Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Evangelical Gnosticism

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I teach in a great books program at an Evangelical university. Almost all students in the program are born-and-bred Christians of the nondenominational variety. A number of them have been both thoroughly churched and educated through Christian schools or homeschooling curricula. Yet an overwhelming majority of these students do not believe in a bodily resurrection. While they trust in an afterlife of eternal bliss with God, most of them assume this will be disembodied bliss, in which the soul is finally free of its "meat suit" (a term they fondly use).

I first caught wind of this striking divergence from Christian orthodoxy in class last year, when we encountered Stoic visions of the afterlife. Cicero, for one, describes the body as a prison from which the immortal soul is mercifully freed upon death, whereas Seneca views the body as "nothing more or less than a fetter on my freedom," one eventually "dissolved" when the soul is set loose. These conceptions were quite attractive to the students.

Resistance to the idea of a physical resurrection struck them as perfectly logical. "It doesn't feel right to say there's a human body in heaven, when the body is tied so closely to sin," said one student. In all, fewer than ten of my forty students affirmed the orthodox teaching that we will ultimately have a body in our glorified, heavenly form. None of them realizes that these beliefs are unorthodox; this is not willful doctrinal error. This is an absence of knowledge about the foundational tenets of historical, creedal Christianity.

At some point in my Evangelical upbringing, I came across a timeline of world history. The timeline started with Adam and Eve, then moved through significant events recounted in the Old Testament, with a few extra-biblical highlights from elsewhere in the world spliced in here and there. The fulcrum of the timeline was the birth of Christ, followed by details from his life and ministry, then post-Resurrection events from the Book of Acts. All these episodes were demarcated by bright colors, with neat lines stretching upward into the margins, connecting each sliver of color to a corresponding

label. After Paul's ministry, however, this busy rainbow of history dissolved into a dull purple rectangle spanning fourteen centuries, labeled simply "the Dark Ages."

This is an apt illustration of all too many young Christians' sense of Christian history. The world after the New Testament is blank and uneventful. Even the Reformation is an obscure blip. They are not self-consciously Protestant, but merely "nondenominational." Their Christian identity is unmoored from any tradition or notion of Christianity through time.

My students are a microcosm of what I see as a growing trend in contemporary Evangelicalism. Without a guiding connection to orthodoxy, young Evangelicals are developing heterodox sensibilities that are at odds with a Christian understanding of personhood. The body is associated with sin, the soul with holiness. Moreover, this sense of the body, especially under the alias *flesh*, tends to be hypersexualized.

Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the Evangelical emphasis on purity, a word that has become synonymous with bodily virginity. Despite the biblical usage of purity as holiness in a broader, holistic sense, including but not limited to sexual matters, the word "purity" has become narrowly sexualized. It is not a virtue to be continually cultivated, but a default physical state that can be permanently lost.

In Evangelical vernacular, "sins of the flesh" denote specifically sexual sins, and these are the evils that dominate the theological imaginations of young, unmarried Evangelicals, far more than idolatry, say, or greed. I can remember one particularly vivid illustration from my Evangelical youth, when I was asked to imagine myself on my wedding day, in a pristine white dress—and then asked to picture a bright red handprint anywhere that a man has touched me. This image of a bloodied bride, of flesh corrupted by flesh, seared into my imagination a picture of the body, rather than the soul, as the source and site of sin.

This is not a new misunderstanding. The view of embodiment as the epitome of evil was a central tenet of Gnosticism, which St. Irenaeus refuted in the late second century. But the notion that our fall is metaphysical, not moral, persisted. In the early fifth century, St. Augustine faced an interpretation of St. Paul that placed the Apostle's warning about the weakness of our flesh and our bondage to carnal works within a Platonic framework. For the Platonist, the material world and the spiritual world are distinct and hierarchically ordered; the material is illusory, temporary, imperfect. The body is the seat of harmful desires and passions, from which the soul must be released. The body weighs down and corrupts the soul.

But as Augustine observes in book XIV of *City of God*, Paul's litany of "works of the flesh" in Galatians includes faults of both mind and body. The corporeal sins of fornication and drunkenness are listed alongside enmity, discord, and other inner dispositions. Paul uses the language of "flesh" and "spirit" to denote two distinct ways of life: To follow the flesh is to live according to the standards of fallen humanity, whereas to follow the spirit is to live according to the standards of God. And both of these paths—this is the vital point—involve the person's entire nature, body and soul. According to Augustine, to see the body as the sinful aspect of the person "shows a failure to consider man's nature carefully and in its entirety."

In the Christian understanding of sin and human nature, as articulated by Augustine, "it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful; it was the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible." Augustine highlights a painful irony at work in those Christians who affirm a Platonic anthropology: "For anyone who exalts the soul as the Supreme Good, and censures the nature of the flesh as something evil, is in fact carnal alike in his cult of the soul and in his revulsion from the flesh, since this attitude is prompted by human folly, not by divine truth." In other words, to see the flesh as more sinful than the soul is to *follow the way of the flesh*.

The tenet of the bodily resurrection is not a peripheral doctrinal issue. It is part of the entire economy of salvation. What could be the point of the Word becoming flesh if our bodies are merely sinful husks that will eventually be discarded? Moreover, as St. Paul makes clear, to live in a carnal fashion means accepting the world's claim that sin is inescapable and death is final. Both claims crimp our spiritual imaginations and limit our aspirations.

It was in debates about the person and work of Christ that the Church Fathers defended the integrity of the body. For Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, salvation was ultimately a matter of *theosis*, of redeeming humanity so fully that we might share in the divine life of the Trinity. This entails a reconciliation of the human and the divine. To use Athanasius's famous phrase: God became man that men might become god. This reconciliation, however, does not destroy or overwhelm our human nature. It brings it to perfection. To be human means having a soul *and* a body; the full redemption of our humanness must have a bodily dimension. Thus, according to Athanasius and Cyril, as mediator and author of our salvation, Christ himself is fully God and fully man. The Incarnate Son unites humanity and divinity in his person—hence the notion of hypostatic (personal) union. Christ effects in his person the reconciliation of Creator and creature.

This was not the Nestorian view, against which Cyril argued. Nestorius was wary of language that seemed to fully unite divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. He preferred terms like "association" and "conjoining," rather than Cyril's hypostatic union.

He wished to maintain strict metaphysical boundaries between the human and divine. For Nestorius, the claim that God could be said to *have flesh* and be intimately conjoined to a person who *suffers* seems to degrade him.

The Nestorian interpretation of the Incarnation resisted the idea of God fully entering into the matrix of embodied humanity. Nestorius rejected the notion that the Virgin Mary is *Theotokos*, mother of God, saying instead that she is *Christokos*, the mother of Christ. This allowed him to keep the man Jesus of Nazareth from being too closely associated with God, the eternal and unchangeable source of all reality. According to Cyril, this view of Christ keeps God at arm's length from man, which deprives Christianity of its salvific meaning. It obscures the radical descent of the divine Logos into human nature, a descent that infuses our finite flesh with the power of eternal life.

We need to side with Cyril and other defenders of Chalcedonian orthodoxy to resist the contemporary trend that denigrates the body in the false view that this will elevate the soul. The apostolic tradition carries a radical message that defends the truth of human personhood against the secular tide of pessimism about the flesh. Safeguarding that message requires entering into the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, affirming God's alliance with us in our created finitude, which means in our embodied existence. We do not profess a religion that despises the body. Christ speaks of us *as* his body, a body that spans the globe and extends through time. To disdain our flesh is to neglect the Incarnation and our membership in this historical communal body.

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