

METHODIST RECORDER

BOOK REVIEW

by

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The cosmetic industry is large, profitable and growing as women, and increasingly men, seek to improve their 'body image'. We are visually assaulted through advertising, magazines and the media with images of 'body beauty'. More and more people are becoming less and less happy about themselves and want to 'change' their bodies. Paula Gooder, Theologian in Residence at the Bible Society, in her book **Body: Biblical spirituality for the whole person** (SPCK 2016 £??) seeks to initiate a theological conversation about this.

Her book explores what Paul has to say about bodies, identity, relationships and life after death. She has set herself a daunting task because Paul's teaching in this area is often dismissed. This, according to the author, is because he has been interpreted within frameworks of certain philosophical traditions - Plato particularly. It is also because the Greek words Paul uses are so slippery.

Gooder explains the Greek words which, in our Bibles, are 'flesh', 'soul', 'spirit', 'mind', 'physical' 'spiritual' and 'heart'. She then investigates their relationship with each other. What becomes crystal clear after a couple of chapters is the lack of any dualism or 'splitting' of body and soul in the teaching of Paul.

Her chapter on 'the resurrection body' expounds parts of 1 Corinthians 15. She states that 'at some point in the future we will be raised to a bodily existence' (p.44). This lead her to examine, with a brief reference to cremation, the question of the sort of bodies we might have beyond death. 'Paul's vision of our future embodiment is a vision of bodies that will have elements of continuity and discontinuity with the bodies we have now.' Noting that Jesus' resurrection body was scarred she states 'we are all in our different ways 'disabled' awaiting a future transformation into bodies marked by what they **can** do.' (p.70)

The rest of the book develops the following sentence: 'it is this body – the one we have rather than the one to which we aspire –that makes us truly who we are. Learning to love our bodies as they are, rather than as we wish they were, is one of the hardest but most important features of an existence lived in the knowledge of God's love.' (p.54) Chapters on spirit and

the Holy Spirit, discerning the body, fellowship and the church as the body of Christ, follow. She demonstrates again and again that true identity is not found in the 'me-ness' of me but in the 'us-ness' of us (p.104)

A particularly illuminating insight for me was her description of 1 Corinthians as a musical 'fugue on the body'. From chapter 5 of the epistle, Paul 'dances with the theme of the body, bringing it back in fascinatingly different guises' (p.107). This startling comment made me pick up my Bible to see if this might be true. It is! Henceforth I will read this epistle with new eyes.

I commend this book because it shows how Paul's insights about the body far from being unhelpful are especially pertinent today. Two disappointments! I wanted her to say more about aging, sex, cremation, disability and heaven. I also wish she had given some practical suggestions of actions we might take to confront the 'body beautiful' culture. Her message nevertheless is clear. What makes a beautiful body is not image but inner and outer integration.

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