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The body problem

Bodies. We all have one but we often have a complex relationship with it. Some people prefer not to think about their body at all, only allowing the body's needs to impinge when absolutely necessary. Others think about them nearly all the time, often with an eye for improvement. Surveys suggest that many people are, at best, ambivalent about their bodies and, at worst, view them with loathing.

If we step for a moment into the world of mass media, then numerous articles suggest that the majority of women (and an increasing number of men) have poor body image. Such poor images can range from slight disappointment with a single part of the body (thinking that your stomach is a bit wobbly; or that you have too much/too little hair etc.) to full-blown disgust at the whole of one's body. Radio phone-ins, agony columns and interviews reveal a depressingly uniform picture. A surprisingly wide range of people – different in gender, age, ethnicity and educational background – feel unhappy, in various different ways, with their body.

One, though very much not the only, reason for this is the presentation of bodies in the media. Open almost any magazine and you are sure to find articles on your body: how to lose weight; how to eat more healthily; what make-up to buy and how to apply it; the latest cosmetic medicine available – whether surgical or through drugs. The list goes on. The assumption of many magazines is that we need to change our bodies to make them more attractive and healthier. Before male readers of this book begin to think that this has nothing to do with them, this trend is increasing in men's magazines too. Young men in particular are facing a growing pressure to conform to a certain body image – not least the search for the perfect 'six pack'.

The cosmetic industry is large and profitable with sales worldwide of over 400 billion dollars a year. What is even more interesting is the

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explosion in the growth of cosmetic procedures. Each year the number of cosmetic procedures, both surgical and non-surgical, increases and those in the public eye often comment on the pressure they feel to alter their bodies. In October 2014 Julia Roberts went on record in an interview with *You Magazine* to talk about the pressure she felt to have a facelift and the risk she took of ruining her career by choosing not to have one. While most of us do not move in circles in which we would feel this kind of pressure to have surgery, there is certainly very strong society-wide stress on the importance of conforming to a particular image, which involves a certain body shape and requires the use of cosmetics.

One image of beauty that has been projected into Western society very successfully for the past 55 years is the Barbie doll. Barbie's popularity among young girls remains high, despite a growing criticism of the image that the doll projects.¹ The problem, as numerous studies have pointed out, is that were Barbie a life-sized woman she would struggle to survive. Her neck would be twice as long and six inches thinner than most women's necks, meaning that she would not be able to raise her head. Her 16-inch waist would leave room for only half a liver and a few inches of intestines. Her wrists would be so thin that she could not lift anything and her feet so small and her body so top-heavy that were she able to move at all she would have to walk on all fours.² This is, of course, a relatively trivial example. Few girls, of any age, aspire to look like Barbie. It reminds us, though, of the dangers of holding up an unattainable body image that requires people to live unhealthily in order to attempt to replicate it (and this is even before we raise questions about skin and hair colour and the negative effects of holding up a single racial grouping as the epitome of beauty).

While no single aspect of the contemporary pursuit of beauty is, in and of itself, the source of all cultural attitudes, the cumulative effect of the beauty industry has been damaging, built as it is on the assumption that we should change what we look like because our bodies are not good enough as they are. It is interesting to muse on the question of what the beauty industry might be like if, instead, it were to be based on encouraging people to feel good about their bodies. How different it would feel if the beauty industry existed in

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order to enable people to make changes to their bodies solely because they felt so positively about themselves that they sought their own maximum well-being and wholeness. Sadly, however, these do not appear to be the principles from which most of the beauty industry draws and the effects of its more negative attitude towards bodies are toxic.

A range of surveys suggests that not only do a large number of people feel dissatisfied with their bodies but that this dissatisfaction with our bodies is growing. For example a survey for *Glamour* magazine in the USA found in 1984 that 41 per cent of the women they surveyed were ‘unhappy’ with their body, by 2014 that number was 54 per cent.³ In that same 2014 survey 80 per cent of respondents said that just looking in the mirror made them feel bad. This attitude is heightened among pre-teen and teenaged girls where a fear of being fat or of being ridiculed for what they look like is worryingly high.

Alongside this gnawing sense that we have to work very, very hard for our bodies to be deemed ‘acceptable’ is what medics are calling an obesity epidemic, in which people are abusing their bodies to the point of malnutrition with food that is unhealthy and lacking in nourishment. Many theories have been proposed that link the quest for the body beautiful with the obesity epidemic, and it is not for a book like this to attempt to add to them. Suffice it to say that as a culture we face a ‘body crisis’.

The question is what a Christian response to this crisis might look like. It sometimes feels as though the Christian response is currently a ringing silence. Indeed conversations I have had with various people suggest that not only do they feel ill-equipped to speak into the prevailing ‘body beautiful’ culture, they have a lurking fear that if they were to articulate a truly Christian view they might find themselves saying the opposite of what they might want to say in this context. In other words people fear that Christianity has so little good to say about the body that the best we *can* do from a Christian perspective is to say nothing at all. The time is ripe for a rich, thoughtful and joyful celebration of the body in the Christian tradition. This book alone cannot begin or even sustain such a conversation, it simply seeks to offer one strand of thought – a strand drawn from the writings of Paul – that I hope some people will find interesting.

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It is important to acknowledge that there are some excellent and very important books written on the body and its significance in theology. There have been some noteworthy discussions about body theology in the context of sex and sexuality, feminism and disability studies, to name a few.⁴ It is interesting, however, that these studies have not, as yet, made great impact on popular thought and the prevailing view of many Christians remains that the Christian tradition is naturally opposed to the physical, in general, and bodies, in particular.

The spirit problem

Among the many reasons why some people feel hesitant to speak about bodies in the context of Christian life and faith is connected to a common perception of the notion of 'spirit' and the 'spiritual'. In the minds of many, 'spiritual' is the opposite of 'physical'; the 'spiritual' is associated with God and the 'physical' with earth; the 'spiritual' with all things good and the 'physical' with all things bad.

Extreme versions of this kind of view can be found in movements like Gnosticism, some forms of which sought to reject anything to do with the evil physical world and, instead, to embrace only those things which they saw as purely spiritual. This kind of view led to certain ascetic practices such as sexual abstinence, intense poverty or extreme forms of subjugating the body. Anything, in fact, that involved turning away from the merest hint that they might enjoy anything physical. It is worth noting, however, that people did not have to be influenced by Gnosticism to engage in such customs; ascetic practices are also to be found in what we would recognize to be orthodox, mainstream Christianity.

Although few people today would adhere to extreme levels of asceticism, more moderate versions remain firmly embedded within Christianity. This attitude manifests itself as a general uncertainty about a Christian attitude to anything that falls under the heading 'physical'. An interesting example of this might be attitudes to the environment. For many years, many – though not all – Christians have displayed an ambivalence to creation and the environmental disaster that is approaching with ever-growing rapidity. This ambivalence

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emerges, at least in part, out of an emphasis on the ‘good’ of the spiritual to the exclusion of the physical. If we believe that our ultimate fate is a spiritual existence in heaven with God and that the physical world is coming to an end, then it is much harder to feel motivated to act for the good of the planet.

In a similar vein, if we feel that we are ultimately going to leave our body behind when we go to be with God, it is easy to feel ambivalence towards it. Furthermore, some strands of teaching about spirituality, which advocate the subjugation of the body and mortification of the flesh in order to train the soul to virtuous and holy living, appear to encourage a less than positive attitude towards the body. Such teaching can involve a wide range of different practices from simply forgoing chocolate and alcohol (as many people do during Lent) through to the wearing of hair shirts and flagellation that is vigorous enough to draw blood. Whether practices like flagellation arise out of hostility to the body is debatable,⁵ and certainly giving up things for Lent does not need in any way to arise out of a negative attitude to the body, but a general silence on the body’s importance, coupled with such practices, can easily suggest that the body is something to be controlled not loved; ignored and overcome rather than cherished.

Part of the issue does, in fact, arise from our word ‘spiritual’ or ‘spirituality’. Many Christians dislike the word ‘spirituality’ because it is saggy and unfocused. I dislike it for a different reason. My dislike of the word arises from what it implies about the body, or lack of it. Although a few ‘spiritual’ practices do focus on the body, the word ‘spiritual’ is often defined as something that is non-corporeal or non-physical. For example the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of ‘spiritual’ is of something that relates to or affects ‘the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things’. In other words, the very word itself, unless redefined, implies something that has nothing to do with our bodies. This is certainly how it is often used to refer to a ‘spiritual life’, which stands in opposition to an everyday embodied life.

In other words, much popular Christian tradition with its emphasis on us leaving the body and all things physical behind at death, its teaching about fasting and subjugating the body and its emphasis on the ‘spiritual’, communicates by default a hesitation about the body

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and its importance, if not a downright hostility towards it. Whether such an attitude is intended or not by those doing the teaching, it is often how it is interpreted by faithful Christians who are seeking to live a life dedicated to the service of God. It is not difficult to see how easy it would be to understand from teaching on abstinence and on sex, and a general silence otherwise, that Christians are to be embarrassed by or hostile to embodiment.

The Paul problem

Some people would point to the writings of the apostle Paul as the origin of our negative view of the body. Even the phrase ‘mortification of the flesh’, which is often used to encourage asceticism, seems to emerge from his writings since Romans 8.13 talks, in the King James version (KJV), of ‘mortifying the deeds of the body so that you can live.’⁶ Such language appears to indicate a powerfully negative view of bodies and to be the origin of a belief that true Christian living can only be found in subjugating the physicality of the body to the spirit or soul.

If we step back from this particular verse, however, and explore the writings of Paul more generally, then a different picture emerges. Although the word ‘flesh’ is at times used negatively, the word ‘body’ often has a more positive association. Indeed the body lies at the heart of some of Paul’s most significant theology, especially, though not exclusively, in the Corinthian epistles. So Paul points to the way in which the bread that we break provides participation in Christ’s body (1 Cor. 10.16); he regularly uses the grand metaphor of the body of Christ as his primary way of talking about Christian community (especially in 1 Cor. 12.12–27 and Rom. 12.4–5); he argues that the best response to God’s mercy is to present to him our bodies (Rom. 12.1–2) and reflects on our future resurrection bodies in 1 Corinthians 15.

The reason why Paul has such a bad reputation when it comes to his attitude to the body is that we often read one word onto another, so we see ‘flesh’ and read ‘body’; we see ‘spirit’ and read ‘soul’. This confusion of key terms in Paul opens the door to interpreting Paul as saying something that he wasn’t. Paul uses his terms carefully and

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intentionally, saying flesh when he meant flesh and body when he meant body; spirit when he meant spirit and soul when he meant soul. In fact, he only rarely used the word 'soul', and this is significant, as we will observe below in Chapter 2. Far from being the villain that some consider him to be as regards the body, Paul is careful and sophisticated in his language about bodies. He even appears to regard them positively, so that he can exhort us to offer them to God in response to all that he has done for us (Rom. 12.1–2). All of this suggests that a study of Paul and his writing might have something valuable and powerful to offer to our reflections on bodies, self-identity and self-worth.

The aim of this book

I should stress that this is not a new area of study. Paul's attitude to the body and his use of soul, spirit and mind has been extensively explored over the years,⁷ but the debates and discussions among New Testament scholars have not, as is often the case with Pauline scholarship, trickled out to non-Paul specialists despite the importance of the topic.

In some ways this book is intended to be a sequel to my previous book *Heaven* (though they can both be read separately from each other) in that it picks up the question of physicality, particularly as regards the body. *Heaven* ended with the observation that New Testament understandings of life after death focus on the resurrection of the body. If we take that seriously, then we need to think carefully about what this tells us about the importance of bodies both now and after the resurrection. This book tries to pick up the threads left by stating that Paul believes in a bodily resurrection and to see what difference this might make to how we live in our bodies now.

As we trace these threads through the writings of Paul, I hope that it will become clear that Paul has a carefully nuanced and largely positive view of the body and that he views a mature and proper response to our bodies as an essential part of Christian life and faith. Not only that, but Paul's attitude to bodies forms a fundamental and hugely significant part of his understanding of who we are as people, 'in Christ', members of his body. We cannot really understand Paul's

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theology without recognizing the importance that his language about the body plays in his thinking. Paul has much to teach us about bodies, and we lose some valuable aspects of his theology when we overlook this.

In this book, then, we will trace the concept of the body specifically in the writings of Paul (with the odd glance from time to time at the Gospels). This will inevitably require us occasionally to step outside of Paul, particularly into the Hebrew Scriptures and a little into Greek philosophy in order to understand some of the language that he uses and the ideas that he explores. Part of the argument of the book is that in the West, whether consciously or not, we have been heavily influenced by the thought and writing of Plato, Aristotle and their philosophical successors. In this instance, however, Paul does not seem to be dependent upon their thought – even though he was almost certainly aware of it.

It is important, however, to be clear-sighted about what I am and what I am not saying. I am not suggesting that there is necessarily any problem with Plato's, Aristotle's or even Descartes's view of the body and soul. Their views of the body and soul have simply had consequences, some of them, though not all, negative, on popular attitudes towards the body. What I am saying is that their views have dominated our conversations about the body and that the voice of Paul brings an alternative – and in my view much needed – perspective on a subject of vast modern importance. My aim is simply to introduce Paul's voice on this subject into our current reflections and to ask what difference it makes to the nature of our discussion.

Word studies and their problems

One of the challenges of a study like this is that we need to engage in word studies, or at least to begin with word studies. This is a very common method in studying the Bible, among academics as well as among preachers. Word studies are a very popular way into understanding themes in the New Testament. We think of the theme we wish to explore and then look at a concordance (or the electronic modern equivalent of one) to find every occurrence of that word in the Bible and from there begin to shape an understanding of what the Bible might say about it.

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Indeed, one of the largest and most influential of all theologies of the New Testament was G. Kittel's ten-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.⁸ This influential work lays out in alphabetical order (in Greek) each of the words deemed to be of importance in the New Testament and then, in an article written by a leading New Testament expert, explores what it meant in the New Testament, including a consideration of its Old Testament background.

This approach has shaped the writing and preaching of countless people but it comes with certain problems.⁹ An obvious problem when exploring the text in English is that you cannot necessarily know from English translations when the same original word is being used or whether a different one lies behind the same English word. Probably the best known example of this is the word 'love'. There are two Greek words for love in the New Testament, *agapē* and *philia*, but a simple English word search for 'love' would bring up all occurrences where either word had been translated as love and without further help it is impossible to tell the difference between them. Connected to this, a Greek word will often be translated in different ways in the New Testament. As a result an English word search will only help you to find those words which have been translated in the same way. The word 'soul' is a good example of this, since, as we will see below, translators are often hesitant to use the word 'soul' in Paul's writings.

Even more important than this is the problem of the connection between concepts and words. Individual words are not the only means of communicating a concept. If we continue thinking about 'love', this is illustrated well. A word search for love would bring up all instances where the New Testament writers had used the word 'love' but would not bring up those places where love is shown but not mentioned. The most iconic example of this kind of instance would be the crucifixion. The word 'love' is not anywhere in any of the narratives about Jesus' death but it is, arguably, the most striking illustration of love in the whole of the New Testament.

Similarly C. S. Lewis talked powerfully and affectively in his book *The Four Loves* about four kinds of love based on four different Greek words: *agapē* or unconditional love, which shows affection no matter what the circumstances; *philia* or friendship, which refers to the bonds between friends; *erōs*, romantic love, and *storgē*, family love. The

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problem from the perspective of the New Testament is that neither the word *erōs* nor the word *storgē* appears in any New Testament book but it is quite clear to anyone who has read Lewis's book that the ideas of romantic love and family love are central to some of its theology.

A further difficulty with word studies that touches on the subject matter of this book is that words mean different things in different contexts. As human beings we are adept at gaining meaning from contexts as well as from individual words. Take for example the following three sentences in English:

That bird is a crane.

They had to use a crane to lift the object.

She had to crane her neck to see the movie.

This is an extreme example but English has a large number of homonyms, words that are spelt the same but mean entirely different things. Native English speakers are adept at reading from the context which of the particular meanings is meant at any one time. The variations are probably less extreme in the New Testament but the same point prevails. What a word means in one context is not automatically what it means in another context. We need to be careful, therefore, about transferring the meaning of a word from one context to another without first checking what it means in each context.

The problems of using word studies have dissuaded some people from engaging in them at all; while others ignore the problems inherent to word studies entirely. Neither is the most sensible way forward. A much better solution is to use word studies judiciously. If we are aware of the pitfalls and limitations then word studies remain a valuable tool for exploring the New Testament. The key is to ensure that proper attention is given to passages that do not use specific words but appear to refer to similar ideas and to explore key passages in detail to get a better sense of how a word is used in that particular passage. In this book I will try as far as possible to follow this kind of method, using word studies as a bouncing-off point but looking in detail at key passages, as well as drawing in other passages that do not have 'trigger' words but do help us to understand the broader context of what Paul has to say about bodies.

What this book is and what it is not

It is important to recognize what this book is and what it is not. We have already noted the long influence of philosophy on discussions of the soul and identity. More recently the existence of the soul has also been the subject of much discussion by neuroscientists. The philosophical and neuroscientific discussions are very interesting but I am neither a philosopher nor a neuroscientist. As a result, while from time to time this book will point at such discussions they cannot be the centre of the argument here since they are not my expertise.¹⁰

The other reason why we will not delve too deeply into the complexities of philosophy or neuroscience is because these complexities often dissuade the non-specialist reader from approaching the question of the body at all. The discussions are framed in too difficult and convoluted a way for non-specialists to feel able to engage with them. Meantime the issue remains undiscussed and unaddressed by the majority of Christians. The issue, as I have tried to show above, is so important a subject and becoming more so year by year that it is vital that as many people as possible join in the conversation about what the Christian tradition might have to say about bodies in general, and what constitutes a beautiful body in particular. I fully recognized that even this book will be off-puttingly convoluted for some but I have tried as far as possible, in a very complex area, to make it as accessible as possible.

The argument

What this book does seek to do is to explore what Paul had to say about bodies, life after death, identity, relationships and life in the Spirit, and to reflect on what Paul's view of the body might contribute to more general discussions about bodies and their role in spirituality.¹¹

The challenge of this particular task is that what Paul says about the body has, historically, been read through the lens of a certain philosophical tradition – particularly that of Plato. As a result, Paul has been understood to be saying something profoundly negative about the body which I do not think was what he intended. I may of course be wrong and I hope that you will use the argument of this

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book to decide for yourself what you think. Whether you agree or disagree with the book's premise, my hope is that you will find the ideas sufficiently stimulating to enable you to think again about your own position on the subject.

The chapters of the book fall into four sets of two, with each pair of chapters focusing on a specific theme: the nature of the soul (Chapters 1 and 2); the resurrection of the body (Chapters 3 and 4); the Spirit and identity (Chapters 5 and 6); and finally Paul's language about the body (Chapters 7 and 8).

This is a book first and foremost about Paul's attitude to the body but from time to time it felt wrong not to mention a key Gospel verse or passage, which may be relevant. Where it seemed helpful I have included an extra note that draws on the Gospels (and, in one instance, Hebrews) in order to give a fuller New Testament feel to the discussion. As we proceed through the book you will find, at regular intervals, initial reflections on the importance of certain ideas and what difference these might make to our faith and the way in which we live our lives. A final epilogue draws together some of these ideas in reflections on what I have learnt and will see differently as a result of the passages and ideas explored.

The discussion about the body in Paul is fascinating but far from simple. This small book does not aim, for a moment, to be the last word on the subject. Instead it seeks to be provocative, to generate new ways of looking at issues and, most of all, to stimulate discussion on what we might have to contribute to the wider societal fascination with the body beautiful. Paul does, I believe, think that bodies – both individual and corporate – are important. If you find yourself agreeing with this then the challenge is how to begin shifting our language and our thinking, our practice and behaviours, our spirituality and our worship to reflect the importance of embodiment to a sense of self, self-worth and life in Christ.

A note on Greek and Hebrew words used throughout the book

The default translation used throughout the book is that of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Occasionally where that translation,

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in my view, does not quite communicate the depth of what was said I have provided my own translation.

As a rule, as much as possible, I try to avoid the overuse of Greek and Hebrew words, not least because I know it can be off-putting for those who do not know these languages. This is one of those occasions where it is not really possible to avoid using them. As will become clear, there are some words that are simply very difficult to put into English easily in such a way as properly captures how they were being used in the Bible. As a result I have found it easier to leave them largely in their original language. So below is a list of words with a range of meanings in case you find the need to remind yourself of their meaning as you read.

<i>kardia</i>	Greek word for heart, but also used by Paul to refer to thoughts.
<i>koinōnia</i>	Fellowship, participation, sharing, communion – an important word that refers to vertical relationship with Christ and horizontal relationship with each other.
<i>leb</i>	Hebrew word for heart.
<i>nephesh</i>	If there is a Hebrew word that could be translated ‘soul’ this is it, it is probably better translated as life or life force, and includes ideas such as desire, appetite, ‘me’ or ‘you’, or a whole person more generally.
<i>nəshamah</i>	Hebrew word for breath. In Genesis 2.7 God breathed the breath (<i>nəshamah</i>) of life into the man’s nostrils and he became a ‘ <i>nephesh</i> being’ (see above).
<i>nous</i>	One of the Greek words Paul uses for ‘mind’, it occurs 21 times in Paul’s letters.
<i>pneuma</i>	Greek word for spirit. Used by Paul to refer to God’s Spirit, our spirit and the realm of the spirit.
<i>pneumatikos</i>	The adjective related to the noun <i>pneuma</i> and meaning pertaining to the things of the Spirit.
<i>psuchē</i>	The word used in Greek philosophy for the ‘soul’ and used by Paul only occasionally, but when he did use it he used it in a way much closer to <i>nephesh</i> than to the Greek philosophical concept of the soul.

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<i>psuchikos</i>	An adjective related to the noun <i>psuchē</i> used by Paul in contrast to the adjective <i>pneumatikos</i> (see above) and meaning pertaining to the life of the <i>psuchē</i> as opposed to the life of the <i>pneuma</i> or Spirit. Maybe best translated as natural.
<i>ruah</i>	Hebrew word for spirit. Used in the Old Testament to refer to God's Spirit and the human spirit, as well as to wind or breath.
<i>sarx</i>	Greek word for flesh.
<i>sōma</i>	Greek word for body.