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Forming the Church and the Cultural Imagination with a Theology of Embodiment

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The swearing-in of Amy Coney Barrett, the newest and the youngest associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, brought forth the prospect that a significant shift in the law regarding abortion could occur in the future, with the possibility of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision being overturned. Abortion defenders fear not only that *Roe v. Wade* may fall, but that the newly revised court could go further by recognizing fetal personhood.¹ On the other hand, this would be a great victory for abortion opponents as this would effectively form a constitutional right to life for the preborn child. Over the past few years,² states have taken action to codify various provisions either protecting abortion rights, or banning abortion, should the U.S. Supreme Court come to the point of overturning *Roe*.³ And in fact, after months of deferring the question, in May of 2021 the

U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear a significant abortion case in its upcoming term—the Court's decision on the Mississippi law that bans most abortions after 15 weeks (or more than three months of pregnancy) could pose a significant challenge to *Roe v. Wade*.

If *Roe* is to be diminished, a distinct though not guaranteed possibility with the Mississippi case, abortion access in the U.S. would be impacted, falling to determination by state legislatures. "In the future, women may experience multiple limitations on accessing services," especially impacting "disadvantaged individuals, including women of color and women with lower incomes, less education, or rural residence."⁴ Thus we can infer that more women who otherwise may have sought abortion as an option to an unplanned pregnancy will instead carry the pregnancy to full-term. The Guttmacher Institute also notes in this scenario the rising need and public cost for

prenatal care, delivery services and welfare.⁵ That is, more women will be seeking public or private assistance for the costs associated with raising a child.

What does it mean for the Christian to engage this issue from a biblically informed theological worldview? First, it will be argued that we need a sound theology of embodiment. With that foundation, we then must consider the best way to engage the culture from a Christian perspective. A theology of embodiment that draws on the doctrines of creation, the *imago Dei*, and the incarnation to form a Christian practice of relational life lived out in the body can transform the Church to serve pregnant women and the preborn child, thus providing a welcoming place for women considering abortion, whether they have the legal option or not. This theology of embodiment can also transform our culture, shining a beacon of light in a dark world filled with broken bodies and ruptured relations.

Abortion and Disembodiment

Before constructing a theology of embodiment, it is helpful to first consider what disembodied living might be. Many approaches to abortion involve a disconnection to the woman's body, from both the pro-abortion and anti-abortion sides. A familiar pro-abortion feminist slogan is "my body, my choice," meant to imply that it is a woman's choice to end a pregnancy. She can terminate the nascent human life within her, denying the physiological process happening to her and the unborn child, in order to continue her current life situation. This perspective claims that a natural, embodied experience for a female is a barrier to the emancipation and autonomy of women.⁶

However, the aforementioned soundbite also acknowledges that it is a woman's *body* that carries a pregnancy. It is the woman's body that nourishes and grows a preborn baby, first as an embryo and then as a fetus. And while rhetoric tries to obscure this truth, it is scientific fact that from the moment of conception, when egg and sperm come together, the zygote that is formed is a separate organism.⁷ Dependent upon the woman's body, yes, but a unique human. Furthermore, for the mother during pregnancy, "dramatic anatomical, physiological and biochemical changes occur in every organ of a woman's body."⁸ To interrupt that process can lead to health risks for the mother.⁹ Abortion then, is disembodiment in a grave and destructive way for both the preborn child and the mother. This discussion will be further unpacked in the section, *The Female Body*.

Gnosticism

Disembodied thinking and living represents a dualism that can be traced back to Greco-Roman culture. Platonic philosophy emphasized the spiritual life over the material, physical life, which gave rise to Gnosticism.¹⁰ This thinking has pervaded Western culture in various forms over the centuries, with its central premise being “a radical dualism of spirit and matter, soul and body.”¹¹ One of Gnosticism’s most egregious manifestations currently is that of transgenderism. Author Abigail Shirer details the impact this post-modern Gnostic movement is having on teenage girls in her book *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing our Daughters*. She reports that young girls, influenced by social media messages, are suffering from gender dysphoria and looking for a quick fix to escape the pressures of female adolescence and puberty by undergoing gender surgeries at alarming rates.¹² This transgender craze is seducing many with the falsehood that one’s body, their biological sex, is separate from their personhood. As philosopher Robert George notes, “Changing sexes is a metaphysical impossibility because it is a biological impossibility.”¹³

Gnostic heresy threatened the early church in the second and third centuries by taking away from the power of Christ, essentially denying the incarnation. In turn, “for the gnostic, the resurrection of the body was an absurdity, at most a mere metaphor for the ascent of the soul to its true home in heaven.”¹⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons was one of the first great opponents of Gnosticism and

defender of orthodoxy. In *Against Heresies*, he exposed the heretical teaching that Jesus possessed a mythical, rather than human, body.¹⁵ While Irenaeus presented a trichotomist rather than dualist view of the human person, his perspective of the indivisibility of the human person is helpful. He wrote of the body:

For that flesh which has been moulded is not a perfect man in itself, but the body of a man, and part of a man. Neither is the soul itself, considered apart by itself, the man; but it is the soul of a man, and part of a man. Neither is the spirit a man, for it is called the spirit, and not a man; but the commingling and union of all these constitutes the perfect man.¹⁶

Ireneaus developed a strong doctrine of creation that is a “*free act of an omnipotent God, but also that its materiality is a good product of an omnibenevolent God.*”¹⁷ His doctrine also takes into account Christology and soteriology: since God became man, no created material can be considered unreal or intrinsically evil, and that “creation as a whole is the object of God’s redemption—its destiny, like that of human beings is maturation and perfection.”¹⁸

Virtually all of the early defenders of the Christian faith “were adamant about defending the intrinsic goodness of the body as created by God against the anticorporeal doctrines of Gnosticism.”¹⁹ In *Theology of the Body*, Jean-Claude Larchet emphasizes how we see in the biblical account of creation the body being created first, “out of dust,”



and then the soul when God breathes life into Adam.²⁰ “Here, Scripture contradicts in advance those philosophical or religious schools of thought—such as Platonism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, or Origenism—that see the body as a secondary, subsequent entity, associated with a degradation of reality.”²¹

A Theology of Embodiment

Creation, the Body, and the Imago Dei

Embodiment is life lived out in our bodies, both on this earth and in the new earth after the resurrection of the body.²² Our embodiment is even essential to human development, knowledge, and culture. In *Theology in the Flesh*, John Sanders describes the critical role that embodiment plays in cognitive learning, including how we think about God and Christian living.²³ He describes how we can only learn and understand what we perceive from our embodied experience, which could lead us to postulate that “human cognition is dependent upon our bodies.”²⁴ Similarly, in discussing the views of both Augustine and Aquinas on the human as both a soul and a body, theologian Beth Felker Jones writes that “because we are body-soul unities, we have no direct access to knowledge, including knowledge of God, outside of our senses, outside of our embodied lives.”²⁵ Sanders rejects Gnostic thinking: “Human understanding of our world is from a human perspective, which is an embodied perspective, rather than from a mind that exists independent of the body. For instance, we talk about a book being ‘in front of,’ ‘behind,’ or ‘to the side of’ a person because we have the sorts of bodies that enable us to cognize this way.”²⁶ Our embodiment precedes language and is the foundation of our conceptual systems.²⁷ In countless ways through Scripture, analogies of the body are utilized. God works through our embodiment to reveal himself through Scripture and the natural world.²⁸

A theology of embodiment thus must start with the body, and we can look to the beginning, the book of Genesis, for wisdom. The doctrine of creation shows us that there is a “psychosomatic unity,” in that there is no superiority of one substance, the soul, over the body.²⁹ “God formed us from the ground and enlivened us with his breath. We are not mere souls, but embodied beings.”³⁰ The first book of the Bible gives the account of God

creating the world, with man as his penultimate creation: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27, NIV). There is much that is unique about man and woman; *basar* is the Hebrew word used for “living beings and their bodily existence,” and it is solely used for physical beings (human persons and animals) and not of God.³¹ Furthermore, mankind is uniquely created in the image of God; however, there are many interpretations of the *imago Dei*, of what it means to be made in the image of God. These views can be categorized as substantive, functional, or relational. The substantive view emphasizes the mental and spiritual qualities of humans, while the functional sees man and woman as a royal representative of God on earth to exercise dominion.³² The relational view, developed by Karl Barth, posits that image and likeness are about an “analogy of relation”: the relationship between male and female is in some way analogous to the relationship among the persons of the Trinity.³³

Catherine McDowell discusses the prevailing views of the *imago Dei* in “In the Image of God he Created Them,” writing that “the dominant view through the history of interpretation has been that these terms refer to a spiritual or mental similarity to God with which humans were endowed at creation.”³⁴ She argues, however, that this dominant

view is not the only view, citing various Scripture that would indicate that “God’s spiritual nature does not preclude divine self-revelation in other forms,” with the incarnation being a prime example.³⁵ She interprets the relational view on the basis that image and likeness are kinship terms—that to be made in the image of God is about status, or belonging, in the family of God; we are created as “sons” of God.³⁶ She writes of the gleanings of the Torah in ancient Israel. Boaz is the most famous practitioner of these commands, providing for his future wife Ruth, who becomes part of the genealogy of Jesus.³⁷ Boaz, Ruth’s kinsman redeemer, fulfills God’s intent for creation by living out the proper understanding of his identity as the *imago*. This is what every “son of God” is created to do, demonstrating “in every sphere of life God’s original creational intent, his redemptive plan and his eschatological goal for humanity. This was Israel’s mission, and it is ours, for the sake of the world.”³⁸

As a picture of the *imago Dei* becomes more clear, so too does our embodiment. I would argue that the relational view is the best interpretation for the *imago Dei* and that it fully supports our embodiment. In *Dignity and Destiny*, theologian John Kilner warns that we miss the significance of the *imago Dei* when it is conflated with an exact representation of humanity.³⁹ And more grievously, this misinterpretation has fueled much discrimination over time, as it is easy to target populations that don’t reflect the ideal human, such as those with disabilities, women who were thought to lack the intellectual capacities of men, or the preborn child. Kilner argues that the *imago Dei* is about humanity’s connection with God and reflection of Christ: “The wonder of being in God’s image is about people’s special connection with God and how that will enable all who wish, to be a reflection of God in Christ.”⁴⁰

The rationality test is also rejected by Carter Snead in *What It Means to Be Human*, as what bestows human dignity and defines the *imago Dei* is that we are all created, embodied, unique, and dependent on one another.⁴¹ It is connection to God—our kinship with him as described by McDowell—and how this is reflected in the world that best describes the *imago Dei*. Every human arrives in the world with connections, first



and foremost with the mother that births a child. In *Neither Beast nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person*, Gilbert Meilaender writes: “How we come into being and how we go out of being are of central importance for any sense of what it means to respect (or undermine) human dignity. But human dignity also involves more than how we are born and how we die. To be born of human parents is to be connected in particular ways.”⁴² We are dependent upon one another, in different ways at different times in our life cycle. As Snead writes, “An exorable reality of embodied human life is *dependence*. Most obviously, given the way human beings come into the world, from the very beginning they depend on the beneficence and support of others for their very lives.”⁴³ That is, every human starts his or her journey as dependent, in relationship with other humans.

As we begin to understand our relationships as part of our embodiment, we must further consider the relationship between God and humanity set in motion at Creation. In *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth writes of the significance of humans being created male and female in the image of God.

The relationship between the summoning I in God’s being and the summoned divine Thou is reflected both in the relationship of God to the man whom He has created, and also in the relationship between the I and the Thou, between male and female, in human existence itself. There can be no question of anything more than an analogy.⁴⁴

It is an analogy that recognizes that both the Trinitarian Creator God and the created creature have their existence in relationship.⁴⁵ There is a unique relationship between man and woman that represents the I-thou-ness of God. “To be created in the divine image is to be so endowed that one lives one’s life in an ineluctable relationship with God and neighbor.”⁴⁶ The doctrines of Creation and the *imago Dei* are thus foundational to a theology of embodiment, in which every human is created with innate dignity that reflects the opportunity to be in relationship with God, and with one another, not just as souls or through our mental capacities, but in life lived out together, in the flesh, in community. Paul reflects this interdependence as he teaches

that the church is the body of Christ, urging believers to honor each member. We see how giving and receiving care through the challenges of life is an embodied experience. “The pastoral encounter itself is always necessarily and variously embodied: the touch, be it informal or as a ritual of anointing or healing; or the reassurance of eye contact, the one-to-one conversation.”⁴⁷

Thus, a theology of embodiment is the human body lived out in relationship, the truest reflection of the Creator’s image. “Such encounters at the bodily level are true I-thou encounters, for the I always meets the thou in the mutuality of a concrete, bodily existence.”⁴⁸ Embodiment is to live out “I-thou” encounters; connection, interdependence, and relationships are a necessity. It is to look into the eyes of the weeping woman considering abortion because she has just lost her job and does not know how she can afford to raise a child, and to lovingly say, “I will support you,” along with the church. “To be made in God’s image is purposeful. We are to be faithful images of the love of God, images who can be touched and seen.”⁴⁹

The Incarnation

The incarnation is a central doctrine to Christianity with the divine word of God becoming flesh in the human body of Jesus. “The New Testament depicts Jesus Christ as both the Word becoming flesh and a fully human being who communicates that Word in what he says and does.”⁵⁰ He was born of a woman, coming to this earth as an embryo, and brought forth through birth in Bethlehem. “At the heart of the Christian faith is the mystery of the incarnation: of God sharing human life in the form of the person of Jesus.”⁵¹

The incarnation sets Christianity apart from other religions. Furthermore, it is in the Last Supper and the Eucharist that Christ leads his followers to participate in communion with him. “In communicating with the body and blood of Christ, the believer also communicates with his soul and spirit—in short, with the entire person of Christ. Here, confirmed by Christ himself, can be seen on the one hand the essential link that unites body, soul, and spirit in the human being; and on the other the fact that the body involves the entire person.”⁵²

Lastly, it is the death and resurrection of Christ that accomplishes God’s plan for

redemption, forming the new covenant that man and woman might have new life, a promised future of hope of resurrection. It is through Christ’s body that he accomplishes salvation.⁵³ Because of the psychosomatic unity of the human, the resurrection of the body is necessary: “we must be freed from death in both soul and body.”⁵⁴ The unity of body and soul from the beginning at creation must be carried through into redemption.⁵⁵ The incarnation further shows the importance of the body in that God chose to redeem creation through his body. He sent his Son in bodily form to this earth; his broken body accomplished salvation so that all who believe may live again. Furthermore, his death and resurrection foretell the bodily resurrection of believers—we will not just live on as souls, but as unified persons with body and soul. Writes Joshua Farris in *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, “The significance of human embodiment is reflected in our generative relationships. The incarnation and resurrection . . . also point to the significance to human life.”⁵⁶ We must encounter one another in the flesh relationally to affirm our dignity as endowed by God.

We see then how creation and the incarnation inform the believer’s life lived out in the body, caring for and connecting with the humans we come in contact with, in relationship and community. “Christians acknowledge the reality of God’s self-revelation in the form of a human life; but a practical theology that tells stories of embodiment can really examine what it might mean for God to be revealed in a human body, broken and suffering, whose resurrection proclaims that Love is stronger than death.”⁵⁷ Through his resurrection, Christ suffered bodily so that we might have new life. One’s identity cannot be understood outside of one’s body nor outside of their relationship with God and those around them.⁵⁸ We, too, can live out this story for the sake of others.

The Female Body

Pregnancy is an inextricable part of the female body. The “natural rhythms” of the female body and her procreative purpose tie her to the natural life cycles of all of creation.⁵⁹ Our embodiment reflects the image of God in many ways, and in pregnancy we see this uniquely. The pregnant woman is a reminder of the incarnation in that God became flesh in coming to his created

world born of a woman. Every pregnancy can remind us of this humble entry of Christ Jesus, the mysterious incarnation. The state of pregnancy reflects eschatological hope, as the expectant mother experiences the here-and-now discomforts of pregnancy and birthing pains as well as a longed-for future happening at once.⁶⁰ “Pregnancy is a poignant reality of the known and felt yet unseen dimension of the kingdom of God: a biological and human experience and expression of the ‘now’ and the ‘not-yet’ reality of the kingdom of God.”⁶¹ The pain of childbirth is part of the curse after the Fall, and a metaphor for the impact of the Fall—futility, suffering, corruption—on all of creation. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:22–23). This is our hope as believers—the bodily resurrection.

Likewise, caring for the pregnant woman, her body and soul, is an extension of our embodied existence. In “Embodiment versus Dualism: A Theology of Sexuality from a Holistic Perspective,” Leslie Kendrick Townsend writes:

In pregnancy, a woman experiences the conviction that “My life and another’s are one.” . . . Woman’s inner connection with her own embodiment during pregnancy serves to bond rather than separate her from others. Just as in the internally felt connections of pregnancy, self and other do not compete, but have value for each other and contribute to the completion of each other.⁶²

In the symbiotic unity between mother and child during pregnancy, one body cannot be separate from the other without diminishing the other’s embodiment. Furthermore, abortion poses many health risks for the mother, which speaks to the unnaturalness of abortion, or rather, the consequences of disembodiment. Abortion is associated with numerous physical health risks for women, including breast cancer, placenta previa, preterm birth, suicide, and maternal mortality.⁶³ In “Reviewing the Evidence, Breaking the Silence,” Dr. Elizabeth Shadigian notes that even the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists documents

that “long-term risks sometimes attributed to surgical abortion include potential effects on reproductive functions, cancer incidence, and psychological sequelae.”⁶⁴

Data in regards to abortion and mental health is also downplayed, as seen in the American Psychological Association’s 2008 report by its Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion. The APA’s press release on the report highlighted that women who choose abortion rather than carry a pregnancy to term were at no greater risk of mental health challenges.⁶⁵ Yet in their report they conclude, “It is clear that some women do experience sadness, grief, and feelings of loss following termination of a pregnancy, and some experience clinically significant disorders, including depression and anxiety.”⁶⁶ As researcher David Reardon points out, “In regard to the abortion, mental health controversy, studies by [abortion-mental health] minimalists tend to be written in a way that minimizes any disruption of the core pro-choice aspiration that abortion is a civil right that advances the welfare of women.”⁶⁷

Women also experience short-term and long-term emotional effects from abortion. Dr. Julius Fogel, a psychiatrist and OB-GYN, was a leader of abortion rights and performed tens of thousands of abortions. He defended the necessity of abortion, and yet even he testified to the profound emotional impact of abortion on a woman:

Every woman—whatever her age, background or sexuality—has a trauma at destroying a pregnancy. A level of humanness is touched. This is a part of her own life. When she destroys a pregnancy, she is destroying herself. There is no way it can be innocuous. One is dealing with the life force. It is totally beside the point whether or not you think a life is there. You cannot deny that something is being created and that this creation is physically happening.

Often the trauma may sink into the unconscious and never surface in the woman’s lifetime. But it is not as harmless and casual an event as many in the pro-abortion crowd insist. A psychological price is paid. It may be alienation; it may be a pushing away from human warmth, perhaps a hardening of the maternal instinct. Something

happens on the deeper levels of a woman’s consciousness when she destroys a pregnancy. I know that as a psychiatrist.⁶⁸

Though a difficult testimony to digest, this report from a doctor who supported abortion rights should be available as information to consider before a woman makes the decision to terminate a pregnancy. Furthermore, Dr. Priscilla Coleman has done extensive research on the emotional effects of abortion on women, and the often distressed path to which it leads.⁶⁹ In a qualitative synthesis on women who have suffered emotionally from abortion, Coleman found that “common negatives included feelings about termination of a life, regret, shame, guilt, depression, anxiety, compromised self-appraisals, and self-destructive behaviors.”⁷⁰ In “Learning from Bodies,” Nora Calhoun dismantles the idea of autonomy, of both the preborn child and the mother, which to accept would require a “willful blindness to the physical reality and lived experience of pregnancy and birth.”⁷¹ The human body, especially the pregnant female, speaks to us, and we gain wisdom in the experience of being with and caring for one another.

Christian Engagement in the Culture

Because the violence and mass scale of abortion is grievous, with over sixty million abortions occurring since 1973,⁷² anti-abortion, or pro-life, Christians have sought to end abortion since *Roe v. Wade*. Yet this effort to rescue babies from death is not just a modern phenomenon. The early Church condemned the common practice of infanticide and Christians rescued infant lives left out to exposure.⁷³ With the need to rescue vulnerable children from either infanticide during the time of the early church or the mass genocide of abortion in modern times, the woman’s body has often been lost as the focus for the anti-abortion Christian. We can similarly be faulted for disembodiment by removing the woman’s body out of the conversation, or ignoring her in practicality and only focusing on the body of the pre-born child.

Christians can draw on a theology of embodiment in order to rescue preborn children from death *and* support the flourishing of women, and thereby families and communities. With this theology of embodiment, how can the church engage culture

on abortion? First, a clarification on culture. The simple yet understandable definition from Kevin Vanhoozer in *Everyday Theology* is helpful: “By culture we mean the distinctly human world that persons create by doing things not by reflex but freely as expressions of desire, duty, determination.”⁷⁴ Unfortunately, we live in a culture that pursues and celebrates abortion. Likewise, our society, made up of our social institutions, has been impacted by that culture, enshrining abortion into law. While there is a shifting legal landscape, our culture still fully embraces abortion as a human right.

As new laws and court cases threaten to restrict abortion access, culture has dug in its heels to promote abortion as sacrosanct. While in prior decades even pro-choice advocates and political leaders expressed the desire that abortion should be a rare occurrence, in the past ten years proponents have explicitly dropped the qualifier of “rare” from the mantra of “safe, legal, and rare.” Abortion has become not just a right, but something to be celebrated and encouraged, and dissenters are considered anti-woman. Women are encouraged to celebrate abortion with the #ShoutYourAbortion campaign.⁷⁵ This ethical egoism denies the possibilities of mental and physical health risks as the primacy of abortion is so sacrosanct to women that any negativity is overlooked. For example, doctors who attempt to present the medical case for the abortion and breast cancer link have faced professional repercussions.⁷⁶ This perspective is so hardwired in society that scholarly and social skepticism about the aforementioned short-term and long-term negative impact of abortion on women’s physical, mental, and emotional health get downplayed or ignored, doing a grave disservice to women and their pursuit of health and well-being.

This current reality should come as no surprise, as it is reflective of both the Gnosticism and the individualism of our age. Snead refers to this as “expressive individualism” and considers it to be what drives the faulty anthropology that undergirds American public bioethics and thus abortion jurisprudence. It is based on the premise that “the fundamental unit of human reality is the individual person, considered as a separate and distinct manner in which he is or is not embedded in a web of social relations.”⁷⁷ The highest good for the human individual is to define the self in accordance with one’s mental desires, outside of the bounds of the body.⁷⁸ A preborn child that may thwart career plans is thus just a lump of cells to be discarded to continue to preserve the woman’s self. Similarly, as previously mentioned as another example of modern Gnosticism that also fits Snead’s definition of expressive individualism, should a teenage girl feel unhappiness and mental stress from the pressures of puberty and the online world she lives in, she can simply escape her bodily life and try to become a male.

But this expressive individualism does and will continue to fail as it does not consider the realities of the body and the human person; it does not embrace the truth of human embodiment. Our embedded human connections across generations and throughout our communities also reflect this. Human dignity is embodied. This dependence should not be seen as a detriment but something that fosters gratitude, solidarity, and community; while each is unique, we are the same in our need for others. Snead expounds upon this dependence:

Gratitude for the gifts of others’ support and life itself is also fertile ground for the cultivation of the sense of

solidarity—extending one’s field of concert to encompass those beyond his immediate circle of family, friends, and community, to encompass the wider circle of humanity. It grows from the recognition that dependence on the generosity and uncalculated giving of others is a universal condition of human beings, owing to their embodied existence.⁷⁹

We need each other to survive and flourish, starting from the beginning of our lives as an embryo on the womb dependent upon and in relationship with our mother. Our dependence and solidarity is not only needed for our survival, but our thriving, allowing our personhood to flourish in every stage of life.

As this paper looks at the ramifications of *Roe v. Wade* and its possible undoing, this includes the full spectrum of individuals threatened, impacted, or rescued from abortion: the pregnant woman uncertain how she will pay her bills and care for a child, the preborn child at risk of abortion, the birth mother heroically carrying her pregnancy to term, and the foster children languishing in the court system in need of a family. “Becoming a new creation in Christ gives us the ability to imagine a new way of relating to each other and to the goods of creation. More than this, the Spirit empowers this new world, this Christian imaginary, so that it can be embodied. New creation can be made visible in our culture. This Christian imaginary understands social relations not as power plays but as arenas of mutual service.”⁸⁰ Every believer should emulate Boaz in caring for the abortion-affected “Ruths” in our midst.

To do life like Boaz in our world of a shifting abortion dynamic, Christians must take a two-pronged approach. First, the gravity



of the issue and popular embrace of abortion calls for a transformation of culture. Just as the church in the first centuries opposed abortion and infanticide, so must the present-day Church be a beacon of light against the evil of abortion at a mass scale. Christians must shine the light of a theology of embodiment against the darkness of Gnosticism present in pro-abortion feminism. In many ways our modern culture has turned towards embodiment. Women are looking to products and programs that are “organic” and care for the body holistically. A theology of embodiment can help form the imagination of a new generation of women, especially those that have grown up with sonogram technology; 4D sonogram pictures makes it uncomfortable to deny the humanity of the preborn child in the womb. We must look at the ordinary and natural occurrences of everyday life, see the blessing of God in it, and in turn help others, the culture around us, see it too.⁸¹ Pregnancy and childbirth are as ordinary and extraordinary events as can be, and seen through the lens of embodiment, we see the beauty of creation and the incarnation—the Church must find creative ways to share this beautiful story with the world so as to not just warn away from the evil and disembodiment of abortion, but to draw people in to the goodness of God’s design and resurrection plan for the body.

Christians must turn inward, too. Abortion is not just something that happens outside the church. According to a study by Lifeway Research, “36% of women were attending a Christian church once a month or more at the time of their first abortion.”⁸² Women are simply not turning to the church for support or guidance with an unplanned pregnancy: “76% of women indicate local churches had no influence on their decision to terminate their pregnancy.”⁸³ The Lifeway Research is distressing. Not only are church-going women having abortions, but women who have abortions do not view the church as a haven of spiritual and material support during and

after an unplanned pregnancy. Churches must look to the ways they can open doors and lines of communication to be equipped to care for women seeking abortion.

Unfortunately, those lines of communication are often not open because of the great barrier of shame in our churches, especially when it comes to issues around sexuality, unplanned or out of wedlock pregnancies, and abortion. Shame has poisoned our world since man and woman first disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, separating humans from the Creator, and man from woman. Psychiatrist and author Curt Thompson writes of the destructiveness of shame, drawing on neurobiology to describe how shame elicits a “felt” sense in the body: “shame is not simply acknowledgment of perceived facts but rather an emotionally expressed and experienced phenomenon.”⁸⁴ However, the transforming power of embodiment is able to overcome the disintegration caused by shame; our brains need connection which can literally reshape our neural networks.

Thompson draws on the relational view of the *imago Dei*, writing that God “desires us to join him in his trinitarian life of being known.”⁸⁵ Connections in which one is fully known and loved, with the church as a body caring for one another, repels shame. A theology of embodiment, backed up by neurobiology, opens the lines of communication, and the arms of one to another, so that we may receive each other with love. This is how it is supposed to be as “the Bible calls us to an alternate social world, a new city. The church is to function as a body, each member ministering the nourishment of Christ to others.”⁸⁶

Guided by a theology of embodiment, the vision of fostering a cultural imagination of embodiment theology, serving women and families struggling socio-economically, and revitalizing the church to support abortion-minded women is less daunting. Looking to small communities and creativity

will be the most effective path forward. In *Culture Making*, author Andy Crouch writes of the power of a small group of people, optimally the trinitarian number of three, to see cultural change.⁸⁷ Christians must first start with our families, raising up our children in the faith, formed by a theology of embodiment that rejects abortion and welcomes the pregnant single mother. A concentric circle of influence of 12 or 120 people can then represent our churches, looking for creative ways to practice embodiment theology. This might be small groups like Embrace Grace that support pregnant women through baby showers and other acts of service,⁸⁸ supporting local pregnancy centers, or establishing programs and outreach within the church and community to welcome women who might otherwise choose abortion.

The Transformative Power of Embodiment Theology

The doctrines of creation and the incarnation form a theology of embodiment in which life lived out in the body is of extreme importance to reflect the image of God and to accomplish God’s salvific plan for creation. The life we live in our body tells the story of our creation, of our salvation, and our future resurrection. We were created with dignity and purpose: to reflect our Maker and live out his redemptive purpose for our bodies, through our bodies, in relationship with one another. As the supply and demand for abortion shifts in coming years, Christians must be prepared to practice a theology of embodiment. Drawing on the doctrines of creation, the *imago Dei*, and the incarnation, a theology of embodiment that forms Christians to live a relational life lived out in our bodies can revitalize the Church to serve women and children, especially those at risk for abortion. If we want to see an end to abortion, we must start with the woman’s body—we must consider the body upon which the preborn body is dependent, her mother. 🌱

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