybe, no matter how hard it is to think about, we won’t recognize one another at all, à la C.S. Lewis’ The Great Divorce, wandering around waiting to be united with God.

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17 Bynum, 29-30.
18 Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Death and the Resurrection of Jesus” in Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 264-285. “We must avoid the misunderstanding that resurrection is a return to life and existence in time and space as we experience it. For when it is misunderstood in this way, resurrection could not be the salvation which is in God’s hands, incomprehensible and known only in hope.” This idea corresponds to Bassler’s commentary in an interesting way, allowing for the possibility of a hermeneutic to better understand the reign of God that relies not only on a glorified bodily resurrection but also on a glorified hierarchy of worldly status and right relationship, if we had the space in the scope of this article.
19 Rahner, 268.
20 For further exploration of the emphasis on death and resurrection fulfilling and validating human existence, as opposed to an emphasis on death and resurrection as continuing human existence, see Rahner, “The Theology of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus,” 268-273.