

Body Without End: Biological Mutualism and the Body of Christ

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Abstract: This article argues that the ecological turn towards biological mutualism enlivens our understanding of the eschatological promise contained in Christ's resurrected and ascended body. I examine the implications of proposing that Christ's body was not only incarnate as microbiome, but also rose and ascended as microbiome. First, I analyse contemporary approaches to Christology's relation to creation and Andrew Davison's theological exploration of mutualism. I then respond via Irenaeus' defence of Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension as promise for all flesh. By reading Irenaeus in light of the mutualistic body, we enrich our understanding of this promise: of fruitfulness for all creation, of fullness for human nature, and that fleshly life is no ultimate barrier to union with God. Finally, I propose that this reading also offers renewed insight into the Eucharist: this promise and its implications are also made manifest at the heart of the church, Christ's body on earth.

Climate change and ecological collapse have prompted rapid growth in theological attention to God's relationship to non-human creation, including (and even particularly) in relation to eschatology. This growth is characterized by renewed emphasis on the ecological dimensions of Scripture's eschatological visions. Eschatological attention to Christ's relation to creation has, however, produced little commentary about the material nature of Christ's resurrected and ascended body. It is Christ's particular eschatological body which is the focus of this article. I will approach the eschatological significance of Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension through attention to another contemporary turn: the ecological model of 'biological mutualism', which acknowledges that creaturely bodies are not isolated individuals but made up of cooperative communities of organisms. Rather than focus on the question of where Jesus' ascended body is, I consider what Jesus' ascended body is – and the eschatological

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implications of the answer given. I begin by briefly outlining contemporary theological approaches to the intersection between creation, Christology and eschatology before introducing Andrew Davison's theological engagement with biological mutualism and the questions it prompts. I then offer a constructive contribution to these existing approaches by taking seriously the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth was not only born microbiome but was also raised and ascended as microbiome. My primary interlocutor is Irenaeus' defence of the bodily resurrection and ascension, though I also turn to Douglas Farrow's *Ascension and Ecclesia* and Colin Gunton's *Christ and Creation*. Finally, I consider the implications of this claim for our understanding of the Eucharist as an eschatological sacrament.

Christ the first fruits

While it is not a new theological idea, the conviction that all creation is being and will be redeemed is back in vogue. This recent (re)conviction is amply supported by christological justifications, which I will first map out before introducing the potential for dialogue which biological mutualism represents. I do not intend to offer a new scientific turn as the basis for a new theological claim. Rather, I believe this scientific turn illuminates existing theological understanding in ways which are instructive for the church – both in our joyful anticipation of the promise for which we wait and in our gathered worship. My hope is that it will mirror the illumination which scientific knowledge has, at its best intersection with theology, also given to the doctrine of creation: not replacing it, but rather enriching it, and turning us to greater praise of the One who both creates and redeems.

In 1961, Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler addressed the New Delhi Congress of the World Council of Churches.¹ His paper, titled 'Called to Unity', critiqued the limited vision of redemption perpetuated by a theology which had disentangled creation from salvation. In response, he argued that the church needed to expand her christological scope² by taking up a 'daring, penetrating, life-affirming Christology of nature',³ which would see grace at work in all things. While Sittler takes Irenaeus as his reference point for this theological shift, his address was – as Douglas Farrow points out – oddly lacking in

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- 1 The address was published the following year in *Ecumenical Review* 14 (1962), pp. 177–87.
 - 2 Steven Bouma-Prediger, 'Conclusion', in Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken, eds., *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 224.
 - 3 Joseph Sittler, 'Called to Unity', in Bouma-Prediger and Bakken, *Evocations of Grace*, p. 46.

references to the body of Jesus of Nazareth.⁴ It is a cosmic vision of Christ with an oddly un-fleshy centre. And this approach has been perpetuated over the subsequent decades, as Farrow summarizes:

Since the New Delhi congress references to an Irenaean type of theology have become commonplace. Much more frequent as well are references to the cosmic Christ. But discussion of these themes has been characterized by . . . strange silence about Jesus of Nazareth . . . what Sittler presents as the beginning of an ecological theology does not appear to be based on the Jesus-centred vision of Irenaeus after all, but rather on a doctrine of ubiquity which is intended to recapture the latter's much needed affirmation of the material world.⁵

This 'doctrine of ubiquity' – an ironically displaced and generalized vision of material abundance and progress – is not so much concerned with Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension as sign of the age to come. It rather imagines that the ascended Christ, no longer tied to the tedious business of being a Jewish man under Roman occupation, is now found in all of creation and as such is bringing all things to completion. This implication takes its most explicit form in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, whose commitment to an ideology of evolutionary progress (and even salvation)⁶ led him to propose a 'third face' to Christ beyond the 'Man-Jesus' and the 'Word-God'. This third face, or nature, is the 'cosmic Christ', who is unconstrained by humanity's relative insignificance in the universe.⁷ The cosmic Christ is necessarily the end of evolution, lest he become irrelevant. If Christ is the One in whom all things hold together, he must not, argues Chardin, be limited in our imagination by the particularity of the incarnation. Rather,

when the face of Christ is projected . . . upon a universe that is evolutive in structure, it expands and fills out effortlessly. Within this organic and

4 Douglas Farrow's detailed analysis of the 'Return of the Cosmic Christ' notes that Sittler's turn to Irenaeus – and cosmology – was directly influenced by Allan Galloway's *The Cosmic Christ* (1951), though both were working in a wider theological milieu, including J.R. Illingworth, William Temple and W.R. Inge. Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 191–254.

5 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 197.

6 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 78:

A Christ whose features do not adapt themselves to the requirements of a world that is evolutive in structure will tend more and more to be eliminated out of hand... if a Christ is to be completely acceptable as an object of worship, he must be presented as the saviour of the idea and reality of evolution.

7 For an extended analysis, see J.A. Lyons, *The Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard de Chardin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

moving framework, the features of the God-man spread out and are amplified with surprising ease. There they assume their true proportions, as in their own natural context.⁸

In his desire to counter the harmful dualisms and narrow salvific lens of Western Christian thought, Chardin finds Christ everywhere! And, as such, nowhere particular.

Other readings of the eschatological relationship between Christ and creation are of course available. In *Christ and Creation*, Colin Gunton argues that the resurrection informs their eschatological relation: the resurrection demonstrating God's power over creation, and thus substantiating the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The resurrected body of Christ is as such a transformed body, not an immaterial spirit.⁹ For Gunton, hope for creation is not found in an abstracted universal presence. Rather, that hope is found in Christ taking on and rising in our creaturely particularity. Gunton goes on to emphasize that to be a creature is to be in relationship, horizontally and vertically: 'the universe is not a blank homogeneity. Rather, there is a network of mutually constituting particularities: distinct beings who yet take the shape of their being from one another.'¹⁰ This plasticity to our being, shaped by our relationships with other creatures, is something Jesus shared with us. He 'was as we are, a creature in relations of "horizontal" reciprocal constitution with other people and the world'.¹¹ Unless we are to treat the incarnation as a skin which was easily shed (and circumvent the testimonies of those who met the risen Christ, a point I will return to later), this shaping was, in some mysterious sense, also raised and ascended into heaven.

Peter Scott has also emphasized the mutuality of creatureliness in his assessment of the eschatological promise made to the whole of creation. He likewise notes that the prevailing eschatological models (strictly 'personal', 'historical/social', or 'cosmic') have failed to do justice to 'the constitutive and

8 Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 87.

9 Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), pp. 30–1. Gunton echoes Barth's emphasis on Christ's particular resurrection and ascension – in Jesus of Nazareth the human creature comes into the very presence of God, the human essence exalted. The 'Creator condescended to be a creature . . . (and so) adopted it into fellowship with His being as God' and this condescension is not given up in the ascension. Jesus' humanity, he writes, is 'in its very creatureliness . . . placed at the side of the Creator . . . It is a clothing which he does not put off. It is his temple which he does not leave . . . He is God in the flesh' [emphasis mine]. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), IV/2, pp. 103–4.

10 Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, p. 37.

11 Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, p. 43.

mutually shaping relations between humanity and non-human nature'.¹² Speaking of the future of human creation without speaking of the future of wider creatureliness misunderstands that 'constitutive of the creatureliness of the human is the creatureliness of ecological nature'.¹³ This must transform the task of eschatology.¹⁴ Like Gunton, Scott turns to Christ's bodily resurrection as containing eschatological promise for all creation – but it is, for Scott, our sociality which holds all of creation together:

God, nature and humanity are social concepts that are intelligible fully only if their social intention is drawn out . . . the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's promise to the covenantal character of the social humanity in nature; humanity and nature share the important feature of the transcendental of sociality . . . The promise of God the Creator in Jesus Christ grants a future to that which is social. For nature also is social. Nature participates in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because of the sociality that it shares with social humanity.¹⁵

Scott's argument ties together the fullness of Christ's creatureliness with the 'law-like',¹⁶ fullness of interconnected life, whereby no individual creature lives in isolation. Christ's perfect and perfecting humanity is not expressed in distance from other creatures, but in intimacy – and this is no less true of the resurrected (and by extension the ascended) body. Rather than the resurrection offering a point of divergence whereby non-human creation goes one way and human creation goes another, Scott argues that this moment 'grants a future to spatio-social creatures'; it is a future embodiment which will be distinct in nature from its beginnings but is nonetheless promised.¹⁷

Gunton and Scott articulate clear commitments to the significance of the creatureliness of Jesus being shaped by other creatures, and as such the promise for all creation found in the bodily resurrection.¹⁸ Both also commit to treating our relationality – our being shaped by each other – as a good, whose fulfilment we see in Christ. Both, however, remain prudently cautious

12 Peter Scott, 'The Future of Creation: Ecology and Eschatology', in David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot, eds., *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 93.

13 Scott, 'The Future of Creation', p. 93.

14 One could argue that we can only be certain that ecological creatureliness is constitutive of human creatureliness in this life, not the life of the age to come, and so it need not concern us. But rather than offering a simpler approach to describing human salvation, such an argument requires a re-imagination of the nature of humanity which is so extensive as to render us unrecognizable – and also struggles to find purchase in Scripture. And there are other problems concerning our assumptions about sin or fallenness which this approach opens up – I will return to them later.

15 Scott, 'The Future of Creation', pp. 100–101.

16 Scott, 'The Future of Creation', p. 97.

17 Scott, 'The Future of Creation', p. 114.

18 And even more so in the ascension, the significance of which I return to later.

in making explicit claims as to the specific nature of this shaping: they avoid commenting too closely on the nature of Christ's resurrected body, or what it might signify of the new creation.¹⁹ It is, after all, a difficult and dangerous task to sift through the created order and demarcate those aspects of being a relational creature which are the product of a fall, or a necessary but not necessarily good limitation, from those aspects of our creatureliness to be fulfilled in the eschaton. I do not intend to produce a straightforwardly natural theology. But when God chooses to take on nature, and not just temporarily, but forever, the aspects of nature which he adopts define the meaning of Christian hope. Asking specific questions about the nature of that which is gathered up in the first fruits of the new creation can, when held lightly and with humility, help illuminate the promise to which we hold. It is to that end that I now introduce biological mutualism.

The mutualist turn

Biological mutualism offers a contrast to the previously popular assumption that the primary (or even only) driver of evolution is the biological dynamic of competition. By way of balance, mutualism emphasizes creaturely bodies as cooperative communities of organisms. Humans are not only externally dependent on relationships with other creatures, but also internally – in the very meaning of what it is to be a body, and, by extension, what it is for us to be human. We may have generally accepted that the substance of our humanity is relational in an external sense, but our internal relations seem more challenging for us to grasp. This is particularly confronting when we realize that not only do our bodies rely on a variety of non-human organisms for our survival, but that those same organisms are not operating in a kind of incidental parallel to us, and are also mutualistic in their behaviour:

My parts, including those bacteria, are shaped by their role in the whole that is me . . . those bacteria will behave differently after my death underlines this . . . Bacteria that had been playing a mutualistic role will start to become opportunists . . . the behaviour of parts is transformed within a whole while, and only in as much as, the whole lasts.²⁰

The wholeness of being a creature is made up of a variety of parts, and each of these parts is changed by its participation in the whole.

19 This is a pervasive but perhaps odd caution in much contemporary theology, given how much the post-resurrection accounts are concerned with describing the bodily (and unbodily) things Jesus does: walking, being wounded, touching, eating, cooking, appearing and disappearing, ascending.

20 Andrew Davison, 'Christian Doctrine and Biological Mutualism: Some Explorations in Systematic and Philosophical Theology', *Theology and Science* 18 (2020), p. 264.

As Andrew Davison observes, theologians have in recent history given ‘considerable energy’²¹ to thinking about competition. While mutualism does not replace the dynamic of competition, it does at the very least merit a similar level of theological attention.²² We might for example take what Davison describes as a ‘Thomist perspective’ and see this intrinsic mutuality as a sign of nature’s glory, a grace conferred, and a kind of ethical guide to a more-than-zero-sum kind of community, where ‘more for one does not mean less for another – it accords with a fundamental beneficence’.²³ Or, further, that mutualism might speak compellingly to Aquinas’s structure for the soul (animal, vegetable, mineral), whereby parts are shaped by their participation in the whole:

The Dominicans insisted on a single form or soul in each living thing, even in a human being. For them, each of the lower levels and functions is subsumed into the higher level, with the implication that ‘lower’ faculties are somewhat transformed by their part in a new whole . . . for me to be alive, or to be an animal, is not a different business from what it means for me to be a rational human being: *for a human being to be alive is to live humanly, and to be an animal is to be an animal humanly* [emphasis mine].²⁴

There are plenty of interesting theological questions raised by mutualism,²⁵ but this latter point is of particular interest because of what Davison calls the ‘mereological problem’: how the individual is constituted, not only here, but when we will be gathered into the presence of God. If it is true that to be human is to be microbiome, it was certainly true of the incarnate Christ.²⁶ Whether it is also true of the resurrected and ascended Christ cannot be addressed with the same certainty, but it does prompt serious examination as to whether any of creation’s current state of mutual dependence will be redeemed – or has already been redeemed. And while Davison takes on the question of a mutualist incarnation, he backs away from its possible implications for eschatology, preferring instead to assume its absence. He suggests there are basically three options for how we might understand

21 Davison, ‘Christian Doctrine and Biological Mutualism’, p. 273.

22 Davison, ‘Christian Doctrine and Biological Mutualism’, p. 271.

23 Davison, ‘Christian Doctrine and Biological Mutualism’, p. 261.

24 Davison, ‘Christian Doctrine and Biological Mutualism’, p. 264.

25 Davison provides an excellent summary of the other theological questions mutualism raises in the aforementioned article.

26 Davison, ‘Christian Doctrine and Biological Mutualism’, p. 268, does not shy away from making this direct connection with Christ the mutually dependent creature, and provides an apt summary of the questions this raises: ‘whether one thinks that poses a challenge to traditional Christian doctrine will likely depend . . . on whether one thinks that the compound picture of human biology more widely, presented to us by a mutualistic perspective, disturbs our understanding of human identity’.

Christian hope for other creatures. These options align with how comfortable we might feel about non-human cells in our bodies continuing after resurrection. The first is a maximalist eschatology, in which all things are raised. Davison suggests that this may naively downplay the difference between this life and next. The second is a middle way. This approach might say that only humans are resurrected, but perhaps wish to accommodate a place for non-human cells, as part of what we are. The third option is a human-cell-only eschatology, which emphasizes the difference between current flesh and the resurrection. Davison calls this final vision ‘parsimonious’ but ‘metaphysically credible’. For Davison, this credibility is because the life we currently receive comes from God mediated by other creatures (trees, microbes and so on), but in the life of the world to come, we will receive life from God directly.²⁷

Davison’s rejection of mutualism in the life of the world to come treats the mutualistic nature of creation as part of that ‘form’ which is ‘passing away’. This position rests on the assertion that, in the presence of God, we will no longer be dependent on anything but him. The state of eternal life will thus involve quantitatively less of life as we know it: the new creation will require fewer creatures and less diversity, and ever greater intimacy with God will be achieved by lessening our intimacy with the rest of God’s creation. To be more human in this frame is to be less mutually dependent.

This position is most obviously supportable because it deals efficiently with the problem of death (and by extension evil more broadly): biological mutualism is still bound up with creation in cycles of death and struggle, and eternal life must mean an end to the current order of the created world. I find this a troubling resolution to the problem for two reasons. Firstly, Davison’s position risks treating our sociality or interdependence as a fall-out of sin, brokenness, or at best a necessary but temporary limitation – that is, as an alternative to truly being in the presence of God. There is of course theological pedigree for this approach. Tertullian, for example, argues against eating in heaven: a necessity no longer required when we will be nourished by God directly.²⁸ But this reading creates considerable difficulty for interpreting the forty days following Jesus’ resurrection and our affirmation of the bodily ascension of Christ (that his resurrected body also ascended into heaven). Perhaps woundedness and eating were, for Jesus’ resurrected body, wholly different to our eating and woundedness. I do not mean to downplay the radical difference of Christ’s ascended body to our own. But I also take seriously the risk in implying that – for example – the fish which the resurrected Jesus eats was not really eaten, Christ’s risen humanity becoming a sort of

27 Davison, ‘Christian Doctrine and Biological Mutualism’, p. 271.

28 Tertullian, ‘On the Resurrection of the Flesh’, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III (repr. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), Chapter LX, pp. 591–2.

mask in our imagination.²⁹ The danger of seeing encounters with the risen Christ as in some way deceptive represents a far greater theological risk than supposing that God, the Creator of all things, could indeed so redeem microorganisms that our whole bodies could receive life without death.

Secondly, squeamishness about what happened to our risen Lord's gut is arguably associated with a wider theological nervousness concerning his ascension. To speak of Christ ascending into heaven with body feels complicated at best, especially now that we have largely abandoned a medieval cosmology whereby heaven is directly above us. But the consequences of quietly abandoning this theological claim are more far-reaching than perhaps we realise, as T.F. Torrance points out:

The way we interpret the ascended and advent humanity of Christ and its cosmic and eschatological import for human and physical existence in space and time, will determine more precisely how we regard the resurrection of Jesus Christ in body. A concept of the ascension in which the humanity of Jesus is swallowed up in the Spirit or Light of the eternal God, or a concept of the eschatological future which has little more material content to it than that somehow the future is more real than the past or the present, and in which the humanity of the advent Christ is replaced by 'hope', would appear to reflect in the last analysis a rather docetic understanding of the incarnation. Hence the 'human realism' with which we interpret the ascension and the final advent of 'this same Jesus' is likely to prove a real test for the 'human realism' in our understanding of both the historical and the risen Jesus Christ.³⁰

Torrance offers an explicitly holistic vision of incarnation to resurrection to ascension. In ultimate terms, they cannot be treated in isolation from each other – they interpret each other. And it is not only the fates of those on earth that are transformed by Christ's triumph, but the nature of heaven too: 'the ascension of the incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus Christ inevitably transforms "heaven": something quite new has been effected in the heavenlies which must alter its material content in our understanding of what heaven is'.³¹ In Christ's bodily ascension, heaven welcomes the first fruits of the new creation. Whether we

29 There is also perhaps a broader discomfort with God the Son experiencing the bodily functions of which we are most ashamed – and these becoming less acceptable in his glorified body. Or we might assume that Jesus did not need his gut flora anymore – which reintroduces creaturely mutualism as a necessary inconvenience, or even necessary evil, of which we will one day be rid. The latter approach strikes me as bearing some similarity to those who might, for example, imagine that in heaven they will be able to fly, our pedestrian nature being a weird and temporary limitation God imposed, rather than part of what it is to be a human.

30 Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1976), pp. 25–6.

31 Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, p. 129.

think this can include the microorganisms which his mother Mary gave him, and which sustained him during his life on earth, will depend very much on the relationship between our doctrines of creation and our eschatological imagination. In this article I treat mutualism, including the human microbiome, as part of God's ongoing creative act rather than seeing it as a temporary limitation or attempt to squeeze goodness out of a fallen state. That is, I am treating mutualism as a good beyond its necessity. Based on our experience of God's creative goodness and Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension, I will propose that our eschatological imagination should assume more life – qualitatively and quantitatively – rather than less. To do so, I now turn to Irenaeus' defence of the bodily resurrection, and the abundant life which dominates his eschatological vision.

Irenaeus and eschatological abundance

In fierce response to gnostic thought, Book V of Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* defends human bodily redemption with reference to the power of God, the body of the resurrected and ascended Christ, and the nature of the promised spiritual body. He also argues that this incorruption is for all flesh. Irenaeus does not see the inferiority of the present life when compared to eternal life as an indicator that eternal life will be less fleshly, but rather that it will be more – that life eternal has more power to vivify and to be fruitful. This radical challenge to a dualism whereby spirit and matter not only operate in parallel but are actively at odds pertains directly to the question of this article: how does our imagination of Christ's risen and ascended body reflect and perpetuate attitudes concerning the goodness of matter, and its promised restoration?

Irenaeus opens his defence of the bodily resurrection (and thereby the power of God to give all flesh incorruption) by affirming that Jesus truly possessed flesh and blood in the incarnation,³² that it was this same flesh and blood that also attained salvation for us,³³ and that the Eucharist (whose elements are part of creation) is a sign to us that flesh can receive life eternal.³⁴ I will return to this latter point later on, but it is useful to have this frame in mind before turning to a close reading of Chapter 3, where Irenaeus introduces his main emphasis for the rest of the book: the power of God. It is this life-giving power which drives the force of his argument for true bodily resurrection for humans, and also that all of creation might be made more lively, more abundant. It is bewildering, Irenaeus argues, that we might 'dwell upon the infirmity of the flesh' rather than 'the power of Him who raises it up from the dead':

32 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I (repr. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), V.1.2.

33 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.2.2.

34 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.2.2–3.

For if He does not vivify what is mortal and does not bring back the corruptible to incorruption, He is not a God of power. But that He is powerful in all these respects, we ought to perceive from our origin, inasmuch as God, taking dust from the earth, formed man. And surely it is much more difficult and incredible, from non-existent bones, and nerves, and veins, and the rest of man's organization, to bring it about that all this should be, and to make man an animated and rational creature, than to reintegrate again that which had been created and then afterwards decomposed into earth . . . He who in the beginning caused him to have being who as yet was not, just when He pleased, *shall much more reinstate again* those who had a former existence, when it is His will [that they should inherit] the life granted by Him. And that *flesh shall also be found fit for and capable of receiving the power of God . . . Numbers would fail to express the multiplicity of parts in the human frame, which was made in no other way than by the great wisdom of God. But those things which partake of the skill and wisdom of God, do also partake of His power* [emphasis mine].³⁵

While Irenaeus' focus in Chapter 3 remains on human flesh receiving the power of God, here two key themes emerge to which he will repeatedly return, and which also drive the basis of his vision for restoring the whole of creation. The first is that the current corruptibility of flesh is in no way a barrier to its receiving incorruption, given the power of God. The second is that the complex nature of present creaturely life is not a product of fallenness or corruptibility, but a result of the wisdom of God. Irenaeus is insistent that both fleshiness itself is no barrier to eternal life³⁶ and that it is the 'whole nature of (hu)man' that will receive salvation.³⁷ What, then, is the whole nature of being (hu)man? Irenaeus is guided here by Christ's resurrection appearances, who rose 'in the substance of flesh and pointed out to His disciples the mark of the nails and the opening in His side'.³⁸ He draws on the bodily nature of this interaction to interpret the distinction between 'animal' (mortal) and 'spiritual' (incorruptible) bodies in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere in Paul's epistles.³⁹ The spiritual body is for Irenaeus not less fleshly, but qualitatively more, in that the power of God which vivifies it is eternal. As he goes on to emphasize in the following analogy, it is not the substance but the quality which is transformed:

35 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.3.2, p. 529.

36 'Since the Lord has power to infuse life into what He has fashioned, and since the flesh is capable of being quickened, what remains to prevent its participating in incorruption, which is a blissful and never-ending life granted by God?' Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.3.3.

37 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.6.

38 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.7.1, p. 532.

39 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.7–8.

The engrafted wild olive does not certainly lose the substance of its wood, but changes the quality of its fruit, and receives another name . . . so also, when man is grafted in by faith and receives the Spirit of God, he certainly does not lose the substance of flesh, but changes the quality of the fruit . . . a spiritual man.⁴⁰

Movement towards God is not brought about by losing the flesh, but by receiving the Spirit. As Julie Canlis puts it: 'Irenaeus fought for a sphere in which flesh is neither antithetical to, nor subordinate to, nor changed into spirit, but in which flesh participates in the Spirit for its integrity, salvation, and fulfilment'.⁴¹ By transforming our understanding of the life of the world to come, we also transform our relationship to the present. To continue in creatureliness is not the result of sin, but the fulfilment of God's promise that fleshly life will be no barrier to participation in the life of God. And as we participate still further in the life of the Spirit, we will become more human, our participation in divinity a kind of ultimate 'humanization', to borrow a phrase from Canlis.⁴²

Irenaeus repeatedly returns to the fleshly substance of that which is redeemed, on the basis that God will not ultimately cast aside what God has deemed worthy of creation:

For it is not one thing that dies and another which is quickened, as neither is it one thing which is lost and another which is found . . . as in Adam we do all die, being of an animal nature, in Christ we may all live, as being spiritual, *not laying aside God's handiwork* [my emphasis], but the lusts of the flesh.⁴³

It is perfectly possible to construct a defence of the microbiome's resurrection based on this argument alone: that, not having reason to treat this part of human creatureliness as the product of sin, it would be safest to assume that Jesus' microbiome (and thus ours) will be raised, as being part of God's creative wisdom. For Irenaeus, Jesus' resurrection and ascension affirms that creatureliness is not ultimately incompatible with eternity. And even more than this there is, as Farrow summarizes, 'a creaturely form of eternity, consisting in an existence that is fully engaged with God, open to the inexhaustible possibilities generated by communion with God'.⁴⁴ But Irenaeus' vision for human creaturely

40 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.10.2, p. 536.

41 Julie Canlis, 'Being Made Human: The Significance of Creation for Irenaeus' Doctrine of Participation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005), p. 444.

42 Canlis, 'Being Made Human', p. 447: 'How can our humanization simultaneously be our "promotion into God"? It is only when we leave behind modern anthropological renderings of human creaturehood as autonomous, or as threatened by participation in the divine . . . The very orientation and goal of our creaturehood is towards participating more and more in God.'

43 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.12.3, p. 538.

44 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 50.

redemption cannot be treated in distinction from the fulfilment of all creation. He goes still further, offering clear conviction that the resurrection of humans in isolation would also contradict God's wisdom:

For since there are real men, so must there also be a real establishment, that they vanish not away among non-existent things, but progress among those which have an actual existence. For *neither is the substance nor the essence of the creation annihilated (for faithful and true is He who has established it)*, but the *fashion* of the world passes away . . . when this [present] fashion [of things] passes away, and man has been renewed, and flourishes in an incorruptible state . . . there shall be the new heaven and the new earth [emphasis mine].⁴⁵

Both the substance (taken here to mean the physical properties of creation) and the essence (that which makes it what it is) are distinguished from the fallenness of creation (its fashion). It is not the physicality or the innately interdependent nature of creation which is to be annihilated. This 'real establishment' is not a sanitized city, where humans dwell alongside other humans – and perhaps a few (largely figurative) trees. Instead, Irenaeus sees this incorruptible flourishing as being fundamentally intertwined with a kind of mutual abundance, in line with the visions of the prophets: 'the whole creation will, according to God's will, obtain a vast increase, that it may bring forth and sustain fruits'.⁴⁶ The people of this new creation 'shall come to what is good, and into a land of wheat, and wine, and fruits, of animals and sheep; and their soul shall be as a tree bearing fruit, and they shall hunger no more'.⁴⁷ Irenaeus envisions both a qualitative and quantitative increase in the life of the world to come. This eschatological vision of infinitely multiplied fruitfulness might appear almost mundane to contemporary Western readers – though our capacity to judge a fitting redemption for the earth should at the very least be treated as under serious question, given the wholesale destruction we have wrought of precisely these most basic and material gifts. Bearing this in mind, are we to accuse Irenaeus of a kind of naiveté, an inability to distinguish between goodness now and goodness in the world to come?

Here I return to the key role that not only the resurrection but also the ascension plays in Irenaeus' thought. As Farrow summarizes:

On the one hand, the ascension (or rather what we might call the ascension/parousia differential) highlights the discontinuity between the present world and the world to come. On the other hand, ascension in the flesh, as the

45 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.36.1, p. 566.

46 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.34.2, p. 564.

47 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.34.3, p. 564. Irenaeus is also firmly opposed to purely allegorical readings of these prophecies – see V.35.1.

bishop puts it, demands that we understand the former as something incorporated and perfected by the latter.⁴⁸

Book III of *Against Heresies*, in which Irenaeus defends Jesus of Nazareth as God the Son ('united to and mingled with his own creation' and thus able to 'raise up all flesh'), sets this scene:

In every respect, too, He is man, the formation of God; and thus He took up man into Himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus *summing up all things in Himself*: so that as in super-celestial, spiritual, and invisible things, the Word of God is supreme, *so also in things visible and corporeal He might possess the supremacy*, and, taking to Himself the pre-eminence, as well as constituting Himself Head of the Church, He might draw all things to Himself at the proper time [emphasis mine].⁴⁹

In the ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, creaturely nature is taken into heaven and thus changes the nature of heaven itself. This is the demonstration of Christ's supremacy over creation. Participating in creation cannot, then, be a necessary but mercifully temporary filter for God's gift of life, nor does it present any barrier to full communion with God. God takes up creation into himself as an act of triumph, not as compromise. Gunton also picks up on the significance of the bodily ascension as testifying to the perfection towards which creation moves; Jesus' flesh 'transformed into the conditions of the age to come'.⁵⁰ Here, we have our glimpse of 'the first fruits of a human life that has been freed from the pollution disseminated in the world by its misuse for other purposes than the praise of God. Thus is the creation, closed off from God by sin, opened up to the Father'.⁵¹

In interpreting the promise for creation which the resurrection accounts or the conviction of bodily ascension offer, we also look to the event which

48 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 46. The role of the ascension in Irenaeus' eschatological vision for creation has received surprisingly little attention. For example, Matthew C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) offers a thorough defence of the bodily resurrection as core to Irenaeus' eschatology but makes no mention of Christ's ascension.

49 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', III.16.6, p. 443.

50 Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, p. 61. Gunton's understanding of the conditions of the age to come, p. 60, explicitly incorporates the horizontal nature of Christ's relating:

The risen Jesus is brought into some kind of constitutive relation with all creation. If the resurrection is an event which universalises the relation of the historical Jesus of Nazareth to the world, it must . . . in large measure be understood in terms of what we have called the horizontal relationality of Jesus.

51 Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, pp. 106–7.

Christ's ascension brings about. The ascension of Christ in body both transforms the nature of heaven and opens creation up for the descent of the Holy Spirit. This is the Spirit who works to bring life; a perfecting liveliness which rejects alienation in favour of communion. It is, in other words, a mutualistic creation restored. The Spirit's presence affords God's creatures with more fruitfulness and greater intimacy, not less creaturely in their transformation but more fully the creatures that they are called to be. It is the Spirit which brings about flowering in the desert and which forges unity across the diversity of the early church; the Spirit does not annihilate creaturely particularity but rather brings about the possibility for communion.⁵² On what basis, then, do we see the 'renewal of the inheritance of the earth'⁵³ as a movement away from interrelation with other creatures? It would serve us well to admit that perhaps our discomfort with this idea may be the product of our cultural alienation from other creatures. Again: to firmly dismiss the notion of the ascended (and thus eschatological) microbiome, we would have to argue that it is a product of sin (pollution) – or say that while it is not itself bad, it is a product of necessity in a not yet perfected world. To do so we would have to have a clear theological line of perfection as movement *away* from interrelation with other creatures, *away* from mutual dependence.

A metabolic thanksgiving

I turn now to the final piece of the puzzle for imagining the nature of our transformation: the gathering of the body of Christ at the Lord's table, in which the eschatological promise of ultimate communion with God is prefigured in the life of the church. Gunton highlights the significance of the sacrament for our creaturely eschatology by emphasizing the parallel between the Lord's supper and the heavenly banquet:

The Lord's Supper, the sacrament of continuing membership of the body of Christ, shifts the emphasis from the judgement of the old form of life – though that is still there (1 Cor. 11:31f) – to the eschatological theme of transformation. That is why it is often linked to the idea of the heavenly banquet. Meals are in almost universal human experience linked with notions of celebration and community. Food is best eaten in company, and

52 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 63, puts this relationship between the ascension and the Spirit's work well:

The Spirit takes possession of creation. And in this act of possession he brings everything into subjection to Christ, enabling him to grant fruit to what is barren, wholeness to what is broken, vitality to what has become lifeless. Creation is liberated from every form of alienation and from everything contrary to the life of communion.

53 Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.33.1, p. 562.

so the Lord's Supper becomes the means by which the praise of God and the transformation of human life out of alienation and into the eschatological community are at once symbolised and realised.⁵⁴

While Gunton's focus is on intra-human creatures, let us be still more explicit about the nature of the community that participates in the Eucharist.⁵⁵ In the church, we enact this promise of creation's future fruitfulness in the act of eating bread and wine; our microbiomes participate in our reception of the body and blood of Christ. We offer a metabolized thanksgiving. While Irenaeus was not a biologist by training, the significance of these creaturely goods being offered was also central to his conviction concerning the renewal of the earth. First, he affirms the creaturely reality of the Eucharist:

And as we are His members, we are also nourished by means of the creation (and He himself grants the creation to us, for He causes His sun to rise, and sends rain when He wills Matthew 5:45). He has acknowledged the cup (which is a part of the creation) as His own blood, from which He bedews our blood; and the bread (also a part of the creation) He has established as His own body, from which He gives increase to our bodies.⁵⁶

And it is on this basis that Irenaeus rejects the idea that flesh cannot receive eternity:

When, therefore, the mingled cup and the manufactured bread receives the Word of God, and the Eucharist of the blood and the body of Christ is made, from which things the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they affirm that the flesh is incapable of receiving the gift of God, which is life eternal, which [flesh] is nourished from the body and the blood of the Lord, and is a member of Him?⁵⁷

The material nature of the Eucharist is not incidental, or a circumstantial constraint to worship – it is, in its creatureliness, precisely what God intends it to be. To use Torrance's language, its physicality is a 'pledge' that we participate in

⁵⁴ Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, p. 115.

⁵⁵ Norman Wirzba's *Food and Faith* picks up similar themes: Wirzba opens by reminding the reader that 'living beings are always already communities of beings', fundamentally challenging the individuation which dominates our imagination of the self. He returns to this theme in his treatment of the Eucharist ('By eating at the Lord's Table, people are given here and now a glimpse of heaven as the sort of life God desires for the whole creation . . . a comprehensive reorientation in which all life is restored') and in his closing chapter on eating in heaven, where he draws on Irenaeus to argue that 'eating is one of the most fundamental ways we know for enacting communion'. Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 8, 153, 216.

⁵⁶ Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.2.2, p. 528.

⁵⁷ Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', V.2.3, p. 528.

Christ's full humanity, and will be saved as creatures, not from our creatureliness.⁵⁸ This pledge is consumed, metabolized, by the communities of our bodies. Who are we to treat these creatures to which we belong as beyond the gift of eternal life?

Conclusion

Colin Gunton makes two key observations concerning eschatology: that it is 'in large measure about how we are to deal with our particularity'⁵⁹ and that 'Christology provides the necessary control of eschatology . . . Christ is the one in whom the end and its anticipations, the embracing of time by God's eternity, become real and therefore conceivable'.⁶⁰ As understanding of our particularity has been transformed by biological mutualism, so our understanding of Christ's particularity and eschatological imagination is transformed. I have argued that interpreting the triumphant Christ as a body which is in itself community is not at the expense of his glory, but rather its realization. In this light, our mutualism becomes an overflow of the goodness of God, rather than simply a necessity to which we are temporally bound. This interpretation of Christ's risen and ascended body affirms, with Irenaeus, that the redemption of humanity has never been one which extracts the human from creation, but rather hopes for life abundant. This is affirmed in the work of the Spirit and in the church's celebration of the Eucharist.

Such a theological treatment of microbiomes might, for some, overstep the bounds of the eschatological questions we feel we ought to ask, or the bounds of how science ought to interact with theology. But rather than challenging the doctrines of the bodily ascension and the redemption of creation, it is my hope that this treatment of biological mutualism serves to expand our vision of what these promises might entail. Knowing that we are ourselves communities of creatures adds humble confidence to the conviction that all of creation might be redeemed, and not simply the isolated flesh of the human – as if this has ever been truly isolated.

58 Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, p. 142.

59 Colin Gunton, 'Dogmatic Theses on Eschatology', in Fergusson and Sarot, *The Future as God's Gift*, p. 142.

60 Gunton, 'Dogmatic Theses on Eschatology', p. 143.