Chains Fall Off: The Resurrection of the Body and Our Healing from Shame

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Abstract: This chapter reimagines bodily resurrection in light of women’s experiences of shame and defectiveness. Women around the world experience shame in relation to their embodied lives. Many women testify they experience shame not only in relation to their sexuality, but in relation to their very existence as embodied beings. The doctrine of bodily resurrection is often used to argue against the value of bodies in this world by directing us to hope only for the world to come. Related doctrines, including “total depravity” and atonement, have similarly been used to perpetuate shame rather than to promote healing.

How can these doctrines help us set aside feelings of defectiveness and shame, living instead with a perception of our beauty and worth? The proposal is that “total depravity” names the fact that shame cannot be overridden by appealing to escapist notions of hope; that “atonement” remembers we are met and valued in our shame by the Word made flesh; that bodily resurrection includes these bodies, on this day, in this world, with these scars.


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Introduction

It was a Tuesday afternoon last spring and I was teaching my regular “feminist theologies” class. There were about 15 students—11 women, 4 men—gathered around a table. We were discussing what it means to be “embodied.”

“I’m sick of feeling shame about my body!” one student exclaimed, inviting others, in turn, to risk a deeper level of honesty. “And I am going to do something about it.” (She went on to develop a final project for the class where she invited close friends to help her reclaim her body by writing her own words—poetry about her experience of trauma and survival—on parts of her body.) Students talked, in particular, about feeling shame in relation to their sexuality. Never living up to expectations (others’ or their own) for how they should look, feel, give.

In the course of the continued conversation, many students—some of the men, and most of the women—testified to feeling shame. Many of them confessed how they had failed to see themselves as the beautiful, embodied people God created them to be, pledging to do better. Each reminded all that our hope and our challenge is to live as whole children of God, helping others to do likewise. It was the kind of conversation any of us would likely have described as “good” over dinner that evening.

Suddenly, the conversation took a more dangerous turn. There was a class member present who simply could not bring herself to climb on board our communal determination to claim our beauty and worth. I have surmised, in retrospect, that for “Charlotte” to have made such a move would have been to betray her own self-perception, however much the others in the conversation might have, at that time, argued precisely to the contrary. To resist even a solidarity-funded, reaching-out-to-claim version of feminist hope was to honor what Charlotte hoped-against-hope (but could not be sure) were the limitations of her perspective. To imagine she could leapfrog to a more intact self-identity would have been, for Charlotte, to disguise herself with an appearance of hope that would only preserve her hopelessness.

“But,” Charlotte said, in the face of our passionate recommitments, “it is not just my body I’m ashamed of. I feel like all of me is defective.” Her comment cleared space for a raw, steadying silence. Our proscribed confessions and affirmations ceased. And in that moment we knew we were incapable of thinking about ourselves the way we ought to. We