

The Embodied Image of God. The Anthropology of Embodiment in Theological Perspective

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“Every assertion about God is simultaneously an assertion about humanity and vice versa.”¹ Rudolf Bultmann arrived at this programmatic statement in interpreting the theology of Paul, which signaled to him an inseparable bond between theology and anthropology. Whoever speaks about God also speaks about the human person. For that reason, reflection about the human person is part of theology from the very beginning. John Calvin wrote: The “knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie.”²

By contrast, the theological discipline, described under the name *Theological Anthropology*, only emerges in the twentieth century. This new theological discipline seeks from its beginning the dialogue with modern anthropology. That is what distinguishes theological anthropology from the classic dogmatic locus de homine (“on humanity”), that part of the doctrine of creation, in which theologians have traditionally discussed their view of the human person, strictly within the bounds of their own discipline. Theological anthropology seeks the dialogue with the sciences and the humanities. Theological anthropology helps critique basic anthropological assumptions in the church, academia, and civil society, supporting a more realistic understanding of the human person in these three arenas and resulting in better practical guidance.

1. Theological Prologue: No Godlessness of Humanity

It is the privilege of theologians to speak about the human person in a way that no other academic area does. The task of theologians is to reflect on the gospel, the message that in Jesus Christ, God has taken on human nature, human flesh, and that hence in my bodily existence I belong to Jesus Christ. Those who have heard and understood this message—and who in fact has ever heard and understood it fully?—can live in confidence and take heart when dying. The gospel has been summarized as the “comfort” that “I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”³

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. K. Grobel (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), p. 191 (trans. altered).

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), I. 1. 3.

³ The Heidelberg Catechism answering question 1: Arthur C. Cochrane (ed.), *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 305–31, 305.

The theological reflection on humanity begins with the gospel. From a theological perspective, the true and hence the real human person is the person as brought to light by the gospel.

The gospel is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The content of the gospel is Jesus Christ as a person in his history, that is, the Christ event in which God reveals God's self as 'God for us' (Rom. 8:31), as caring for this world and its salvation. Theological anthropology understands the human person based on this event, on Jesus Christ.

If we are facing the true human being in Jesus Christ—that human person who is brought to light by the gospel—then we should not shy away from saying that the human person first of all is a being in whom God delights. Jesus's life, lived in close communion with God, takes place under God's declaration, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). In the same way, we can look at every human person with the assumption that he or she is a son or a daughter of God, and that God is pleased with them. If we ask what justification theologians have to include everybody into the Christological statement from the text about Jesus's baptism, we can first refer to the way Jesus himself taught his disciples to pray the Our Father. In doing so, he regarded them as similar to him: they are privileged to call God their father—and consider themselves sons and daughters of God: "And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven" (Matt. 23:9). The disciples are allowed to call *father* whom Jesus calls his father. In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks explicitly about "my Father and your Father" (John 20:17). Through Jesus Christ we are sons and daughters of God like Jesus Christ.

The gospel of John spells out the reason for the equality between Christ and the rest of humanity, which redounds to our salvation: "And the word, the *logos*, became flesh" (John 1:14). God's word enters a sphere that had not been associated with God previously: the flesh. Regardless of the view that God had a body, widespread in Judaism and Christianity in antiquity,⁴ the Bible never attributes flesh to God. It is only in the incarnate one that God's word and flesh join together. In Jesus Christ, faith recognizes God's presence in human flesh, i.e., in humanity and so in Christ's own bodily existence. Since flesh unites all human beings, even human beings and animals, humanity and fleshly nature can no longer be thought of as godless after the incarnation. For that reason, the gospel of John calls Christ "the true light, which enlightens everyone who comes into the world" (John 1:9). As the one who comes

⁴ Christoph Marksches, *God's Body: Jewish, Christian, and Pagan Images of God*, trans. Alexander Johannes Edmonds (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019).

from God, Christ brings God's glory into the human world. From then onwards, God's glory can no longer be thought of appropriately apart from the grace with which God cares for the world.

The Pauline and deuteropauline traditions encapsulate this insight in calling Jesus Christ "the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4) or "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). According to this tradition, in Jesus Christ, the invisible God—even God's "whole fullness" (Col 2:9)—is present in the world. Once that is believed and seen, the history of humanity can no longer be interpreted as godless.

Since Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God, reflects God's glory, introducing it into the world (see 2 Cor. 4:4), human persons find themselves as part of a story that is permeated by God's glory and which aims at God's glory entering into everything. Christ does not view his status as the image of God as an exclusive possession, but lets his own and ultimately all people participate in it—even "all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Col. 1:19 f.). God's glory is meant to shine not only in Jesus's life, but also in the lives of all believers, even in the lives of all people.

Jesus Christ's glory—i.e., God's saving grace—presents the human person in the right light: the human person is—viewed theologically—not primarily a sinner, but a person in whom God is well pleased and whose face reflects this pleasure. As the splendor of Christ's light is reflected in the human face, the human person is always already justified and sanctified. In this sense we can say: evangelical theology—in the sense of a theology appropriate to the *euangelion*, the gospel—understands the human person on the basis of the fact that changes everything: that in Jesus Christ, God has lived as a human person among human persons. In Jesus Christ, the eyes of faith see God's presence in our fleshly, all too human story, and so in everyone's own story. The gospel localizes us human beings in a story that is not "god-less," devoid of the divine, but replete with salvation. Those understanding humanity on the basis of the gospel see human persons enmeshed in a story of deliverance, in which they emerge as those they were meant to be from the very beginning: as persons in whose life God's grace is powerfully at work.

My argument is in line with Karl Barth's Anthropology. Barth opened his anthropology with the characteristic remark: "In Jesus Christ we not only see who and what God is; in Jesus Christ we also see who and what the human person is. Barth's anthropology was published in 1948, three years after the end of World War II in Europe. Barth saw more clearly than many others what happened in the previous years; he had the mass murder of the Jews and the

concentration camps clearly in mind. Yet Barth disputes that these events show the essence of humanity. No, war and mass murder do not reveal the essence of humanity; rather they obscure it. It is not sin that discloses who the human person is, but the incarnate word of God.

For this reason, Barth makes a suggestion. “Let us assume for a moment that we can say who and what humanity is, although only in relation to this person [i.e., Jesus Christ]. What is the result in terms of the distinctive characteristics of humanity among other creatures?” (p. 68) Pursuing this guiding question, Barth identifies two aspects that characterize the distinctiveness of humanity:

1. In the human person named Jesus Christ we come to know God. “It would be impossible to see and think about the human person, i.e., the person named Jesus, if we did not at once see and think about God also” (p. 68).
2. God’s presence in the life of one person is not an ambivalent one, however, but the presence of the savior. The God who is present in Jesus Christ is “the savior of humanity, their eternal and almighty, their total and unique savior” (p. 68). His presence is the presence of the saving God.

While a theological anthropology must preserve the distinction between Christ and the rest of humanity, it cannot develop this distinction in such a way as to contradict the anthropological insights we have gained from the discussion of Jesus Christ. For that reason, Barth assumes: “If it is true for the human person Jesus that in his humanity we are confronted immediately and directly with the being of God, then necessarily, assuming that there is a similarity between Jesus and us in spite of all dissimilarity, every human person is to be understood ... as belonging to God, i.e., in the light of God, and above all God must be seen as actively moving towards the human person” (p. 73). Barth then forestalls a possible misunderstanding of this thesis, which would emphasize that humanity belongs to God, but deny the salvific character of that fact. Starting with the premise that God’s presence in Christ is “the history of the deliverance of each and every man,” Barth argues that every person exists as part of a history “which stands in a clear and recognizable relationship to the divine deliverance enacted in the man Jesus” (p. 73). If in theology we speak of the human person, we speak of a being in whose history God is present as savior.

2. The Human Person as a Psychosomatic Unity. The Wisdom of the Body

In the incarnate Christ, the Christian faith does not only acknowledge the presence of God in the sphere of the human flesh. In the incarnate Christ, the Christian faith sees the embodied

nature of the whole person and, at the same time, the wisdom, the competence and the power of the living body. The traditions about the Son of God becoming a human person make plain that, on the one hand, the human person is flesh, *sarx*. The Gospel of John understands the fact that God becomes human as God's becoming flesh: "And the Word, the *logos*, became flesh" (John 1:14). This way John contradicts any kind of anthropological dualism: the entire person is flesh. Even reason, even the mind, is embodied. On the other hand, the incarnation implies the theological dignity of the living body. The American New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes: "The human body not only can reveal God, it is the privileged medium of the divine self-disclosure."⁵ The physical, fleshly body is nothing we would have to be ashamed of, with a view to God, or which we even had to reject. To the contrary, it is destined to be the site of God's revelation. That is true not only for Jesus Christ and the church as his body, but also for the individual bodies of believers (see 1 Cor. 6:19). In spite of all danger to the flesh, this applies also to the mortal flesh: according to Paul, it can and will become the place of Christ's epiphany (cf. 2 Cor. 3:3 and 4:11).

Since the New Testament understands the body as the privileged medium of God's self-revelation, it emphasizes the fleshly, bodily nature of all human life in continuity with the Old Testament. Nevertheless, for centuries and up to the present, Christianity and its theologies have supported and refined dualistic views of the human person. From patristic times up to the present, hostility to the body has been unshakeable in theology.

Moreover, for the sake of intellectual honesty, Protestant theology has adopted the modern Cartesian dualism. By consequence, theologians have focused on the disembodied subject, which was then envisioned as immediate to God. This way, dualistic views of the human person have been supported. At the same time, theological anthropology has lost those factors from view that connect the human person with the world—both the body, objectified in the third-person perspective, and the lived body, perceived in the first-person perspective and experienced as oneself.

Against this backdrop, the current interdisciplinary anthropology of embodiment is a conversation partner that can help theologians recover their own traditions.

2.1. The interdisciplinary anthropology of embodiment

In 1993, the neurobiologist Francis Varela and the philosopher Evan Thompson have published a book with the title *The Embodied Mind*. Picking up ideas from the American

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 57.

Pragmatism and the French phenomenology and insights from neurobiology, they established a new philosophy, the philosophy of embodiment.

The interdisciplinary philosophy of embodiment is fundamentally committed to the view that the mind cannot be separated from the body, but must be understood as the mode of being in the world in a bodily way. The human mind does not only depend on the body, it is even constituted and shaped by bodily activities. The human mind is not the internal space of the human person, but it develops in actively engaging the environment. As embodied, the mind is always already embedded in the environment.

The word *embodiment* could give rise to a misunderstanding. It could be taken to mean that something that is primarily disembodied is embodied only in a second step. However, the term *embodiment* aims at precisely the opposite: the secondary aspect is the primary one, the human mind is always already embodied. By consequence, the separation between body and mind is a secondary abstraction.

As soon as human consciousness awakes, it finds itself embodied. Human persons can relate to their bodies and, in reflection, even define themselves in opposition to their bodies, yet even the most refined operations in thought remain firmly embedded in bodily behavior. This insight is at the center of embodied cognition, a paradigm in cognitive science. In this area, researchers suggest that “Mind, therefore, is not incidentally but *intimately* embodied and *intimately* embedded in its world.”⁶

The philosophy of embodiment emphasizes that the mind is not a neuronal network that is tucked away in some internal space, largely separated from the world; rather, the mind is to be understood as a dynamic, bodily way of being in the world. A hallmark of the embodied understanding of the mind can be seen in “the continuous coevolution of acting, perceiving, imagining, feeling, and thinking.”⁷ This is particularly striking in early child development, but remains a basic characteristic throughout human life. Mind emerges in the living interaction between body and world.

The plasticity of the human mind is reflected in the plasticity of the brain. The “human brain is not only the most complex, but also the most adaptable organ that we know of. ... All our experiences, perceptions, and interactions with the environment continually modify our neural structures throughout our lives.”⁸ The long period during which the human brain matures is

⁶ John Haugeland, “Mind Embodied and Embedded,” in: *Having Thought: Essays in the metaphysics of mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 207–37, 237.

⁷ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, p. 43.

⁸ Fuchs, *Ecology of the Brain*, p. 139.

particularly significant in this context. The brain of a neonate is just a little more than 25% in size compared to the brain of an adult, and even at age 10, it is not yet fully developed. The development of the brain depends on an environment supportive of life, and the more fine-grained structure emerges only in interaction with the environment. The brain is shaped by the environment even in its neuronal structures.

Yet mental life is not only embedded in the world, but even brings forth this world. We can understand cognition as the shaping of a world that is structured in meaningful ways. This opens up the perspective on the “deep continuity of life and mind.”⁹ Our cognitive capacity to produce a world structured according to meaning has been prepared in our evolutionary history. Based on our own awareness of this capacity, we recognize this capacity in lower organisms as well. “In observing other creatures struggling to continue their existence—starting with bacteria that actively swim away from a chemical repellent—we can, through the evidence of our own experience and the Darwinian evidence of the continuity of life, view inwardness and purposiveness as proper to living being.”¹⁰ The philosophy of embodiment thus acknowledges the evolutionary continuity of which humanity is part, but also helps recognize the reality of mind in all levels of embodied life. The fact that mental life is embodied not only implies that “mind even on its highest reaches remains part of the organic,” but also means that “the organic even in its lowest forms prefigures mind.”¹¹

With the anthropology of embodiment, theologians gain a partner in dialogue that helps them understand their own biblical traditions better and make the case against the Cartesian paradigm for which theologians, too, had long fallen. For this reason, the exegetical disciplines are of particular significance for the dialogue between theological anthropology and an evolutionary anthropology of embodiment, articulated in the neurosciences, biology, medicine, and philosophy. The biblical texts are a bridge to an anthropology of embodiment, also with their critique of the reductionistic images of the human person that are still in operation in theology even today, including those arguing for dualism or those focusing crucially on pure self-awareness.

In his foundational work on the anthropology of the Hebrew Bible, the German Old Testament scholar Hans Walter Wolff noted already in 1973 that the Hebrew Bible consistently views the human person as embodied.¹² The Hebrew term that has commonly

⁹ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, p. 128 and at other places in the book.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹¹ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. 1.

¹² Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

been translated as *soul*, *naepæš*, instead describes the “needy” person, “who aspires to life and is therefore living.” Yet the word also highlights “emotional excitability and vulnerability.” The human person appears as a pathic being, as a psychosomatic unity. The term *naepæš* also displays the “semantic element ‘vitality’, which also applies to the animal.”¹³ Today we can say: The historically distant texts of the bible operate with an understanding of the human person much closer to the current research and discussion in the neurosciences, biology, medicine, and philosophy than those accounts of the human person that we customarily consider modern. Biblical traditions prove their significance, in all of their strangeness, by bringing the real human person into view.

2.2. The Wisdom of the Lived Body: Phenomenological Explorations

In 1946, the Heidelberg physician and philosopher Viktor von Weizsäcker wrote: “If I now survey the medical aspect in that period of life that is mine, from 1906 to 1946, the overwhelming power of the bodily human situation is what I find most impressive. It is the dependence of the mind on the body, of the soul on instinct; yet it’s also the sagacity of this bodily condition ... wisdom working within matter; how nature comes to the aid of the spirit ... It’s this view on humanity that thwarts the separation of nature and spirit.”¹⁴

Once we perceive the embodiment of the human mind, the wisdom of nature also comes into view. The body is not merely an object to which I relate, but as my lived body, my corporeal lived body, it guides me through my world. It opens up my world for me, it opens me up towards others, lets me sense an atmosphere immediately, and often reacts appropriately through intuition—it also enlivens my mind.

One of the current leading thinkers on embodiment, the American philosopher Shaun Gallagher, emphasizes that “the normal and healthy subject can in large measure forget about her body in the normal routine of the day. The body takes care of itself, and in doing so, it enables the subject to attend, with relative ease, to other practical aspects of life. To the extent that the body effaces itself, it grants to the subject a freedom to think of other things.”¹⁵

Our lived bodies relieve us of the burden of having to control all the steps of our lives consciously. Thus they give us the freedom to invest our conscious attention in more complex matters and relations beyond everyday routines.

¹³ All citations from Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, p. 25.

¹⁴ Viktor von Weizsäcker, “Die Medizin im Streit der Fakultäten,” in: Weizsäcker, *Grundfragen medizinischer Anthropologie: Allgemeine Medizin* (Gesammelte Schriften 7, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), pp. 197–211, 202.

¹⁵ Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (second ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 55.

The lived body not only opens up the world to me as it has come to be, but it always already responds to its affordances. My behavior adapts to my environment, often before I have consciously made sense out of it. I enter a church, fall silent—and I see that a service is being held. I approach a group of cheerful people and with a smile, I am immediately attuned to their jovial mood—even without having heard the joke that caused their laughter. My lived corporeal body unlocks the affordances of my environment in a way that is often shared and with which others resonate. The sun over the hilltops entices me to go for a walk—and someone else decides spontaneously to join me.

Engaging in a constant interplay of perception and movement, the lived body is reasonable in ways that are often subconscious. This is the procedure that also grounds our intelligence. “The embedding of the body in a structured environment that is adapted to us has been established in a long process of trying and testing. This embedding is essential for us as intelligent beings. Our intelligence is not hidden away in some interior space of consciousness and thought; rather it is the lived intelligence of our skillful movements and our practiced activities.”¹⁶

My corporeal lived body keeps me alive, enables me to act intentionally, opens up my world to me in immediate ways and funds my intelligence in acting and perceiving in advance of my conscious efforts.

If we are realizing the competence and power of the lived body, it is advisable, to develop and train a new art of living one’s bodily life. Instead of wanting to manufacture everything, we rather should be open ourselves to ideas and new types of action that result from the pre-reflective intentionality of the body. We should be open to going along with the spontaneous becoming of the lived body. For Protestant theologians, such ideas and thoughts sound uncommon and new. The hostility to the body that has cropped up repeatedly in the history of Christianity has deeply unsettled our trust in the power and competence of the living body. For that reason, in the following I will show how significant biblical traditions encourage readers to take the wisdom of the lived body seriously.

2.3. The Wisdom of the Lived Body: Biblical Perspectives

The idea that God speaks to persons through their individual bodies is common in the Old Testament. In Psalm 16, the Lord and the kidneys can stand in for each other in admonishing the psalmist: “I bless the Lord who gave me counsel; in the night also my kidneys admonish

¹⁶ Fingerhut et al., “Einleitung,” in: *Philosophie der Verkörperung*, eds. Fingerhut, Hufendiek, and Wild, pp. 9–102, 9.

me” (Ps. 16:7). It is considered folly to ignore the warning that is expressed in the stitches felt in the kidneys: “When my heart was embittered and I was pricked in my kidneys, I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you” (Ps. 73:21 f.). Since the Hebrew Bible sees the human person as a fundamentally relational being that is precisely not insulated from others, but open to them, it is not surprising that the kidneys as the embodied conscience react also to what important social contacts think or do. The kidneys “rejoice” when the lips of a friend “speak what is right” (Prov. 23:16). People feel in their own lived bodies what is the matter with them in the variety of their relationships, including the relationship with God.

The Hebrew Bible mentions the heart more often than the kidneys. This organ can also function as the conscience. As the heart is a bodily organ, so the Old Testament also regards feeling, thinking, and willing as embodied processes. They are involved in bodily activities, and the stirring of the heart is a bodily perception. In lament, the heart is “flapping” (Ps. 38:10), “quaking” (Ps. 55:4), is “in uproar” (Jer. 4:19), it is “trembling greatly” (1 Sam. 28:5), is “withered” (Ps. 102:4), “becomes hot” like fire (Ps. 39:4) or soft “like wax” and dissolves (Ps. 22:14, see 2 Sam. 17:10 and other passages).

The Old Testament can speak in such a way about the heart because the Israelites—not differing from many modern people in this—experienced what has been articulated here in a bodily way, in their chest region. Thus Psalm 55:5 says, “My heart is quaking within me.” At bottom, these texts demonstrate that a new physiology would be required that does not separate the vegetative, emotional, intentional, and cognitive dimensions, but instead understands even vegetative procedures as actions of the entire person, in which the organic and the intentional aspects are always already intertwined.

Based on the Hebrew Bible, we can say that when the heart is making itself felt physically, it has a say in people’s lives. The Hebrew Bible prompts readers to listen to the heart as they physically feel it, to let it have its say concerning their own action. Explicitly the wisdom literature advises, “Watch over your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). The prophet Nathan gives the advice to king David to be attentive to his heart, too: “Go, do whatever is in your heart, for the LORD is with you” (2 Sam. 7:3). The story of David sparing Saul’s life shows David following what his heart says. David has it in his hands to kill Saul, yet he only cuts off a corner of the king’s cloak. “Afterward David’s heart struck him because he had cut off a corner of Saul’s cloak. He said to his men, “The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD’s anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the LORD’s anointed.” (1 Sam. 24:5–6)

Here the heart is making itself felt in its beating—and David allows himself to be so unsettled that he changes course. The ethical judgment of the heart is embodied in the physiological and emotional beating of the heart—and that is the immediate reaction to David’s deed. The text does not narrate how a person reflects on his action in the calmness of hindsight, thus arriving at a cognitive insight into an illegitimate deed. Rather, we are witnessing the lived body, whose action has immediate repercussions for one’s vegetative, emotional state, leading to a new orientation of action. Here the ethical judgment uncovers how God wants David to act in this situation precisely as it is embodied and embedded in the situation.

New Testament authors likewise are no strangers to the wisdom of giving one’s lived body a say in how to live one’s life. According to the Gospel of Luke, for instance, it is of particular importance to listen to the lived body.

In the example narrative of the good Samaritan, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan are all said to have seen the man who was robbed. Yet such seeing itself does not result in the help that is necessary; the priest and the Levite see the man in misery, yet they walk past. The Samaritan, by contrast, helps the battered man, and that is because he not only saw him, but “was moved with pity,” *esplanchnisthē* (Luke 10:33). He allows himself to be touched and affected by someone else’s misery, and in being affected, he is moved, even grasped, physically. The noun that is used here, *splanchnon*, which occurs only in the plural, denotes the inner organs. The Acts of the Apostles use the word in the physical sense; in describing Judas’s suicide, the text says, “all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18). So the Samaritan feels the other person’s suffering in his own body, in his inner organs. The reason he acts in a way that the passersby did not is that he allows the physical experience shape his action.

In Luke, Jesus narrates this parable to illustrate the command to love your neighbor. Yet we cannot command anyone to feel compassion, which after all is a pathic event. The philosopher Gernot Böhme solves this apparent paradox persuasively: “The commandment to love our neighbor does not summon us to have a certain affect, but rather not to drown out the natural participation in the suffering of others.”¹⁷ As bodily beings, we have always already been affected by the suffering of others—and the commandment of neighborly love calls on us to allow this affect-based participation in the misery of others to shape our own action.

The wisdom of the lived body can even run ahead of self-aware reason. When the two disciples recognize Jesus in Emmaus, they realize that their hearts were already burning within them when the risen Lord had interpreted Scripture for them on the way (see Luke

¹⁷ Gernot Böhme, *Ethik leiblicher Existenz* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), p. 198.

24:32). When the risen Lord appears to the disciples in the subsequent narrative, the lived bodies of the disciples react similarly to Jesus Christ's presence, in expressing joy. The gospel explicitly says that joy preceded faith, i.e., preceded the understanding that Christ was risen. Bodily joy overcame the disciples in such a way that their rationality was at first unable to grasp what had happened (see Luke 24:41).

Burning hearts and joy unbound are phenomena of ecstatic resonance. They cannot be explained by means of the stimulus-response schema, or in purely physiological terms, nor are they bodily procedures that are consciously controlled. As in laughter or weeping more generally, they display an autonomous behavior of the corporeal lived body—one might also say: an emancipation of the heart from conscious reason. Emotions reveal themselves in bodily expression even before the person who has the emotions is aware of them. It is precisely the autonomous activity of the lived body that gives rise to a humane, compassionate response that is appropriate both to the situation and to one's own personality.

3. Sin and the Destiny of Humanity

Christian Theology has never viewed the human person based solely on empirical human qualities, but has always also discussed the destiny of the human person. I think the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson is right when he writes: "That the body is created by God is a given in Christian Theology, but without asking *what* it is created *for*, creation theology is incomplete."¹⁸ According to Luther, philosophy does not know the "whole and perfect" human person, for of all things it does not know the point and purpose of human life, which is to be justified by God and perfected as the image of God. According to Calvin, humans have been created "to know God," i.e., to recognize what God desires of them: God has "placed us in this world to be glorified in us." From the Reformation perspective, human persons can only be understood based on their destiny. The human person is created for glorifying God—i.e., to reflect God's good intentions for God's creation in this world, God's justice and love.

The human body has been created to honor God, yet since it is still far removed from living up to this goal, the biblical traditions locate the lived body at the intersection of life and death, good and evil. With Cain, already the first human person to be born—speaking on the literary level of the biblical canon—lives within the tension between succumbing to sin, which lurks at his door, by killing his brother out of envy, and acting well, living with his head held high.

¹⁸ Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), p. 581.

In giving the Tora to Israel, God places the people within the tension of life and death: “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.” (Deut. 30:15) According to Paul, the mortal body can either be ruled by sin (see Rom. 6:12) or be permeated by God’s Spirit and become “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19). “No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.” (Rom. 6:13)

From a biblical perspective, sin does not define the essence of the human person. Nevertheless, the biblical traditions show an increasing tendency to portray the human person as inclined to choose evil and death. At the same time, the biblical traditions point readers towards God’s liberating action: people are “set free” from obedience to sin and “made to serve justice.” (Rom. 6:18) I quote once more Sigurdson: “A theology of the body can therefore not content itself with describing the transcendental structure of human embodiment, but must also clarify the fact that the body is embedded in an existential drama of salvation.”¹⁹

According to the American philosopher Donn Welton, this particular perception of the lived human body is the crucial contribution the biblical traditions make to an appropriate understanding of the human lived body. They “place the body at the intersection of good and evil, life and death, addressing issues that we are only beginning to formulate.”²⁰ They thus pose the question of the destiny and the future of human bodily life. Welton rightly notes that “the New Testament does not argue for a rejection of the body but for its redemption and its transformation into a site of moral and spiritual disclosure.”²¹ The lived body is destined to become the locus of God’s revelation, a temple of the Holy Spirit, which helps their environment to experience God’s good intentions for his creation more concretely.

However, people can also fall short of this destiny—de facto, they fall short again and again. Instead of taking guidance from God’s good intentions for creation, conveying God’s justice, love, and kindness towards other people, and thereby growing more deeply into the image of God, people invest their life energy into a supposed enhancement of their lives, at the cost of others. People are in thrall to what they discern as the seeming law of life in biological life: by the violent struggle to assert one’s own interests, and the interests of one’s own group, on the

¹⁹ Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 584.

²⁰ Donn Welton, “Biblical Bodies,” in: *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Oxford: Wiley, 1998), pp. 229–58, 229.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

cost of others. The characterization of Cain by the Old Testament scholar Frank Crüsemann applies to this type of person as well: “He determines on his own what is good for him, and what appears good to him he establishes, if necessary, with violence.”²²

The Christian faith makes a crucial distinction: Although all people live “according to the flesh”—or as Paul also puts it: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10)—the fact that the human person comes under the power of sin is not part of the human condition. By nature, the human person is finite, vulnerable, and limited in perceiving the world, but by nature the human person is not a sinner. This insight discloses itself to the Christian faith in the life of Jesus Christ, who shared our bodily-fleshly condition without coming under the spell of sin. In Christ’s life, which was bodily but was not shaped by sin, the seemingly inseparable connection between flesh and sin turned out to be an illusion. People can live a life in the flesh that is consistent with God’s good intentions for creation. For this reason, Christian faith understands human destiny in Christ: people are destined to take part in God’s fight against sin by communicating faith, hope, and love the way Jesus Christ does. They are meant to let the Spirit of Jesus Christ shape their bodily actions—and become a *sōma pneumatikon*, a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44).

As embodied images of God it is the purpose of humans to reflect God’s gracious countenance in their bodily behavior towards others, to enact what life is meant to be like, and to create new possibilities that promote life. This way they contribute to the building up and the preservation of a community that communicates faith, hope, and love.

We get a more nuanced view on this community, if we contrast the perspectives of the Old and the New Testament on the communities God wants to build up. The Old Testament consistently envisions a political order shaped by justice, mercy, and knowledge of God. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8) “But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.” (Hosea 12:6). The demands of justice, mercy, and knowledge of God also shape the legal corpora of the Hebrew Bible.

Some of the Old Testament traditions originate in times when Israel’s state-like social structure was relatively independent politically, and they articulate the expectation that God would grant Israel such independence again at some point in the future. New Testament

²² Frank Crüsemann, *Maßstab: Tora: Israels Weisung und christliche Ethik* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher 2003), p. 109.

traditions were shaped in a different socio-historical context; nevertheless, they are similar to the Old Testament vision in aiming at the creation and preservation of congregations that serve as parables of the coming kingdom of God. In our times, Christian faith depends on the equal potential of both Testaments to provide practical guidance. Congregations shaped by faith, hope, and love figure prominently in the Christian faith, as does a political order governed by justice, mercy and the search for truth.

If Old Testament perspectives count for something, surely the Christian social vision must insist on the rule of law and robust social welfare provisions. Already Deuteronomy's sibling ethos shows that such a state depends on people hearing the call to tend to their neighbors—not in a paternalistic way, but like brothers and sisters. By contrast, Cain's attitude, encapsulated in the question whether he is his brother's keeper (see Gen. 4:9), is detrimental to achievements in the rule of law and social welfare.

With a view to the wider biblical canon, we can then say that human persons are destined to communicate faith, hope, and love and to build congregations and communities shaped by these attitudes—and to contribute to the building up and preservation of social systems in which justice, mercy, and the knowledge of God—or secular speaking: the search for truth—are vital factors.

The question is how the general destiny of the human person—the communication of faith, love, and hope—can become a concrete reality in one's own biography: what ways are there to strengthen others in their trust, to help them experience love, and have hope?

Since the communication of faith, hope, and love are meant to gain specific shape in every life, nobody needs to do everything. The destiny of a finite person is always itself finite. The tasks to which one could devote oneself are so manifold that people could give up hope, if they had not been freed to do precisely what one perceives as one's particular task here and now. Life's destiny takes on a specific shape for each individual. The New Testament narratives of Jesus's healing the ill make the point in a profound way: by no means are all the healed people called to follow Jesus and become disciples; Jesus sends a paralytic home whom he healed (Mark 2:12). After exorcizing the unclean spirit from the Gerasene man, Jesus keeps him from joining his group, but gives him the task to proclaim Jesus among his friends and family (Mark 5:18–20). In Mark 10, by contrast, Bartimaeus chooses health by deciding to follow Jesus. Human destiny has a particular shape for each of these who were healed. To communicate faith, hope, and love can mean for some to be called to work in the public (with proclamation and discipleship) and to take on leadership roles in social systems;

for others, it can mean to find their place and fulfill their function in the more intimate circle and to work among friends and the family.

If in this sense we ask for the destiny of life that may change within one's biography, we will need to ask, secondly: which ways are likely to strengthen my hope, my love, and my faith? There is a way to practice self-effacement for the benefit of others that does not even ask this question anymore. Ultimately, this kind of activity makes people ill.

This prompts the third question for the right balance: how much can any particular person give without becoming exhausted in the long run? What can he or she tolerate without breaking? It is part of the communication of faith, love, and hope to react with faithfulness to unfaithfulness, with forgiveness to lovelessness, to keep up hope where others can only despair. Self-effacement always implies a sacrifice of vitality, yet the ultimate sacrifice of vitality is death. A person needs to find the right balance between self-effacement and vitality, again and again. We can make the joyful experience that there are forms of self-effacement that are experienced as enhancing vitality. Yet nothing can simply be taken for granted here, and usually the situation is such that first of all, people need to invest, sacrifice certain opportunities for life and a measure of vitality without knowing for certain that these sacrifices will strengthen their own lives.

In the process of finding a balance, the lived body has a say as well. In this sense, a theological anthropology of the body argues for a greater attentiveness for one's own lived body, in dialogue with biblical texts and phenomenological thought. We can feel it in our own bodies, and see in other people's bodies as well, whether the sacrifice of opportunities of life makes them ill or strengthens their vitality. It would be wise to hear out the wisdom of one's body when discerning the destiny of one's own life.

It is the destiny of the human being as embodied image of God to communicate truth, love and hope. Since Godself vouches for this destiny, it implies a promise for bodily life: precisely in their embodiment, human persons will become agents of faith, hope, and love and so inherit eternal life.