

THE BODY IN NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

First Corinthians 6:19 is one of the most misused texts in the New Testament. The part of it that is misused, and often taken as a commonplace, is the first part, “Do you not know that your body is temple of the Holy Spirit?” Although the use to which this text is frequently put by some Christians and Christian groups is inappropriate and in fact contrary to New Testament teaching, the truth expressed in it is at the heart of the mystery of salvation, and indicates some of the basic principles of Christianity. What we see adumbrated here is the very principle of the Body of Christ, the end and purpose of Christ's death and resurrection. To understand this passage fully, and to understand the use of the word “body” (Gk. *σῶμα*, *soma*), in the New Testament, is to see what God has done and is doing, and what it is important that we must do in response.

What Is a Body?

The great variety of uses of *σῶμα* can be divided in many ways, but initially we will begin with three main areas: 1) “body” in the normal, unextended sense; 2) “the Body of Christ” meaning the Church; and 3) “the Body of Christ” meaning the Eucharist. We will return to senses 2) and 3) later. The remaining use, the one with the greatest number of uses in the NT, though perhaps not the most theologically controversial, can be further broken down into two large categories: the dead body and the living body. Evidently the body of 1 Cor 6:19 is one of the latter; but we will begin with the former.

Apparently, the word *σῶμα* originally referred only or principally to dead bodies.¹ In Greek philosophy, dating from a period when the word had come also to refer to the living, it retained some of this connotation. *σῶμα σῆμα*, the body as the tomb of the soul, was a commonplace before Plato and continued to influence Greek thought. The image of the divine spark animating a corpse is never far even from the philosophers who taught otherwise. It is rather the same as with us: to speak of “a body” implies that it is dead. If someone told you, “I found a body in the library,” you would probably picture at once the Oriental dagger projecting from its back, and send for the police or Hercule Poirot. This usage occurs in the New Testament as well. A good example is Jude v. 9, “the body of Moses” speaking of his corpse after his death on Mount Nebo. It is a corpse which is pictured by Jesus in Lk 17:37, “Where the body is, there will the eagles [or vultures] be gathered together”: just as carrion birds surround a corpse, so there will be unmistakable signs of the Second Coming. The body of Jesus is called *σῶμα* in the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion and burial, although Mark also uses the more specific word *πτῶμα*, the word used in the parallel in Mt (24:28) of Lk 17:37. This last is worthy of note. Jesus' body, when dead, was like any other dead body, a corpse, and could be spoken of in the same way.

Among the Greeks, this original use of *σῶμα* colored the more extended use for a living body. In general; it indicated the body when conceived of as an object, an inert and passive thing. According to Schweitzer this affected Jewish use also, so that generally in LXX, *σῶμα* indicates passivity. The word could be used to mean “slave,” the slave being simply an object. This use occurs in the NT at Rev 18:13. The verse describing the things bought and sold in Babylon concludes dramatically, *καὶ σῶμα τῶν καὶ ψυχῶν ἀγορεύοντων*, translated in the RSV as, “and slaves, that is, human souls”: using the meaning of *σῶμα* as “slave” but pointing out that the “bodies” were,

¹ See Schweitzer in Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. *σῶμα*.

after all, those of living human beings. This passivity in the LXX usage carries over into the use of *swma* in the context of sexuality, the body being regarded as passive under the direction of the sexual impulse.

Another nuance that sometimes crept into the Greek usage of *swma* was its use as the equivalent of the reflexive pronoun, especially to indicate the corporeal and individual nature of the person spoken of. This may be related to schools of philosophy that taught the ultimate unity of the souls of all men, the body being therefore the principle of individuation. At any rate, the body is what is most particularly one's own, although it was recognized by some that married couples had their *swmata* in common, as they had their house and their children. The connection of *swma* with sexual relations is always strong. It is the *swma* that the child receives from its parents, who have produced it by the use of their *swmata*. In fact in the LXX of Lv 15:2ff, *swma* is apparently used to refer to the sexual organ.

With the word *swma* is associated the word *sarc* (*sarx*, "flesh"). This is a word which, at least in St. Paul, almost always has a negative connotation. The "flesh" is that part of human nature, either collective or individual, that is unredeemed. Sometimes "body" substitutes for this. One instance is in Rom 8:13, "eiote pneumatika/praxeis tou=swmaton qanaton, zhsete"; "if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live," where an important variant reads, "thj sarkon" ("of the flesh") for "tou=swmaton" ("of the body"). Yet this cannot be all. This "body" is not the one that is a "temple of the Holy Spirit." How is one to separate bad bodies from good?

The Spiritual Body

Paul makes the distinction for us by looking ahead to the general resurrection. In 1 Cor 15, he goes into some technical detail about this event, and the way in which the body can be raised. He points out that there are many kinds of body, as there are many kinds of flesh: men have one kind, birds have another, beasts another, and fish yet another; so too the stars, the sun and the moon are "celestial bodies" differing from "terrestrial bodies." So too with the resurrection of the dead. "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:44). This translation is inadequate. The Greek is "speiretai swma yuxikon, egeiretai swma pneumatikon." The key words are *yuxikon* (*psychikon*) and *pneumatikon* (*pneumatikon*). These refer to the animating force of the body, either the *yuxh* or *pneuma*, the "soul" or "spirit." "Spiritual" will do for *pneumatikon*, but *yuxikon* is harder. "Physical" is not very good; "psychic" or "soulish" have been tried, but none of these fits very well into English. However, a better word may be available. If the Latin *anima* translates *yuxh*, then the best word could be an "animal" body: that is, a body of the same kind, and with the same life principle, as animals.² Note that in 15:39-41 Paul lists different kinds of

² This is in fact the translation used in the New English Bible at this passage.

This is an essay not in psychology, but in somatology (if such a thing exists), and therefore the discussion that follows gives inadequate treatment to the aspects of the human soul. I have no intention of denying scriptural and traditional teaching regarding its immortality or the eternal punishment of the wicked. Even in the "animal body" man is more than an animal. The "heart" is the way the NT usually refers to the seat of the rational soul or *logos* and *logikon* is often used as a synonym for "spiritual." It is this rational soul that is immortal and is shared by men and angels. One does not cease to be, in scholastic terminology, animal by being rational as well, as one does not cease to be vegetative by being animal as well. In the same way, we do not cease to be rational by being spiritual. The distinction here is between different types of body more than between different types of soul. Scripture does not clearly indicate, and I will not even attempt to speculate, what sort of body the damned are raised with. It must at least be able to suffer eternal pain, something probably beyond the capacity of mortal flesh. Nevertheless they have, to their regret, rational and immortal souls. Jesus, of course, in order to be fully man, had to have a human animal soul in the "animal body" as well as a human rational soul.

“flesh”—using the same word for men and lower creatures, then “bodies”—the terrestrial and the celestial. The distinction between animal and spiritual bodies is followed by a discussion of Adam and Christ, the new Adam. The first was a “yuxhē zwsan”: a “living soul”; the Second is a “pneuma zwopoioy”: a “lifegiving spirit.”

The soul merely has life, the spirit gives it. This is “the image of the man of heaven” that we are to bear at the resurrection. But it requires a new body. This new body is not flesh because “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God”; flesh is left behind with the animals, identifying “the flesh” with the “animal body.”

Paul speaks of the animal body being “sown” like a seed; indeed he introduces his discussion by saying, “What you sow does not have life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body” (15:36-38). Here he recalls Jesus in Jn 12:24, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” The context of this saying is significant. Some Greeks—Gentiles—have come looking for Jesus, who now proclaims (12:23) that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Therefore He must be the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, that it may bear much fruit, and not “remain alone.” What Jesus is saying is that now that the Gentiles have begun to come to Him, as prophesied (e.g., Is 60:3), the Church which will be entrusted with the mission of bringing the Gentiles into the people of God must be founded. The rich harvest that is the Church springs from the seed of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Christ is, in fact, the first to participate in the process Paul describes in 1 Cor 15. He lays down his animal body to receive the spiritual body seen and touched after the resurrection. To do this he had to take on a human body and soul, a fact pointed to in Heb 10:5 “a body you have prepared for me,” a body which could die and become a corpse, so that it could be transformed into a spiritual body. That Jesus’ resurrected body is a spiritual body shows that “physical” is a poor translation for yuxikhō since Jesus’ resurrected body was certainly physical in the sense that it could be seen and touched; indeed that it was the same “physically” as the body laid in the tomb on Good Friday.³

It is moreover in some sense a body made of flesh. This is emphasized in John 6, where Jesus discusses the Eucharist before it is instituted. When he institutes the Eucharist, he uses the word swma: tou to eStin to swma/mou (“this is my body”; Mt 12:26); but in Jn 6 he uses the word sarx: “my flesh for the life of the world.” This emphasizes the real and corporeal nature of the food that he would give the Church and its identity with the flesh that they could see before them even then. But it is not the animal body of Jesus that is present in the Eucharist, but what that body has become, the swma pneumatikhō. If the seed of the animal body is transformed into the spiritual body in the resurrection, and if the Church is the harvest that springs from the seed of Jesus’ sacrifice in the flesh, then the Church also is the swma pneumatikhō of Christ, His Body. Here indeed the three senses of swma come together.

The Christian Life and Its Law

Let us now return to the passage in Romans (8:2-14) from which we earlier took “the deeds of the body.” This is a discussion of how Jesus’ death in the flesh affects our life in the flesh. “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God

³ A comparison might be the way that clay becomes ceramic by being fired. It is the same “stuff” yet different in its attributes. “Spiritual” does not mean “unreal” or even “intangible”; cf. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, app. A.

has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. . .” Here we see man under the old Law. The life of man in the flesh is condemned to death, because of the sin of Adam, the father of all human flesh. If Adam had not sinned, flesh would not be a problem, but because he sinned, we inherit his sin with his flesh. The Law, which is righteous, being from God, is nevertheless “weakened by the flesh” because it rests only upon the “blood of goats and bulls” which is only good for the “purification of the flesh” (Heb 9:13). Since it rests on the flesh, it cannot transform the animal body into the spiritual body.

Paul continues: “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit.” Jesus’ perfect sacrifice could take away the obstacle that prevented the fulfillment of the “just requirement of the Law”—that is, to be a holy people for God, by creating a people who would belong to the Lord not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” The word “those who live” here is *oñtej*, literally “beings,” or “those who exist.” It does not refer to conduct but to the means of life. “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” This is not a subjective statement but an objective one. The flesh is destined to die, but to share in the Spirit, the Spirit of God, is to participate in the very life of God. Those whose existence is based on the flesh will die: “Man cannot abide in his pomp, he is like the beasts that perish” (Ps 49:12). Those whose only existence is the *swma yuxikoh*, the animal body, share the fate of animals. St. Paul recalls this when he says “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24) The body of flesh is bound up with death, and with sin for which death is the penalty: “For the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Paul then applies this distinction to the life of the Romans he is addressing: “But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. (Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.) But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead on account of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness.” Here the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, and Christ are identified as that Spirit who lives in Christians. This is the Spirit of life, contrasted with death which is the fate of the body. This death is so certain that Paul can speak of the body as already “dead on account of sin”—that is, because of the sin of Adam, bound up in the flesh. But the spirit is alive “because of righteousness.” What righteousness? Not the righteousness of the flesh, because it hasn’t got any, or the righteousness of the Law, which is based on the flesh, but the righteousness of God whose Spirit is the life principle of the spiritual body: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit who dwells in you.” Thus the Spirit dwelling in Christians is identified with the Spirit of the resurrection. In the Christian dwells, even at this time, the Spirit who will transform the animal body into the spiritual body.

The Spirit dwells in Christians by making them the Body of Christ. As we have seen, the Church is identified with the spiritual, risen body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit. Hence Paul says in Rom 12:5, “we, though many, are one body,” and in 1 Cor 12:13, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of the one Spirit.” This body is indeed greater than its individual parts: “the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:22-23); but the Church is the fullness of Christ by being filled with his Spirit.

The Church, being under the New Covenant, has a new law. This is a law of the Spirit, which corresponds to and contrasts with the law of the Old Covenant. That law was based on the flesh, and its precepts concerned the flesh. As we read in Heb 9:9-10, under the first covenant “gifts and sacrifices were offered which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations of the body imposed until the time of reformation.” Later on we read that we should now worship “with our bodies washed with pure water” (10:22). Since this refers to a time after the “reformation,” that is, the new covenant, it must not refer to the “ablutions” of the old, but to baptism.. This is confirmed by 1 Peter 3:21: “Baptism, which corresponds to this [sc. the Flood], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience.” The dispositions of the old law referred to the flesh, but those of the new law refer to the Spirit.

This was, of course, a very important question in the early Church, a question that St. Paul in his letters frequently addresses. What are the provisions of the new law? Which parts of the old law are still in effect? The old law contained provisions in several areas; we can divide them in three: 1) laws concerning sacrifice; 2) laws relating to ritual purity, including foods; and 3) laws regarding relationships. The Jew, by observing all these laws, would be in state of Old Covenant holiness, as a member of the People of God. But as Jews and Gentiles came together in the new People of God, the Church founded on the sacrifice of Christ, they needed to know what provisions of the law now applied to them. The answer begins with the teaching of Jesus and is further developed by the Apostles. It is consistent with the preceding distinction between flesh and spirit. Briefly, it can be summed up as follows: the only laws remaining in the New Covenant are those concerning relationships, and they have been made stricter. The other two categories, being based on the flesh, do not apply to those in the Spirit, and can actually be a hindrance to the Spirit.

That the first, sacrifice, should be surpassed is easy to see. The perfect sacrifice of Christ replaces the imperfect sacrifices of bulls and goats, as the epistle to the Hebrews describes in great detail. This sacrifice is spiritual, and we participate in it when a priest of Christ’s order, the order of Melchizedek, offers “the acceptable sacrifice that brings salvation to the whole world.” God’s people then partake of the body of Christ, which is his true and risen body, since, in the words of the Roman canon, we receive it from God’s “altar in heaven” in exchange, as it were, for Melchizedek’s sacrifice of bread and wine. Since it comes from the altar in heaven it is that body in which Christ entered into the tabernacle not made with hands (Heb 9:11), where he stands as the Lamb that was slain (Rev 5:6). Thus not only does the spiritual Body of Christ—the Church—feed on the spiritual Body of Christ in the Eucharist, the Eucharist is also a participation in a sufficient sacrifice to supplant all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant.

Laws concerning ritual purity, too, only regard the flesh. This includes all those dealing “with food and drink and various ablutions.”⁴ Jesus speaks of this in Mark 7:14- 22. Here he

⁴ This category of laws includes feasts and Sabbaths as well. These things are based on the sun and the moon, which will not exist in the new creation. Jesus deals with the Sabbath, considered legalistically as a mere resting of the flesh in Mk 2:27-28. However, “the Sabbath was made for man” and therefore serves some useful function; moreover, the place of the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments gives it an importance above other ritual observance. The Christian Church early altered Sabbath observance by switching it to the Lord’s Day (Sunday). This is perhaps the key to the problem of the Sabbath for Christians, It is an element of our participation in the Church that we observe it, but nothing about it is subject to the kind of absolute requirement that would come if it were viewed as an element of New Covenant law; it is capable of exception, where rules against fornicating are not. We can look at other disciplinary regulations of the Church, such as the Lenten fast, in the same way. First of all, the Church has never taught that, they were other than disciplinary regulations capable of change; second, they are all dispensable for good reason. This does not mean that they are not binding, since in general they represent an element in our relationship with the Church.

makes the distinction that applies to all the laws of the Covenant. “Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?” to which the evangelist adds, “(Thus he declared all foods clean).” This distinction between the heart and the stomach foreshadows the distinction of flesh and spirit. The “heart” spoken of is not the physical heart, the center of circulation of the blood, but the heart as the seat of the will, of the rational part of man which is made in the image of God and is the dwelling place—by grace—of the Spirit. It is opposed to the stomach, which is simply flesh. Those things which go to the stomach affect only the body of flesh; they do not affect the spirit. Those things which do defile a man are, Jesus says, “evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slandering, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within”—from the heart or the will—“and they defile a man”—because they are things in the realm of the spirit.

They are things that fall into the third category: matters concerning relationships. The law of the New Covenant concerns only relationships, and insofar as it does, it is stricter than the Old Covenant. This strictness can be seen in the “It has been said. . .but I say to you. . .” of the Sermon on the Mount. Observance of the laws of ritual purity which gave the Jewish people Old Covenant holiness were “regulations for the body”—the body of flesh—combined with commandments on relationships which were, though more demanding than those of pagan societies, mild compared with Jesus’ commandment to love even our enemies and actually to lay down our lives for one another. The observance of the new commandments—love of God and love of neighbor—is what brings about New Covenant holiness. It is obedience to the truth (faith) and love of the brethren that purifies the soul (1 Peter 1:22).

From this perspective we can understand why St. Paul is so firm about the veiling of women in 1 Cor 11, but so firmly opposed to the “circumcision party” in Galatians, or what the distinctions concerning foods in Romans 14 are really about. It also shows us the real importance of the various directives concerning sexual relations. And it is in this context that we find 1 Cor 6:19.

Circumcision of the flesh is the sign above all others of the fleshly covenant. Those who after the flesh are descendants of Abraham are circumcised in the flesh to show that they are in the covenant of his descendants. Those who believe in Christ, whose relationship to Abraham is spiritual (through faith) rather than fleshly, are bound into the New Covenant by the spiritual sign of baptism. Hence for them circumcision (if undertaken for religious reasons) is a sign of an irrelevant relationship which can even be a hindrance to the new relationship that unites Jew and Gentile. The veiling of women, on the other hand, is the outward sign of an inward relationship that is still valid, the relation of men and women in community. It is not the veil itself that is important, but the relationship of which it is a sign. In the same way Romans 14 shows that foods are significant only if they interfere in the relationship among Christians.

The things that destroy relationships, the things that are forbidden by the New Covenant, are the “works of the flesh” which are listed several times in the Epistles. These lists resemble the list given by Jesus in Mk 7:22, such as the list in Gal 5:19-21: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy [“murder” in some MSS.], drunkenness, carousing, and the like.” The last two do not forbid drinking wine, which Paul and other scriptural authors commend, but refer to the misuse of drink, which is an interference with the operation of reason and will, therefore affecting man’s relationship with God. Sorcery and idolatry likewise affect man’s relationship with God. Those named from enmity to murder are all clearly attributes of disordered relationships, while the first

three refer to sexual relations. Irrationality and idolatry, the categories involving the relationship with God Himself, obviously stand in the way of the New Covenant. We will therefore concentrate on relationships among human beings. Here the constitution of the Body of Christ is significant.

The Body as Temple: What It Means

The metaphor of the body as a temple is used three times in the NT, each time with a wider meaning. The first use is in John 2:19-21, where Jesus says that he can raise up the “temple of his body” in three days. He speaks these words in front of the old temple, placing himself as it were in contrast to it. His body is to be the means and location of the new sacrifice, which will replace the old sacrifices of the temple. It is also within his Body the Church where the new sacrifice will be consumed and its fruits experienced, even as the old sacrifices were eaten within the holy place of the old temple. The new temple will be holy, not by the sprinkling of the blood of animals, but by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Peter in 1 Peter 2:5 calls the members of the Church the “living stones” of this temple.

Hence the second reference in 1 Cor 3:16-17: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple, and that God’s Spirit dwells in you. If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are.” “You” here is plural (*υμεις*), indicating the community as a whole. The verses come in a reprimand to the Corinthians for their besetting sin of division. It is their divisiveness that is destroying God’s temple. The temple is holy because of the Spirit and the thing that destroys it is wrong relationships, which are incompatible with the perfection of New Covenant holiness. This perfection is that referred to in Mt 5:48, when Jesus says, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This is not ritual perfection, but perfection in love; love of friend and enemy, of the just and unjust alike.

In 1 Cor 12:12-13, Christians are reminded that the Church is the Body of Christ, and that they are members of it, a phrase used also in 1 Cor 6:13-20. This passage concerns what the RSV translates “immorality”—a rather demure translation of *porneia*, probably better rendered “fornication.” In this passage we can see the spiritual importance of sexual relations in the New Covenant.

Sexual relations are not regulated in the New Testament (or in the Old, for that matter) from the point of view of personal pleasure or emotional satisfaction. The importance of sexuality is that its expression sets up a relationship which can be either appropriate or not. This is the relationship of “one flesh” and the appropriate place for it is between husband and wife. This is discussed at length in Eph 5:21-33 and 1 Cor 7:1-7. But the same relationship is (wrongly) set up in an act of fornication, as we see from 1 Cor 6:15-16. It is the act of sexual intercourse, an act carried out by the body of flesh, that sets up this relationship. Therefore it is tremendously important, for it has spiritual consequences. In 2 Cor 5:14-16 Paul speaks of being “mismatched with unbelievers”—as the believer is part of the temple of the Holy Spirit, so the unbeliever is in a sense the temple of an idol. Thus such a unity between the two would be as if Christ were married to Belial. That is the degree of unity into which the sexual act brings its participants; it has a serious effect on relationships. Similarly in 1 Cor 6:15, Paul asks, “Shall I take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?”

Thus St. Paul can say that fornication (*porneia*, “immorality”) is a sin against a man’s own body, since by this act his own body is made to put him in a relationship that is not right, and it is made one flesh with someone it ought not to be. This is not because it harms the fleshly or animal body (by inducing ill health or weakness) but because it harms the spiritual body, the dwelling of the Spirit, by creating a wrong relationship. The body of the Christian which is a temple of the

Holy Spirit because it is a living stone in the Body of Christ is not the animal body but the new spiritual body that is to be. This passage, 1 Cor 6:19, does not deal with the condition of the flesh but the state of relationships. The activity of the body should build up the set of right relationships—“therefore glorify God in your body” since “you are not your own; you were bought with a price”; that is, your real existence is participation by the Spirit in the Body of Christ which is His temple.

Some Gnostic Errors

Various Christians and Christian groups have tried at various times to use this passage as the justification for various regulations concerning such activities as the eating of certain foods, smoking, or the taking of exercise. It should be clear by now that this passage has nothing to do with these things. In fact, while the advice given by these people may or may not be good from a human point of view, to regard them as regulations spiritually binding on Christians is contrary to New Testament teaching.

For one thing, these regulations often reflect the priorities of non-Christian ways of thought that might be called “health-worship.” The main priority of such people is to lengthen the life of the individual at all costs. To this end they look chiefly to the health of the body: the animal body, that is the flesh. This is an extension of a natural tendency to “nourish it and cherish it” that St. Paul mentions in Eph 5:29. But their concentration on this end is misplaced. The fleshly body is doomed to death, so much so that St. Paul can speak of it in Rom 8:10 as if it were already dead. Trying to keep it alive is always, in the end, fruitless. One often hears people say, “Such-and-such disease must be wiped out, because it kills so-and-so many people each year” or “If you do such-and-such you increase (or decrease) your chances of dying.” Ultimately such statements are nonsense. People who do not die of one thing will die of another, perhaps more painful; affliction; and one’s chances of dying (unless one is Enoch or Elijah) are 100 percent and cannot be increased or decreased. The proper attitude in these areas is summed up in two passages in Scripture: “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tm 4:4) and “the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). The important thing is relationships in the Spirit, not health in the flesh.

We can read about fleshly regulations in Colossians 2:16-23. Here Paul is answering what are probably Jewish Gnostics who are trying to influence the Colossians by making them accept regulations regarding food and drink, linked with the observance of Jewish calendar feasts and the worship of angels. The modern equivalent would be certain cultists who practice macrobiotics and astrology. Paul first rather mildly exhorts the Colossians that no one should pass judgment on them—impose guilt where none properly exists—and goes on to refer to those who follow such rules as “men who live in the world” (zwątej eń kośmw) To follow the rules “referring to things which perish as they are used” is characteristic of one who is of the world, whose mind is “set on the flesh,” since all these things belong to the realm of the flesh. To follow such rules puts one in the realm of the flesh, not that of the Spirit. He concludes, “These have the appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.” Though appearing wise, they are the opposite, for their wisdom is purely of the flesh. Being regulations in the fleshly realm, they do not check its indulgence: this indulgence is the same as the “works of the flesh” which we have already seen. Thus regulations of this kind are something that New Testament teaching actually opposes.

Thus we see that a proper understanding of 1 Cor 6:19 opens the way to the great mysteries of the Christian faith. Contrasting flesh and Spirit, law and grace, and the Old and New Covenants shows the central principle of New Testament teaching: the whole of the law of Christ is summed up in relationships. Love of God and love of neighbor is the whole of the law. These relationships build up the spiritual body of Christ, which we will inherit fully in the resurrection when the animal body is transformed into the spiritual body. Ritual commandments of the Old Covenant, which referred to the animal body, are no longer of any effect, and impede the freedom of the Spirit. Nor are similar commandments imposed in more recent times. On the other hand, Christians must be perfect in love and be careful always to be in right relations, particularly avoiding wrong sexual relationships, where acts of the body of flesh can destroy the proper order and integrity of the Body of Christ. New Testament holiness does not depend on outward things, affecting the flesh, but on righteousness in relationships and perfection in love.

When the people of Israel accepted the Old Covenant, they knew they were taking on a serious commitment. They understood the consequences if they did not obey the law they were accepting. Yet they did accept; and when they did, they knew what they were accepting: there were no secret clauses. God had revealed it to them. As we read in Dt 30:11-14, "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. . . . But the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." So too with the New Covenant, as St. Paul points out in quoting this passage and applying it to the righteousness based on faith (Rom 10:6-13). As nothing could be added to the old law, so nothing can be added to the new; and there are no hidden clauses. What God demands is belief in the true faith, trust in Him, and right relationships with one another in His Body, the Church. This is the Gospel teaching and the teaching of the New Testament—"If anyone is preaching to you a Gospel contrary to the one which you have received, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:9).

Holy Week, 1981; revised Holy Week, 1984