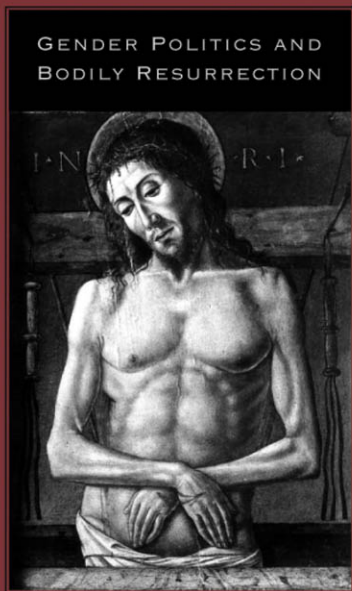


MARKS OF HIS WOUNDS



BETH FELKER JONES

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Gender Politics and Bodily Resurrection

BETH FELKER JONES

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For Brian

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Introduction

We are conditioned to think of salvation as being about anything but the body. We think that what God wants for human beings has to do with our thoughts, with our hearts, with a private and interior relationship. In both popular piety and academic theology, there are strong spiritualizing tendencies. Our gnostic culture and churches deny the importance of bodily life.¹ When pressed, many members of Christian congregations deny the resurrection of the body in favor of some version of immortality only for the soul. The idea that the Christian faith might change the way we think about, and even what we do with, our bodies meets with steep resistance.

But Christians affirm that the one “who raised Christ from the dead” will “give life to” our “mortal bodies” (Romans 8:11).² The people of God “groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). Embodiment is for God’s glory. The body has everything to do with our relationship with and life before God. It has everything to do with our hope for holiness.

In this book, I articulate a Christian theology of human embodiment in light of both resurrection doctrine and feminist political concerns. I forward a theology of the body through (1) a doctrinal focus on the resurrection instead of on creation and (2) a sensitivity to the gendered body as an illustration of the integrally psychosomatic nature of redemption. Through reading Augustine and Calvin and assessing their theologies of the body, I show how the Christian theological tradition contains the resources we need to think through

the history and future of the theology of the body as it coheres with the doctrine of the resurrection. The resurrection of the flesh can help to make sense of our bodies: of what they are and what they are for.

The concept of the resurrection of the body, essential to the earliest Christian confessions of faith, includes the expectation that not only was Jesus of Nazareth raised from the grave, but all of humanity will also someday so arise. This hope is determinative of any Christian theology of the body. Resurrection doctrine is indicative not only of final hopes, but also of present attitudes toward the bodies of the living. It ought, for Christians, to discipline our embodied lives. The doctrine is central to our working out, as the body of Christ, how our own bodies must be at the heart of the very possibility that God might make us into a holy people. In exploring the theological meaning of the human body, I do not, as is frequently done, begin with creation. Instead, I begin with the doctrine of the bodily resurrection in order to understand the body as integral to redemption. If we want to know what God intends for bodily creatures, the resurrected body of the Son, and not our own sinful bodies, is the place we need to start.

To insist that God saves us in the body is also to insist that God demands visible holiness. I come from a wavering holiness tradition struggling to make sense of its own particularity. Whatever else God planned for the Methodists, it surely was to give witness to God's intention to make people holy. But holiness is meaningless outside of the body that would make it accessible to a world in need, and this is perhaps the reason my church is faltering. I hope, in this volume, to make a contribution toward reclaiming the distinctiveness of my own theological tradition by pushing for the practice of embodied holiness. God makes us holy through the concrete body of Christ. God writes on our flesh, and the body of Jesus Christ, risen yet visibly wounded, is the display and model of God's holiness to which we must turn if we have any hope of speaking of right human relationship with God.

The argument is about all human bodies, but the gendered body serves as a primary illustration for my analysis. The significance of this illustration is found, first, in the crucial importance of the body to feminist theory and, second, in my conviction that, when we seek to speak of holiness, the questions at hand have much to do with the political questions raised by feminism.³ It is common to think of our culture as one that worships bodies, and, to some extent, this is probably a right characterization. Yet at a deeper level, we live in a profoundly anti-body culture. The cult around the young body, the veneration of the airbrushed, media-produced body, conceals a thinly veiled hatred of real bodies—bodies that leak and bleed, wrinkle, smell, grow old, and, finally, die. Cultural practice expresses aversion to the body or denies the

body's mortality. The beauty industry commands billions of dollars meant to keep the body looking young. People submit to the surgeon's knife, buying liposuction or silicone breasts. Teenagers self-mutilate. Punishing exercise coexists with patterns of eating that poison the body. In using the gendered body as an illustration of resurrection doctrine, I am convinced it is not incidental that most of these practices center on female bodies.

Such practices, though they seem obsessed with bodies, conceal a loathing of the flesh, of the physical body that will finally succumb to death. The theologically ordered body, the body that will, at the resurrection, be integral to our final redemption, offers hope to precisely this culture. It also stands as a countercultural marker, a pointer to the risen, embodied Lord who assumed our flesh to save us. The body is not an obstacle to be overcome. Instead, it is intertwined with our telos as creatures, and it must not be discounted if the Church hopes to live as a holy people on this side of the eschaton.

Even as media-fed adulation of improbably sanitized human bodies litters our cultural consciousness, academics have complicated the concept of the body. A proliferation of writings seeks either to find meaning in our physicality or to deny that we might find meaning there. In contributing a Christian systematic theological approach to the body, my intent is to move beyond the standard debates about essentialism versus constructivism. By "Christian," I mean a theology standing within the broad consensus of the ecclesial community across time and space, a theology conceived as faith seeking the right way both of living faithful lives and understanding faithfulness before the concrete Christ. By "systematic," I mean work that takes seriously the intersection of any doctrine on the body with other key doctrinal loci: among those, incarnation, eschatology, and ecclesiology. Though an important facet of this project involves a certain interpretation of Christian tradition, it is not a strictly historical study. I investigate the tradition on bodily resurrection with a constructive theological goal in mind. I make no pretense that the Christian tradition is one of unmitigated holiness, but I do have a pneumatologically grounded confidence that we may discover holiness amidst the brokenness.

For the sake of clarity, I need to distinguish my approach from a quite different one. I diverge from feminist approaches that start with a loose understanding of incarnation but ignore the specificities, not only of the story of Christ as narrated in scripture, but also (and this latter does not exclude the Christ of scripture) of Chalcedon. These projects recognize some of the same questions that concern me, questions concerning the relationship between bodies and power and the particular ways that power shapes female bodies.⁴ Yet, the sum of my difference with such projects is in the supposition that "Christianity and patriarchy are highly compatible bed-fellows."⁵ My premise

is, rather, that they are the least compatible bedfellows of all, even while the deformation of Christianity by something like “patriarchy” has conjured various monsters, including deeply un-Christian conceptions of bodies and materiality.

My conviction is that theology as such is feminist. In other words, there is no right theology that is not feminist just because God intends good for all creation, including male and female. Were theological projects faithful, we would not need the designator “feminist” to remind us of those places where theologians have failed to deal explicitly with God’s care for those made weak in this world. My starting point is not experience (women’s subjectivity) but that tradition which, again through time and space, has sought faithfulness to a specific and concrete risen Lord, the same Lord who is the paradigm of that into which we hope, body and soul, to be transformed.

In clearing space for my theology of the body, in chapter 1 I develop the claim that any adequate understanding of human life in the body requires an account of the brokenness of the body, of the ways we human beings torture our own and each other’s bodies and of the pain of death. Contemporary feminists understand bodies as locations for the operation of power. While arguing that these insights are deeply important, I maintain that only a theological conceptualization of the body can make sense of the broken body of death.

Chapter 2 begins such a theology of the body through conversation with Augustine of Hippo. In his *City of God*, Augustine maintains two paradoxical truths about the body: it is *both* very good and terribly disordered. The right ordering of people toward God will be accomplished in the resurrection body when our bodies will give unmitigated witness to the Creator. With Augustine’s hope for the ordering of the body in place, chapter 3 turns to promises and problems in John Calvin’s treatment of the resurrection body. Reading Calvin helps to clarify why we cannot, as Calvin sometimes does, conceive the body as an obstacle between creature and Creator. Calvin helps us see death as the enemy of our bodies. Read together, the treatments of bodily resurrection in Augustine and Calvin shed light on one another. In counterpoint, they unfold particular strengths and weaknesses for a theology of the body based in the resurrection. These readings of Augustine and Calvin create a narrative about the doctrine of bodily resurrection, and they also serve to provide a flavor of what has been historically affirmed in the creedal confession of the resurrection of the flesh.

Drawing from the interpretations of Augustine and Calvin in the preceding chapters, I explicate in chapter 4 a way of understanding human creatures as fundamental psychosomatic unities. Such an understanding