

The Bodily Benefit

We live in an age that is both obsessed with body image and denies the body has any lasting significance beyond death. One day the body is honed and toned through exercise and plastic surgery, and the next it is cremated and scattered to the winds.

The Christian view of the body recognises its value now and calls us to holiness in our bodily actions. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body,” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; cf. Romans 12:1). At the same time, we recognise the great value of the body after death, knowing that God will raise us up again from the dead. One particular Lutheran rite of burial includes a passage that reminds the mourners that God is not finished with this body we now lovingly lay in the ground. “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself,” (Philippians 3:20-21).

At the Lord’s Supper, the Christian is fed both body and soul. Some have inferred a bodily benefit to the Lord’s Supper through the admonition St. Paul gives about unworthy eating. “Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on Himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died,” (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). This bodily benefit that comes from the forgiveness of sins is not one that we should look to for giving us athletic prowess or to free us from every infirmity. It is a much greater benefit: the power of the resurrection. That is one majestic result of being in communion with the resurrected Jesus. We shall also rise from the dead on the strength of His victorious body and blood. In one of Luther’s two great works about the Lord’s Supper, he connects the Lord’s Supper with our coming resurrection.

This is a bodily benefit.... an extraordinarily great one, and it follows from the spiritual benefit.... If we eat him spiritually through the Word, he abides in us spiritually in our soul; if one eats him physically, he abides in us physically and we in him. As we eat him, he abides in us and we in him. For he is not digested or transformed but ceaselessly he transforms us, our soul into righteousness, our body into immortality. (AE 37:132)

This bodily benefit leads us back to the beginning, where man was created by God to live and not die, to partake of the tree of life. In the parables of Jesus, the kingdom of God is often likened to a great banquet, such as a feast for the marriage of the king’s son (e.g., Matthew 22:1-14). The Book of Revelation takes up this same theme: “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9). This marriage takes place in a new city, new Jerusalem,

where God dwells with man (Revelation 21:2-3), where the feast-prophecy of Isaiah 25 is fulfilled: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore” (Revelation 21:4). There in that city, new Jerusalem, is the tree of life, perpetually in bloom, a tree that heals the world (Revelation 22:2).

In the Supper, we receive Jesus in His body and blood. This moment, as the church gathers together around Jesus and His Word, is the one moment that makes sense out of all the other troubles and arguments and sins and death. There at His Supper, Jesus is putting everything to rights for us. The Holy Communion is the Gospel, and while it is everything, it is also provisional. In His Supper, Jesus is preparing us for a yet greater feast, when we shall walk in the new city, free from sadness, free from shame, and be truly alive. Nothing shall harm us, for we will have free access to the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

This is our great hope. This Table of the Lord is our great protection against the gates of hell. When the Table is set for us, there is nothing left to say but the Bible’s closing prayer: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20).