Youth Ministry, Obesity,
And The Rhetorics of Faith

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Abstract: This preliminary study of obesity, youth, and the church should be read as a collection of notes—a resource that sets an agenda for further research and reflection. In the final analysis, this study merely considers a short list of ideas, 1) that obesity is a multivalent cultural problem, resisting easy categorization or prescription, 2) that the church’s rhetorics of the body are complex and often contradictory, and 3) that congregations and youth ministries must consider ways to mobilize its resources in order to construct a faithful and practical theology of the body.

Obesity as a Cultural Problem

Obesity is a growing concern in the United States and globally. In a USA Today article on global obesity (February 3, 2011), the Associated Press reports that rates have doubled since 1980.\footnote{Associated Press, “Study: Global obesity rates double since 1980,” \textit{USA Today}, February 3, 2011. Retrieved from \url{http://www.usatoday.com/yourlife/health/2011-02-03-obesity_N.htm}} Currently, the Center for Disease Control reports that about a third of people in the U.S. are obese—a body mass index (BMI) greater than or equal to 30 (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal 2012). According to a recent report from the Trust for America’s Health (2011), the highest rates of obesity are found among Southerners, racial and ethnic minority adults, those with less education, and those who make less money.

Researchers hypothesize and theorize a wide range of factors that may contribute to obesity. A recent USA Today article reported that researchers are considering portion size, frequency of snacking, marketing strategies, lack of physical activity, lack of sleep, genetic disposition, mental stress, and technology use as potential factors (Jayson 2012). Researchers in neuroscience are also beginning to explore “the buffet effect”—the idea that variety (not quantity) contributes to overeating. These researchers argue that one’s pleasure from eating a single food declines while eating, while a variety of tastes, aromas, shapes, and textures continue
to deliver high bursts of neurological pleasure. Researchers contend that these food cues activate the same brain areas as those cued by drug and alcohol addiction (Gearhardt, Yokum, Orr, Stice, Corbin, & Brownell 2011). Their research appears to confirm the conventional wisdom that food is useful for self-soothing, even to a degree that feelings compulsive or irresistible. Investigation into food addiction is currently generating significant academic interest (see for example, Brownell & Gold 2012).

Even the stigma associated with obesity seems to function as a contributing factor rather than a motivator to lose weight. Rebecca Puhl and Chelsea Heuer (2010) of Yale University’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity note that stigmatization interferes with effective obesity intervention efforts. According to Puhl and Heuer, those stigmatized are more likely—not less likely—to engage in harmful behaviors: binging, unhealthy weight control, increased food consumption, and lower motivation for physical activity. In addition, those stigmatized face an increased risk for psychological consequences including depression, anxiety, poor body image, low self-esteem, and suicide.

A variety of cultural observers express grave concern about the growing problem of obesity—particularly among youth. In his book Fast Food Nation, Eric Schlosser (2002) argues that increased childhood and youth obesity is a result of global food marketing trends that target the young, coupled with increased ease of access to fast food. The documentary Food, Inc. builds a case that the industrialization of food has made fast food and junk food cheaper and more prevalent than whole foods. The recent HBO documentary The Weight of the Nation identifies overeating, inactivity, and technology use (including television watching) as significant factors. Activist chef Jamie Oliver winsomely—and melodramatically—claims that youth often lack access to healthy cooking strategies, tools, and cultures in his television program Jamie
Oliver’s Food Revolution. Most recently, First Lady Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move! campaign urges intervention through healthy eating and increased physical activity.

Obesity among Youth and within the Church

Obesity is indeed a growing concern among U.S. children and youth. The CDC reports that from 1980 to 2008, the percentage of obese children aged 6-11 years in the United States increased from 7% to nearly 20%, while the percentage of obese adolescents aged 12-19 increased from 5% to 18% over the same period (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2012b). For children and youth (aged 2-19 years), overweight is defined as a BMI at or above the 85th percentile and lower than the 95th percentile. Obesity is defined as a BMI at or above the 95th percentile (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2012a). Obese children are more likely to have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, breathing problems, joint problems, fatty liver, and other physical problems. In addition, obese children and youth run a greater risk of encountering social and psychological problems such as suffering from discrimination and poor self-esteem.

For youth, the social dimension of embodiment subtly impinges upon the developmental task of identity construction. Erik Erikson observes that “An increasing sense of identity... is experienced preconsciously as a sense of psychosocial well-being. Its most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of ‘knowing where one is going,’ and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count (1959) [1980, 127-128). In short, Erikson suggests that the adolescent self is an embodied and relational self. It stands to reason, conversely, that youth who feel displeasure with their bodies and dissatisfaction with their relationships are likely candidates for identity confusion and a lack of
psychosocial well-being. For evidence of this, we need look no further than to current reality television programming. The persistence of MTV’s decade-long youth makeover series *Made* seems to support the notion that embodiment, intimacy, self-acceptance, and identity are bound together. Numerous adult-oriented makeover shows communicate this same message, such as *Extreme Makeover, What Not to Wear, and The Biggest Loser.*

Research also suggests that the church’s experience of obesity is neither understood clearly or described easily. For example, sociologists Krista Cline and Ken Ferraro (2006) find that high levels of religious media practice are associated with higher BMI in women—particularly Baptist women. At the same time, the risk of obesity is lowered in men who seek religious consolation and women who attend religious services. Apparently, “couch potato Christianity” doesn’t burn many calories, even though it (debatably) may build virtue. A study published in the Journal of Health and Religion found no significant association between religiosity, spirituality, and weight among African-Americans (Addams, Reeves, Dubbert, Hickson, & Wyatt 2011). On the other hand, a Northwestern University 18-year longitudinal study finds that young adults who attend church or Bible study once a week are 50% more likely to be obese by middle age (Paul 2011). A recent survey of 5000 United Methodist clergy finds that 41% are obese and another 37% are overweight, despite a majority of clergy reporting that they feel a sense of spiritual vitality, spiritual well-being, and the presence of God in daily life (General Board of Pension and Health Benefits of the United Methodist Church 2012). This echoes an earlier study of clergy which finds that 75% of clergy are overweight or obese (Association of Religion Data Archives 2001). Although this data is complex and conflicted, one thing is clear: Christian faith does not appear to make a consistent difference in physical health. In the best light, some research suggests that incidence of obesity in the church doesn’t
differ from that found in the general population. At worst, however, much research suggests that the church may be a contributing factor in the greater incidence of obesity among its leadership and youth.

Biblical Rhetoric and the Body

In addition to the cultural factors that contribute to obesity in the church, the church’s conflicting theological rhetorics of the body also seem partly to blame. Some biblical voices clearly emphasize the importance of the physical body. Other biblical voices seem to lower the body’s standing before the spirit. For the casual reader, a univocal perspective on the body is difficult to ascertain between the First and Second Testaments. Scripture is highly contextual, speaking to cultural concerns of its day and age. Some cultural concerns of ancient Israel greatly differ from those of the early church. Thus, a rhetorical tension exists when attempting to outline a theology of the body from both Testaments.

First Testament language tends to affirm the value of the physical body. Two Hebrew words are often used to describe the person: nephesh (“soul”) and basar (“flesh, body”). Throughout the First Testament, nephesh often describes the whole person, singularly and completely. Basar is sometimes used in a parallel sense with nephesh, but not typically as a diametrically opposed term. Nephesh and basar refer to different—but not discrete—aspects of the human person (Green 2009). To the Hebrew, body and soul are not juxtaposed as to the Greek.

Furthermore, First Testament writers praise physical health as a mark of faith. Proverbs 23:19-21 recommends moderation in food and drink, not abstinence. Proverbs 25:28 praises the virtues of self-control, not self-punishment. Proverbs 30:7-9 asks for daily bread, not starvation
and not gluttony. The writer of Ecclesiastes famously recommends moderation in physical existence, arguing that to eat and drink with satisfaction is a divine gift (3:1-13). Furthermore, the Hebrew prophets express a profound hope for the body and for the physical Creation. The words of Isaiah stand as an epitome of this embodied hope:

“See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth…

“Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years…

They will build houses and dwell in them;
They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit…

They will not labor in vain,
nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune…

The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will the serpent’s food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,”
says the Lord (65:17-25).

Without a doubt, a Hebrew faith is an embodied faith, seeking knowledge of God through Creation—neither bypassing nor surpassing the physical world.

Within the Second Testament, Jesus presents theologians of the body with a bit more challenge than the First Testament rabbis and prophets. On one hand, Jesus seems to recommend a severe path of self-denial (see for example Mark 8:34-38; Mark 10:17-31; John 12:23-26). Indeed, Jesus’ fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) seems to imply a strict call to asceticism. However, the work of Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel argues that the earthly appetites and physical embodiment of Jesus were essential to his ministry. As a case in point, Mark’s gospel presents a Jesus who is emotional, passionate, compassionate, relational, and
appreciative of physical comfort, also noting that it is from Jesus’ body that “the energies which heal the woman with the issue of blood emanate” (Denton 2005, 11). In addition, Moltmann-Wendel observes that:

It is also striking what value the story of Jesus attaches to eating. The New Testament meals are too often immediately associated with Jesus’ last meal, the Last Supper. But all the meals in his life must have been eaten with enjoyment: fish, lamb, bread, wine, herbs do not indicate asceticism. And the fact that his opponents spoke of him as a “glutton and winebibber” only confirms that he did not live his life grimly, but in a relaxed way, as a celebration (Denton 2005, 12).

Interestingly, John’s Gospel presents a complex vision of Jesus who reflects both the mystical and the embodied. John goes to great rhetorical lengths in making this point. On one hand, John presents Jesus as the mystical Logos (1:1-5): who commands new birth by the Spirit (3:1-8), who is the spiritual Living Water (3:13-14) and Bread of Life (6:35), who warns against spiritual blindness (9:35-41), who is one with the Father (10:30), who is the true spiritual Vine (15:1-8), and who leaves the physical world in order to return to the Father (16:27-28). On the other hand, John’s Jesus is also essentially embodied: incarnate divinity (1:14), promising to raise his physical body—a sacred temple (2:19-21), requiring water on a hot day (4:7), multiplying fish and loaves (6:1-15), healing others with mud and his own saliva (9:1-12), who weeps at Lazarus’ death and raises him from the dead as the Resurrection and the Life (11:17-44), who thirsts on the Cross (19:28-30), who blesses his disciples by breathing upon them (20:22), whose resurrection body literally bears the physical marks of the crucifixion (20:24-29), and who feeds his disciples a post-resurrection meal (21:1-14). Even though John’s presentation of Jesus is both mystical and embodied, the crucial point is this: that the Logos became flesh (1:14).
When compared to John’s presentation of Jesus, Pauline rhetoric reflects a similar complexity. On one hand, Paul famously contrasts the flesh and the spirit (Romans 5-7). He enthusiastically declares that he has been crucified with Christ so that he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him (Galatians 2:20). Paul’s argument about the old self and the new self seems to recommend the exclusive pursuit of spiritual virtues at the expense of physical desires (Ephesians 4:20-24). On the other hand, this same Paul preaches a bodily resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). He argues that our struggle is not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). He condemns the ascetic abuses of the body (Colossians 2:21-23).

Some of the confusion surrounding Paul’s rhetoric may lie at the feet of two Greek words: *sarx* (“flesh”) and *soma* (“body”). Today, body and flesh are often understood as synonymous terms. In contrast body and soul are often placed in opposition to each other. This dualistic framework fails to capture the proper nuance of a Pauline theological anthropology. When Paul speaks of the body, he does not speak of it in the same way that he speaks of the flesh. To Paul, flesh often refers to one’s propensity to sin while body normally refers to one’s physical being. Today’s rhetorically careless church, misunderstands this distinction, often implicating the body in the guilt of flesh (see for example Denton 2005, xi). Making things worse, today’s church also tends to implicate the idea of self in the guilt of flesh. This theological turn leads to a deeply conflicted theology that rhetorically pursues self-elimination as an eschatological end. Liturgical examples abound—too numerous to catalog—ranging across historic hymns and contemporary praise choruses.² Paul’s reference to flesh in Ephesians 5 may

² These muddled lyrics from “So Long Self” by the Christian group Mercy Me (2006) well-illustrate the point:

Well if I come across a little bit distant
It’s just because I am
Things just seem to feel a little bit different
You understand
complicate the issue most of all. There, Paul refers to flesh as an appropriate euphemism to describe Christ’s intimate relationship with the church (Ephesians 5:25-33). In this text, Paul actually uses both body and flesh to describe the nature of holiness—a strange choice indeed if body and flesh are nothing more than corruptible, carnal distractions.

Perhaps Paul’s clearest rhetorical statement on a theology of the body is found in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Here, Paul argues against sensuality without resorting to asceticism. He critiques the antinomians who argue that the body is worthless, meaningless, and thus “fair game” for unchecked sensuality. To the antinomians, Paul makes it clear that the body is meant for the Lord. Conversely, Paul could have argued that the body should be punished and harshly disciplined as an obstacle to holiness. Instead, He argues that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit because it was bought at a divine price. At his most succinct, Paul declares that the body is meant for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. This is why misuse of the body is a sin. In Colossians 2, Paul again argues against asceticism and sensuality. Elsewhere, he reminds us that proper stewardship of the body is an act of worship (Romans 12:1).

Believe it or not but life is not apparently
About me anyways
But I have met the One who really is worthy
So let me say

So long, self
Well, it's been fun, but I have found somebody else
So long, self
There's just no room for two
So you are gonna have to move
So long, self
Don't take this wrong but you are wrong for me, farewell
Oh well, goodbye, don't cry
So long, self
Patristic Theological Rhetoric, Medieval

Theological Rhetoric, and the Body

The leaders of the early church hotly debate the theology of the body, particularly in the Greek light of Hellenism and Gnosticism. Platonic dualism sets the stage for both, arguing that physical matter is corruptible while the mind is sublime. To many Greek thinkers, the material corruption of the body invites either punishment or indulgence, depending upon one’s leanings (Perrin 2005). The heresy of Docetism arises from Gnosticism, alleging that Christ cannot possess a corruptible (and thus, evil) physical body. Within this landscape, Marcion and his kin practice a strict asceticism, proscribing marriage and sexual intimacy by baptizing only the unmarried (Arendzen 1910). In response to Marcion, Tertullian contends that neither the body nor sexual intimacy were evil (2.2.2.24). Nevertheless, even Tertullian maintains that sexual intimacy was best set aside in favor of spiritual intimacy with God. His theology of the body is more optimistic than Marcion’s, though not without a lingering hint of pessimism.

In Against Heresies, Irenaeus affirms a greater optimism about the body than Tertullian. Irenaeus contends that the Eucharist nourished one’s physical body (5.2.3), affirming the notion that “flesh shall also be found fit for and capable of receiving the power of God” (5.3.2). Fortifying his position, Irenaeus seeks to persuade others that flesh could participate in the “constructive wisdom and power of God” (5.3.3), not “by a casting away of the flesh, but by the impartation of the Spirit” (5.8.1). Distinguishing between the physical body and the propensity to sin, Irenaeus concludes that the so-called “spiritual man” was in actuality “the union of flesh and spirit. . . For if the flesh were not in a position to be saved, the Word of God would in no wise have become flesh” (5.8.2; 5.14.1, italics mine). In summary, Irenaeus maintains that the incarnate Christ sanctifies the physical body.
Later, desert fathers and medieval ascetics famously preach that severe physical discipline—perhaps bordering upon self-abuse—can contribute to spiritual righteousness. The work of Thomas à Kempis typifies this argument, relying upon a theological framework that elevates the state of grace (understood as spirit) above the state of nature (understood as body and flesh):

Nature is inclined toward creatures, toward its own flesh, toward vanities, and toward running about. But grace draws near to God and to virtue, renounces creatures, hates the desires of the flesh, restrains her wanderings…

Nature likes to have some external comfort in which it can take sensual delight, but grace seeks consolation only in God, to find her delight in the highest Good, above all visible things (3:54).

Here, à Kempis vigorously argues that Christians must embrace the arms of the Creator by fleeing the Creation. Later, à Kempis also calls for a flight from one’s very self into the arms of Christ: “The Voice of Christ: My child, the more you depart from yourself, the more you will be able to enter into me” (3:56). In this way, à Kempis’ rhetoric so severely blurs the lines of distinction between sin, self, body, and flesh that it seems an impossibility to please God in one’s body.

In contrast to à Kempis, Symeon the New Theologian argues in favor of bodily redemption through its sanctified relationship to Christ’s own body. To Symeon, mysticism and embodiment blend as one. In his poem, “We Awaken in Christ’s Body,” he writes:

We awaken in Christ’s body  
as Christ awakens our bodies,  
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters  
my foot, and is infinitely me.

…and everything that is hurt, everything  
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,  
maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged,  
is in Him transformed
and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light
we awaken as the Beloved
in every last part of our body (Denton 2005, 1).

Symeon’s theology of the body is ordered by the Orthodox teaching called \textit{theosis}—the notion that spiritual union with God involves bodily redemption, not bodily rejection. Put another way, Orthodoxy teaches that the human body is “the vehicle through which spiritual transformation of the soul becomes apparent” (Kharlamov & Finlan 2006, 60). Thus, Symeon can imagine the holy intermingling of human flesh with the divine flesh of Christ. Although Orthodox convictions about Creation and the body reflect a measure of variety, they nevertheless share this in common: human destiny is bound up in the total reunion of Creation with Creation, body with spirit, the human with the divine (Lossky 1997, 91-113). Literally, sin and evil are neither a “matter” of the body nor of the physical world. Instead, sin and evil arise through “an attraction of the will towards nothing, a negation of being, of creation, and above all of God” (p. 129). Put in simpler terms, sin and evil arise when human beings seek the emptiness of death rather than the fullness of life. To the Orthodox, ascetic practices do not express contempt for the body. To the contrary, they sanctify the body for \textit{theosis} (p. 224).

\textbf{Modern Theological Rhetoric and the Body}

In my own theological tradition—the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition—historic attitudes toward the body swing between the extremes of contempt and celebration. John Wesley, in his seventh sermon \textit{Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount} cautions against “fulness of bread,” lest it increase “not only carelessness and levity of spirit, but also foolish and unholy desires, yea, unclean and vile affections.” Although Wesley grants that food is a “lawful thing,” he casts suspicion upon the enjoyment of food, describing it as an “inferior appetite” on the level of
bestial sensuality. Thus, Wesley commends fasting as a means to “heavenly-mindedness” and “the weaning of your affections from things below. . .” even as he grants that Christ’s call to fasting rests on a greater vision than ascetic virtue. Wesley concludes that even fasting should be practiced in moderation: “Therefore care is to be taken, whenever we fast, to proportion the fast to our strength. For we may not offer God murder for sacrifice, or destroy our bodies to help our souls.” In summary, Wesley casts suspicion about bodily desires, even though he does not condemn them outright.

Later holiness writers fail to agree upon a consistent theology of the body. For example, Charles Finney ([1837] 1928) returns to a mystical, dualistic rhetoric of the body. He writes

Some minds become so spiritual that they hardly seem to reside in the body, and appear continually to perceive the presence of God in every event, almost as if they were disembodied, and beheld God, face to face. They seem to dwell, live, move, and have their being, rather in the spiritual, than in the natural world. . .The springs of their activity are so divine. . . they act under influences so far above the world. . . Carnal minds cannot understand them.

Clearly, Finney deprecates the body as an obstacle to spirituality. He implicitly pines for a disembodied faith, freed from the nagging distraction of physical concerns. In contrast, the evangelist Beverly Carradine draws a thoughtful distinction between the biblical concepts of flesh and body, affirming the latter’s worth:

. . . God has no quarrel with the body; the Spirit does not lust against the body. Sin is not in the body, as it does not, and cannot, exist in any form of matter. The soma, or body, is the work of God; while the srx, flesh or carnality, is the work of the devil. If we get the srx out, the soma will be all right. If the “flesh” be burned out of us by the baptism of fire, we will find the body all right ([1896] 1965, 74).

Carradine and Finney each possess a theology of the body that stand in opposition to one another, both differing from Wesley’s own theology of the body.
In the nineteenth-century movement known as “Muscular Christianity,” advocates find support for their optimistic theology of the body within Pauline athletic rhetoric. The success of Muscular Christianity owes a debt to both liberal and conservative Christian leaders. Its liberal proponents associate physical training with spiritual vitality. Their advocacy and enthusiasm eventually lead to the development of collegiate sports, the YMCA, the Olympic Games. In contrast, the conservative proponents of Muscular Christianity simply recognize that athletic testimonies of faith can increase evangelistic yields. Even the historic psychologist G. Stanley Hall recognizes the significance of this movement at the time, writing that “among all the marvelous advances of Christianity either within this organization [the YMCA] or without it . . . the future historian of the church will place this movement of carrying the gospel to the body as one of the most epoch making.” Scholars today argue today that a contemporary “revitalization of the Muscular Christian ethic” could effectively aid in “combating the obesity pandemic that has engulfed the Western world” (Watson, Weir, & Friend 2005).

Theological optimism also informs the rhetoric of evangelical diet reformers in the nineteenth century (Sack 2000, 185-197). Famous figures such as Sylvester Graham (of Graham cracker fame), Ellen White (Seventh-Day Adventism), Mary Mann (wife of education reformer Horace), and Mrs. John Harvey Kellogg (of cereal fame) consistently advocate for faithful eating. These diet reformers associate the appetite for spices and condiments with the “animal” appetites. Some diet reformers sing the praises of vegetarianism. Others compare indigestion to drunkenness. Daniel Sack describes these reforms as a kind of “practical asceticism”—pursued more for health benefits than mystical union with God. Sack also argues that the zeal of these diet reformers is fed by their middle-class disdain for “lower-class natives” and their immigrant cooking (p. 197).
Contemporary Theological Rhetoric and the Body


Following Shedd’s success, other books and programs proliferate by the late-twentieth century, including:

- Charlie Shedd’s best-selling sequel: *The Fat Is In Your Head* (1972)
- Joan Cavanaugh’s *More of Jesus, Less of Me* (1976)
- C. S. Lovett’s *Help Lord—The Devil Wants Me Fat!* (1977)
- Tim Tear and Jan Houghton Lindsey’s *Fed Up with Fat* (1978)

Griffith notes that some Christian critics such as Os Guinness (1994) tend to look down on Christian dieting as an anti-intellectual fad—vain, and hopelessly accommodated to a superficial culture. In her conclusion, Griffith sides with the critics:

> This heady mix of theology, pseudo-science and therapy remains profoundly disturbing in its implications for "overweight" Christians, many of whom incur no health risks from their weight and are merely a few pounds over some impossible cultural ideal. Others, the clinically obese in particular, may suffer from glandular or other physiological causes unrelated to issues of overeating or spiritual discipline—an issue not commonly treated in this literature. There is no doubt that the message of the Christian diet and fitness industry may still work to perpetuate the most harmful stereotypes of those in our society who are heavier than the latest faddish norm, reinforcing the double jeopardy of being a "fat" Christian in America. Often enough it slides alarmingly close to depicting a God who loves a size six woman more than a size 16.

Although Griffith’s critique is sharp, it rightly denounces pop culture faddishness. Sometimes obesity is a clinical malady in which no shame should exist. Sometimes diet and exercise have more to do with cultural vanity than Christian virtue. Nevertheless, Griffith’s critique falls short.
It fails to offer a robust theology of the body. Her argument points out a problem, but does not cast a compelling alternative vision other than “get over it.” To her credit, she points out that many so-called “Christian dieting” programs are established upon trite and superficial rhetoric. Nevertheless, these programs can still call Christians to abandon unhealthy self-medication in favor of a more hopeful orientation toward sustainable, physical health.

Recent writers seek to recapture a robust theology of the body, although their work tends to focus on human sexuality rather than obesity and health. In Rob Bell’s book Sex God, for example, he amplifies Paul’s argument that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit—an echo of the Pauline and Orthodox convictions that the body is “a place where heaven and earth [meet]” (2007, 53). In John Paul II’s homiletical collection Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body (2006), he denounces Cartesian dualism while celebrating human sexuality as a mirror of Triune love. Christopher West—an interpreter of John Paul—notes that contemporary culture tends to turn sexuality (and the body) into a false idol rather than an icon—a window into divine being (2003, 265). In N. T. Wright’s Surprised by Hope, he denounces both Platonic dualism and ancient Gnosticism, arguing that a compartmentalized cosmology lead to compartmentalized living. In other words, those who live in divided worlds tend to live divided lives. Wright’s solution overcomes this division by places Christ’s body—and our own human bodies—at the center of God’s grace:

Part of getting used to living in the post-Easter world—part of getting used to letting Easter change your life, your attitudes, your thinking, your behavior—is getting used to the cosmology that is now unveiled. Heaven and earth, I repeat, are made for each other, and at certain points they intersect and interlock. Jesus is the ultimate such point. We as Christians are meant to be such points, derived from him. The Spirit, the sacraments, and the scriptures are given so that the double life of Jesus, both heavenly and earthly, can become ours as well, already in the present” (2008, 251-252).
Most recently, Jurgen Moltmann’s (2012) theology of the body insists that its value transcends all performance (athletic), appearance (sexual), and extension (technology). He writes:

God became human so that we might turn . . . into true human beings, human beings who can accept their youth and age, and assent to the transitoriness of their bodies; human beings who know that life is more than performance, and that it is love which makes human beings beautiful (p. 106).

The subjectification of the mind and spirit and the objectification of the body are cleaving ever more widely apart . . . Today the mind is detached from the limitations of its own body through the internet and is brought to an almost planetary omnipresence. In cyber space every one can be in several places at the same time, but in a bodiless and ‘desensorized’ form (p. 154).

Moltmann’s argument adds a helpful dimension to this discussion. When we overuse technology, we run the risk of devaluing our own bodies as we escape into cyberspace.

In the days ahead, it seems likely that this problem will increase rather than decrease.

The theology of the body proposed by Bell, John Paul, West, Wright, and Moltmann reaffirms a properly constructed Pauline anthropology. To these writers, our bodies stand as a direct reflection of Christian worship, witness, and hope. The body is where Creator and Creation meet—the temple of the Holy Spirit. Despite those who claim that the body “doesn’t matter,” these contemporary writers affirm the Pauline centrality of the body for faith and life.

This is precisely what Paul meant when he wrote:

“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything. You say, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.” The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself . . . ?

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies (1 Corinthians 6:12-20).
Toward a Practical Theology of the Body

for Youth Ministry

Throughout the history of the church, its rhetorics of faith have neither uniformly nor consistently recommended that the nurture of one’s physical body is of critical importance to Christian life. Although the First Testament readily affirms the body’s worth, the Second Testament presents an interpretative challenge. On one hand, the cultural encroachment of dualism in the early church necessitates a strong argument against both self-abuse and sensuality. On the other hand, the scriptural rhetorics of body, flesh, soul, spirit, and self can be hard to unravel. This challenge presents itself in the early and medieval church. Ecclesial leaders preach the virtues of spiritual holiness, even as many of them lay sin’s guilt at their physical feet in a literal sense. Similarly, some in the modern church continue to divide body and soul, arguing that physical desires tend to distract or corrupt spiritual aspirations. However, not all modern and contemporary church leaders subscribe to this rhetoric. Instead, many today seek to recover the body’s relevance to the life of faith, although the degree and kind of relevance is in dispute.

Youth ministry practitioners and academics recognize the importance of body image within adolescent development. The media culture of youth—much of it driven by business interests—thrusts physical appearance upon youth as a marker of self-worth, even though this merely amplifies the internal conversations already underway within young hearts and minds. On a daily basis, youth face an imaginary audience (Elkind 1998, 42-43) upon which youth project their own self-interest and self-concern. This predicament makes it easier to understand the proliferation of bulimic, anorexic, and other self-soothing behaviors. Ironically, youth ministers regularly prepare bountiful tables of pizza, chips, cookies, and high calorie soft drinks.
for group events, apparently heedless of the complex, implicit forces at play around the body, within church and culture.

This study recommends that congregations, Christian families, youth groups, and youth ministers purposefully seek to recover a theological rhetoric of the body in practice, whether in congregational ministry, the life of the domestic household, or within the narrower and more particular context of youth ministry. This study concludes with a modest proposal for church reform and renewal:

- **As a worshipping institution:** Liturgical words need to be rewritten in order to more consistently honor a faith that is incarnate. Rhetorics that carelessly and uncritically place body, flesh, spirit, soul, and self in opposition to each other need to be reformulated. The passing of the peace, the invitation to Eucharist, the sprinkling with water, the use of aesthetic imagery—all of these imply an embodied faith. In particular, the Eucharist calls us to re-member that God’s glory is revealed within the ordinary beauty and goodness of Creation. God intends that lived experience should function as a means of grace, despite the fallenness and brokenness of our human nature. In our bodies, we groan—not only with the curse of death but also with the pains of childbirth (Romans 8). In our bodies, we are being transformed from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3), even though we bear the treasure of life within jars of clay (2 Corinthians 4). This is where an embodied faith is rightly named: worship.

- **As an enculturating institution:** Congregations need to be called to account for their stewardship of the body. At times, congregations divide body and spirit explicitly and verbally. At other times, congregations divide body and spirit implicitly and practically. For example, Sunday morning donuts can be replaced with healthier food. Cooking
classes and exercise classes can provide encouragement for healthier living. Curricula such as these can surpass mere cultural vanity when done as to the Lord (Colossians 3:23). The church can sponsor more activities that center upon physical activity rather than passive mental and emotional experience. The discipline of fasting can be recast as the submission of one’s appetites to the Lordship of Christ so that all things may be enjoyed as clean rather than unclean (Acts 10). Even more specifically, fasting can foster a sustainable sense of well-being that gradually replaces the need for self-soothing through unhealthy eating habits. Youth ministry should celebrate a robust theology of the body, because youth are made for energetic activity. Youth events naturally engage the body. Bike rides, flag football games, camping trips, wooded hikes, and goofy games can serve youth as more than occasions for entertainment. They can become means of grace toward the recovery of a healthy body—a renovated temple of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps most significantly, the adult members of a congregation need to align themselves with the adult leaders of a youth group in order to set a consistent example for the young. This is where an embodied faith rightly begins: enculturation (Nelson 1971; Westerhoff 2000).

- **As a prophetic institution:** Across the First and Second Testaments, cultural encroachment and accommodation always threatens the people of God. This is why the church must resist the powers and principalities of culture. Otherwise, the church loses its ability to bear an incarnate witness within culture. Walter Brueggemann (2001) argues that the church must nurture a “prophetic imagination” in order to resist the world. In part, this means that God’s people must resist the king’s food (Daniel 1)! In practice, this points to simplicity (Foster 1981). Through simplicity, we resist a socially-
disengaged, relationally-divided, overworked and overstressed life that soothes itself through frequent trips to fast-food troughs of mass-produced, stimulant-laden, calorie-dense, un-nutritious junk. This is not faddishness or vanity. To the contrary, it is a return to shalom—lives lived in gratitude, balance, and peace. Our bodies tend to tell us what we need: rest, nourishment, intimacy, recreation, exercise. When we live lives out of balance, our bodies let us know. How often do we turn to food as our “go-to stimulant” in order to drown out the health-signals of our bodies? Recent developments in Christian practice across traditions and ages are seeking to recover a proper theology of the body. They call for a denunciation of cultural accommodation in order to embrace the countercultural reign of God (see for example http://www.practicingourfaith.org/, http://waytolive.org/, and http://www.danielplan.com/). This is how an embodied faith is rightly practiced: prophetic resistance.
References


