Basis of identity and relationship

Affirmation of the goodness of bodily relations

Marriage as mutual subordination "in the body"

These innovative ideas were developed in response to Corinthian Gnostics who repudiated the significance of bodily relations.


Summary printed below from IDB, Supplement, pp. 117-118:

**BODY. 1. In the LXX and the gospels.** The distinction between true self and flesh, or body, so natural for Greek and modern thought, is absent from the OT, where the physical body is not abstracted from the living reality and where human beings are defined in terms of their relationship to God, their creator. In the LXX the term σῶμα appears as a translation for (a) a corpse, human or animal; (b) living physical bodies; (c) slaves, and (d) occasionally as a synonym for the self. The same general usage is found in the gospels, except for the innovative saying of Jesus, "This is my body" (Mark 14:22). Since neither σῶμα nor its Aramaic equivalent were used in connection with the making of an offering, the word here probably denotes the whole self of Jesus given for his disciples.

2. In the Pauline letters. Paul's use of σῶμα is so varied and original that it has been variously appraised. The several ways in which he uses the term can be understood best when one takes into consideration the historical context of his dealing with specific issues and with specific Christian congregations.

a. 1 Corinthians. Paul uses σῶμα in I Thessalonians, Galatians, and Philo- lemon in a nontechnical sense, to mean the physical totality of a person. But then the same word suddenly appears in 1 Cor. 6:12-20 to designate that aspect of one's personhood through which one may relate to other persons and to God. This new use of the term by Paul was evidently prompted by a Gnostic slogan which must have run something like, "Food is to the stomach as fermentation is to the body" (cf. I Cor. 6:12-13). In rebuttal Paul insists that the relation God establishes with the Christian's σῶμα precludes becoming "one body" with a prostitute. Σῶμα here means the whole person entering into both spiritual and sexual relations. The combination is extraordinary in a Hellenistic environment which downgraded the body, and there is a mystical exclusivity in Paul's usage which is profound and unique. The argument is climaxed by the unusual claim that the σῶμα is the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19-20).

b. The later letters. In the later letters Paul's employment of σῶμα as a relation term recedes in favor of more traditional usage (II Cor. 4:10; 5:10; 10:10; 12:2-3). The adoption of a Gnostic idea in II Cor. 5:6-8, where the σῶμα is the prison of the true inner person, indicates a shift in argumentative strategy. The complex use of σῶμα in Romans also indicates sustained controversy. Only in Rom. 12:4-5 is it used in the technical sense of the basis of unity and relationship, but even here the realistic identification of the church with Christ is avoided. Otherwise σῶμα in Romans depicts the basis of selfhood in the old aeon (1:24; 4:19) and the new (Rom. 8:11, 23; 12:1).