

Embodiment in Paul

Making Christ visible

Laura L. Brenneman

In my grandmother's Bible I recently found a picture that I drew when I was seven. It was tucked in at 1 Thessalonians 4, the passage that was my inspiration: "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thess. 4:16–17).¹ In the drawing, Jesus at the front was guiding my family and the whole church through the solar system toward heaven, which was

positioned above the sun and the planets (nine, as I had learned in school).

Paul has quite a bit to say about bodies: Christ's body, the believers' bodies, and his own body. The body, the primary site of God's saving action in Jesus Christ, is also the primary site of Christian response and subsequent demonstration of belief.

My fascination with the bodily resurrection is one of the reasons why I connected with this scene. Resurrection in the body still intrigues me. It—the believers' as well as Jesus's bodily resurrection—is integral to Paul's gospel. Bodies, for Paul, are key to how believers are believers, especially because our bodies show how belief and action are connected.

Paul has quite a bit to say about bodies: Christ's ² body, the believers' bodies, and his own body. The body, the primary site of God's saving action in Jesus Christ, is also the

primary site of Christian response and subsequent demonstration of belief. Paul refers to the body in both metaphorical and non-metaphorical ways—as actual, tangible bodies and as analogies to other concepts. In this essay, I will examine nonmetaphorical occurrences of "body" in Paul to consider what they offer for our questions about embodied life. We find that redeemed bodies are

good in their potential to show glory to God and participate in Jesus's death and resurrection.

Paul's body

The word "body" (*sōma*) appears in the Pauline corpus ninety-two times. Of these, forty-three references (47 percent of the total) are nonmetaphorical.³ Many are found in 1 Corinthians and Romans (sixteen and nine, respectively), with most of the focus being on the believers' bodies—namely, on how believers do or will act in body. Second Corinthians ranks just higher than Romans, with ten occurrences, most of which (nine) refer to Paul's own body.

The other forty-nine occurrences (53 percent) of the word *sōma* in letters attributed to Paul are metaphorical. Again, 1 and 2 Corin-

Believers' physical bodies have been redeemed for glory—a positive purpose—but with this conviction comes a strong warning: how the body is used can also sever relationship with God.

thians are responsible for many, with thirteen and eight respectively; Romans drops to four, and Ephesians and Colossians surge with eight and six.⁴ The majority of these metaphorical uses are about the body of Christ, with emphasis either on Christ's body as made up of the church, or on individual believers as members of Christ's body. For our purposes, I will focus on the nonmetaphorical occurrences, because they are most useful for understanding how Paul thought about *bodies*—the physical aspect of our lives. The

metaphorical uses give more insight into how he thought about the church and about Christ.

An examination of Paul's nonmetaphorical references to body reveals that his use of the term *sōma* ranges from neutral to positive. For example, Paul makes several references to being absent in body or to not knowing whether he was absent in body (see 1 Cor. 5:3; 2 Cor. 12:2–3). Paul is referring to his body with neither positive nor negative attributes; it simply exists, whether he is "in" it or "in spirit." Although in 2 Corinthians 12:7 Paul talks about a thorn in the flesh that he petitioned the Lord to take away, he turns this weakness into a positive—that is, a way for God's power to be made perfect (12:9). Paul uses "flesh," not "body," in verse 7 (we will return to this below), and the nature of his affliction is unknown. Even if he is referring to a physical

ailment, he does not blame the body; it is what mediates Paul's experience and display of God's power.

A positive example of Paul's nonmetaphorical use of "body" is set in a negative context: Paul's strong reprimand to the Corinthians for inappropriate uses of their bodies. In 1 Corinthians 6:13–20, "body" is used eight times. It is because Paul considers believers' bodies to be united with the Lord, holy, and existing for the purpose of glorifying God, that he is so angry that some are using their bodies to have sex with prostitutes, a type of sex he calls immoral (*porneia*). Believers' physical bodies have been redeemed (literally, "bought with a price," 6:20) for glory⁵—a positive purpose—but with this conviction comes a strong warning: how the body is used can also sever relationship with God.

New Testament scholars Rudolph Bultmann and James Dunn conclude that *sōma* has a mostly neutral connotation in the Pauline corpus. Dunn's analysis is that *sōma* designates the "embodiment" of a person and "in this sense *sōma* is a relational concept. It denotes the person embodied in a particular environment. It is the means by which the person relates to that environment, and vice versa. It is the means of living in, of experiencing the environment."⁶ Bultmann similarly observes that "the fact that [a person] is *sōma* is itself neither good nor bad. But only because [one] is *sōma* does the possibility exist . . . to be good or evil—to have a relationship for or against God."⁷ The substance itself is neutral. It is use that determines a body's orientation to God and thus also defines its goodness or badness.

The next step is to focus on how Paul talks about his own body, since he views himself as a model disciple. His body is where he sees the evidence of Christ's power. He declares in Philippians (written while he was a prisoner, probably near the end of his life) that "Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death" (1:20). In a letter written earlier, Paul closely identifies with the bodily experience of Jesus: "I carry the marks [*stigmata*] of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal. 6:17). *Stigma* can mean "mark" or "scar" or even a brand that an owner puts on a slave; however, *stigmata* also took on specific overtones in Christian tradition as referring to the wounds on Jesus's crucified body. Paul may not mean to signal this nuance in Galatians, but in other places he connects his own bodily experi-

ences with Jesus's: we are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:10).⁸ In the rest of this passage, Paul incorporates some other language for his body—"outer nature," "earthly tent," clothing—but the thought is the same: Paul's present body bears suffering, and he expects future life in Christ (2 Cor. 4:16–5:10).

In addition, what happens in the body will be judged, and each will "receive recompense" (2 Cor. 5:10; see also 1 Cor. 3:11–15). Again Paul's position is that what believers do in their bodies matters. It matters eschatologically for judgment and it matters because it shows their underlying belief and identity. Here Pauline theology and ethics meet. In many cases, Paul points to himself—how he lives in his own body—as an example for believers to imitate. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul calls on the Corinthian believers to imitate him as he imitates Christ, and in Philippians 3:17, he asks the Philippians to become "co-imitators" of him—this, at a time when he was "in chains for Christ" (1:13). In a real sense, this imitation is a call to put one's body on the line. Although Paul never refers to discipleship as such in his letters, these calls to imitation certainly provide models of radical discipleship.⁹ We see that Paul believes it is possible to use our bodies correctly—as he uses his body correctly—in service to God; thus the body can be good.

So far, I've made the case for taking Paul's references to the body as mostly neutral or positive, especially as it enables believers to embody the way of Jesus Christ. However, the many references to "flesh" in Paul that have a negative tone may make it difficult to see Paul's view of the body as neutral or positive. Additionally, "flesh" (*sarx*) sometimes seems to refer to the physical body (*sōma*), which may lead to seeing *sarx* as nearly synonymous with *sōma* and, further, to casting a negative light on *sōma*. In fact, in my *sōma* search, I found that the NRSV translates *sarx* as "body" in some instances (e.g., 2 Cor 7.1, 5), which obscures the nuance in the way Paul uses these words.

Sarx is used a hundred times in the Pauline corpus, slightly more often than *sōma* (ninety-two).¹⁰ These occurrences range in connotation from neutral to negative. The meaning of *sarx* is neutral when Paul is referring to humanity as a group (for ex-

ample, in Rom. 3:20; 1 Cor. 1:29; Gal. 2:16) and to individual bodies (for example, 2 Cor. 7:5; Gal. 1:16). Other times, the connotation is clearly negative, as in flesh-spirit (*pneuma*) antitheses (for example, Gal. 5:13–24). Dunn characterizes *sarx* as “the continuum of human morality, the person characterized and conditioned by human frailty. . . . The spectrum runs from human

Paul points to himself—how he lives in his own body—as an example for believers to imitate. He believes it is possible to use our bodies correctly—as he uses his body correctly—in service to God; thus the body can be good.

relationships and needs, through human weakness and desires, through human imperfection and corruption, to the fully deprecatory and condemnatory tone of the *sarx-pneuma* antithesis.”¹¹ John Barclay contends that “while the flesh can be manifested as human weakness (Gal. 4:13–14), or self-centered behaviour (5:15), neither of these is itself the heart of Paul’s understanding of the term: the looser definition—‘what is merely human’ (1 Cor 3:4)—fits his various uses more comfortably.”¹²

By examining nonmetaphorical occurrences of *sōma*, we see that for Paul bodies are not negative as such. They are neutral sub-

stances that are meant for positive purposes. Further, Paul uses *sarx* and *sōma* differently. While “flesh” can be neutral when its meaning is akin to “body,” it is often used to show negative aspects of being “merely human,” especially weakness in relation to sin. Translators and interpreters must be careful not to conflate *sarx* and *sōma*, thereby giving the impression that the body in Paul is seen as negative.

Our bodies

How can Paul breathe some fresh air into our conversation about bodies? This is the question Mary Schertz asked when inviting me to write this article. If space allowed, it would be interesting to scroll through the history of the church’s understandings of the body and its use of Pauline writings on the subject. For now, here’s what I take away from the study shown above.

I am a woman who grew up in the Mennonite church. Some of my earliest memories are of my grandmother in a cape dress and bonnet. The cape dress hid her figure, the bonnet hid her hair,

and the plainness of her entire garb kept her from attracting notice—at least in some settings. In my comparatively worldly upbringing, my father did not allow my sister and me to pierce our ears, although he eventually relented in his ban on contact lenses, make-up, jewelry, and (regrettably) perms. When I asked his rationale for these prohibitions, he responded by citing a Pauline passage: “Women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes” (1 Tim. 2:9).¹³ I don’t think my father’s views on appropriate attire and grooming for women were formed just from reading Paul, absent other influences. But I did grow up feeling self-conscious about my body and thinking that the Bible—the apostle Paul himself—had strong opinions about how I looked.

Later on, I encountered other people who talked about their (individual) bodies as being temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Especially for some of the student athletes I taught, this conviction was cited as a reason for eating healthy food, getting physical exercise, not smoking, and (for some) not having sex

Use of 1 Corinthians 6:19 to motivate personal improvement seems a bit too body-attentive and certainly too individualistic, with the potential pitfall that we equate physical with spiritual health.

before marriage. Their motivation for fitness was bolstered by this passage. It was part of their inspiration to maintain physical health and strive for greatness in their sport. They also sometimes saw lesser degrees of fitness as moral blemishes and evidence of poor spiritual health.

These passages can help Christians shape important aspects of our views of the body, but using them without reference to their context is problematic. The passage from 1 Timothy left me with a sense of body

negativity and a feeling that it was my responsibility to manage the ways other people thought of my body. I thought I should not draw attention to myself, think of myself as attractive, or want others to find me attractive. Use of 1 Corinthians 6:19 to motivate personal improvement seems to me to be a bit too body-positive, or at least too body-attentive and certainly too individualistic, with the potential pitfall that we equate physical with spiritual health. It takes part of the verse out of context—

namely, that Paul's point (conveyed in the same verse) is "Do you not know . . . that you are not your own body?" The concepts in these passages are far richer than their use as slogans would indicate.

We can do better when it comes to seeing what Paul may teach us about our bodies today. First, it is important to declare that Paul's take on bodies is not negative. In fact, he tends to write about them neutrally or positively.¹⁴ Although he doesn't appeal to the creation account to say that bodies were created good, he does talk about the redemption of bodies (Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 6:19–20; 7:23). Pointing to this redemption, Paul calls for believers to glorify and worship God in their bodies (1 Cor. 6:20; Rom. 12:1).

Second, Paul describes his body as the site where Jesus's effect on his life is shown. Paul links the hardships he endures in the

Paul can help us have a more robust view of the body. It is not a negative or shameful thing; neither is it fully the believer's own, for use solely for myself or for me to take credit for its strength, its beauty, or its weaknesses.

proclamation of the gospel with making Jesus's death and life visible in his body (2 Cor. 4:10). The hardship lists, which appear often in Paul (Rom. 8:35–39; 1 Cor. 4:9–13; 2 Cor. 4:8–12; 11:23–28; 12:10; Phil. 4:11–12), are a way of establishing his credentials (2 Cor. 6:4; 11:30; 12:5). These passages are not a glorification of suffering, and we should not use them to make the case either that suffering is redemptive in itself or that people should not seek or pray for an end to their suffering. To the first point, Paul is adamant that there is no other basis for

salvation than Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). As to the second, Paul himself appealed to the Lord to have his suffering (the "thorn in the flesh") alleviated (2 Cor. 12:8–9). Although he comes to accept his condition—even to say, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (12:9)—he does not see the suffering as good and he seeks to be free of it.

Finally, in holding himself up as an example to imitate, Paul expects believers to embody the life of Jesus, too. The imitation language that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 11:1 and Philippians 3:17 is his way of talking about discipleship. His life is an example, but ultimately it is Christ who is to be imitated. This makes sense to Paul, because believers "have been buried with him by baptism

into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). The pattern of life is similar to Christ’s, because the believers are to expect a resurrection like his (6:5; see also 1 Cor. 15:53–54).

Paul can help us have a more robust view of the body. It is not a negative or shameful thing; neither is it fully the believer’s own, for use solely for myself or for me to take credit for its strength, its beauty, or its weaknesses. Paul helps us see the body as a neutral substance with potential for good or bad, depending on its use. From Paul’s view, believers’ bodies are redeemed and thus have vast potential for good. They are united with Christ, and their redeemed purpose is to show God’s glory, even in their susceptibility to weakness (or “fleshliness”), and they will be resurrected in a resurrection like Christ’s. The body is our home and through it we show our allegiance, our worship, our identity, and our future.

Notes

¹ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

² In Paul’s writings, the title *Christ* occurs 380 times, 266 of these occurrences in the undisputed Pauline letters (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). *Christ* often appears alone, often along with the name *Jesus*, and sometimes in some configuration of *the Lord Jesus Christ*.

³ Some of the nonmetaphorical references to believers’ bodies seem quite close to metaphorical references about the believers as members of Christ’s body, so I’ve made a few judgment calls. In 1 Corinthians, for example, the believers are all members of one body, as in chapter 12 (where there are eighteen metaphorical occurrences; see Michelle Lee, *Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ*, SNTS Monograph Series [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 1–7). However, chapter 6 portrays their actual bodies as part of Christ; there it seems best to see seven of the eight occurrences as nonmetaphorical.

⁴ Of the forty-three nonmetaphorical occurrences of “body” in Paul, thirty-eight are in the undisputed letters and five in the disputed letters (Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians—although there are no occurrences of “body” in 2 Thessalonians). Of the forty-nine metaphorical occurrences, thirty-five are found in the undisputed and fourteen in the disputed. While the nonmetaphorical and metaphorical uses of “body” are almost even in the seven undisputed letters of Paul, there is a nearly threefold jump in Ephesians and Colossians in the use of metaphorical language vs. nonmetaphorical. The Pastorals (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) do not use *sōma*.

⁵ This is a point also made in 1 Corinthians 15:35–58, although “body” there is largely metaphorical in nature.

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 56.

⁷ Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols., trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 1:198.

⁸ See Romans 6:1–11 for a similar sense of closeness between Jesus’s death and resurrection and the believer’s own (although Paul’s use of “body” is metaphorical in Romans 6:6).

⁹ See my “Imitation as Participation: Discipleship in Paul’s Letters,” in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 106–23, for more on this topic.

¹⁰ *Sarx* occurs eighty-four times in the undisputed Paulines (cf. seventy-three times for *sōma*), eighteen times in the disputed (cf. nineteen times), and one time in the Pastoral Epistles (cf. zero times).

¹¹ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 66.

¹² John M. G. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatians*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 209.

¹³ See the virtually synonymous phrasing in 1 Peter 3:3.

¹⁴ Although not studied here, Paul’s metaphorical uses of body are often positive (e.g., the body of Christ metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12).

About the author

Laura L. Brennehan is a hospital chaplain; visiting religion professor at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and New Testament editor of the Studies in Peace and Scripture series. Her work is at the intersection of biblical studies and peace studies.