

Certain groups, notably the Mormons, have committed the error of saying that God the Father has a body, and have thus become anthropomorphites, people who say that God has a human form.

In recent years, this form of doctrinal decay has also set in among certain segments of American Evangelicalism, most notably in the Pentecostal Word Faith movement. Evangelicals such as Finnis Dake, Jimmy Swaggart, Kenneth Copeland, and Benny Hinn have all (temporarily or permanently) bought into the idea that the Father has a body.

Anthropomorphites argue that man is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27) and point to verses that refer to the strong right arm of God, the eyes of God, and so forth.

In doing this, they profoundly misunderstand Scripture. First, the image of God we bear is an aspect of our rational soul that separates us from animals (the function that the image plays in Genesis 1 is to separate humans from the animals God has just created). Second, talk in the Bible about God's strong right arm, his eyes, and such is metaphorical language concerning God's power and knowledge. This can be seen by the fact that the Bible also speaks of God as having feathers and wings; yet even the anthropomorphites would not go this far (cf. Ps. 91:4—"He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge").

Anthropomorphites maintain their doctrine in defiance of verses, such as John 4:24, where Jesus teaches us: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." This means God has no body, because a spirit is, by nature, an incorporeal being. As Jesus tells us elsewhere, "a spirit has not flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39).

There is a big difference between being a spirit and having a spirit. Jesus says that the Father is a spirit, not that the Father has a spirit; this means that he lacks a body entirely.

The Church Fathers, of course, agreed, and loudly declared the fact that God is an unchangeable, immaterial spirit who has an entirely simple ("incomposite") nature—that is, a nature containing no

parts. Since all bodies extend through space and thus can be divided into parts, it is clear that God cannot have a body.

"What of Christ's body?" you may ask. It is true that Jesus, who is God, assumed an earthly body when he was born of the Blessed Virgin, and that this body, now glorified, continues to exist. But since the Lord only took on human flesh in these "last days," and since God has always existed, without beginning or end, we must still conclude that having a body is not part of God's unchangeable nature: he exists in eternity as pure spirit, even though he chose for the Son to also take on a human nature in addition to his bodiless, timeless, divine nature.

TATIAN THE SYRIAN

"Our God has no introduction in time. He alone is without beginning, and is himself the beginning of all things. God is a spirit, not attending upon matter, but the maker of material spirits and of the appearances which are in matter. He is invisible, being himself the Father of both sensible and invisible things" (*Address to the Greeks* 4 [A.D. 170]).

ATHENAGORAS

"I have sufficiently demonstrated that we are not atheists, since we acknowledge one God, unbegotten, eternal, invisible, incapable of being acted upon, incomprehensible, unbounded, who is known only by understanding and reason, who is encompassed by light and beauty and spirit and indescribable power, by whom all things, through his Word, have been produced and set in order and are kept in existence" (*Plea for the Christians* 10 [A.D. 177]).

IRENÆUS

"Far removed is the Father of all from those things which operate among men, the affections and passions. He is simple, not composed of parts, without structure, altogether like and equal to himself alone.

He is all mind, all spirit, all thought, all intelligence, all reason . . . all light, all fountain of every good, and this is the manner in which the religious and the pious are accustomed to speak of God" (*Against Heresies* 2:13:3 [A.D. 189]).

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

"The first substance is everything which subsists by itself, as a stone is called a substance. The second is a substance capable of increase, as a plant grows and decays. The third is animated and sentient substance, as animal, horse. The fourth is animate, sentient, rational substance, as man. Wherefore each one of us is made as consisting of all, having an immaterial soul and a mind, which is the image of God" (Fragment from *On Providence* [A.D. 200]).

"Being is in God. God is divine being, eternal and without beginning, incorporeal and illimitable, and the cause of what exists. Being is that which wholly subsists. Nature is the truth of things, or the inner reality of them. According to others, it is the production of what has come to existence; and according to others, again, it is the providence of God, causing the being, and the manner of being, in the things which are produced" (ibid.).

"What is God? 'God,' as the Lord says, 'is a spirit.' Now spirit is properly substance, incorporeal, and uncircumscribed. And that is incorporeal which does not consist of a body, or whose existence is not according to breadth, length, and depth. And that is uncircumscribed which has no place, which is wholly in all, and in each entire, and the same in itself" (ibid.).

"No one can rightly express him wholly. For on account of his greatness he is ranked as the All, and is the Father of the universe. Nor are any parts to be predicated of him. For the One is indivisible; wherefore also it is infinite, not considered with reference to inscrutability, but with reference to its being without dimensions, and not having a limit. And there-

fore it is without form and name" (*Miscellanies* 5:12 [A.D. 208]).

ORIGEN

"Since our mind is in itself unable to behold God as he is, it knows the Father of the universe from the beauty of his works and from the elegance of his creatures. God, therefore, is not to be thought of as being either a body or as existing in a body, but as a simple intellectual being, admitting within himself no addition of any kind" (*Fundamental Doctrines* 1:1:6 [A.D. 225]).

"John says in the gospel, 'No one has at any time seen God,' clearly declaring to all who are able to understand, that there is no nature to which God is visible, not as if he were indeed visible by nature, and merely escaped or baffled the view of a frailer creature, but because he is by nature impossible to be seen" (ibid. 1:1:8).

ATHANASIUS

"God, however, being without parts, is Father of the Son without division and without being acted upon. For neither is there an effluence from that which is incorporeal, nor is there anything flowering into him from without, as in the case of men. Being simple in nature, he is Father of one only Son" (*Letter on the Council of Nicaea* 11 [A.D. 350]).

DIDYMUS THE BLIND

"God is simple and of an incomposite and spiritual nature, having neither ears nor organs of speech. A solitary essence and illimitable, he is composed of no numbers and parts" (*The Holy Spirit* 35 [A.D. 362]).

HILARY OF POITIERS

"First it must be remembered that God is incorporeal. He does not consist of certain parts and distinct members, making up one body. For we read in the gospel that God is a spirit: invisible, therefore, and

an eternal nature, immeasurable and self-sufficient. It is also written that a spirit does not have flesh and bones. For of these the members of a body consist, and of these the substance of God has no need. God, however, who is everywhere and in all things, is all-hearing, all-seeing, all-doing, and all-assisting" (*Commentary on the Psalms* 129[130]:3 [A.D. 365]).

BASIL THE GREAT

"The operations of God are various, but his essence is simple" (*Letters* 234:1 [A.D. 367]).

AMBROSE OF MILAN

"God is of a simple nature, not conjoined nor composite. Nothing can be added to him. He has in his nature only what is divine, filling up everything, never himself confused with anything, penetrating everything, never himself being penetrated, everywhere complete, and present at the same time in heaven, on earth, and in the farthest reaches of the sea, incomprehensible to the sight" (*The Faith* 1:16:106 [A.D. 379]).

EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS

"To those who accuse us of a doctrine of three gods, let it be stated that we confess one God, not in number but in nature. For all that is said to be one numerically is not one absolutely, nor is it simple in nature. It is universally confessed, however, that God is simple and not composite" (*Dogmatic Letter on the Trinity* 8:2 [A.D. 381]).

GREGORY OF NYSSA

"But there is neither nor ever shall be such a dogma in the Church of God that would prove the simple and incomposite [God] to be not only manifold and variegated, but even constructed from opposites. The simplicity of the dogmas of the truth proposes God as he is" (*Against Eunomius* 1:1:222 [A.D. 382]).

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

"[Paul] knows [God] in part. But he says, 'in part,' not because he knows God's essence while something else of his essence he does not know; for God is simple. Rather, he says 'in part' because he knows that God exists, but what God is in his essence he does not know" (*Against the Anomoians* 1:5 [A.D. 386]).

"Why does John say, 'No one has ever seen God' [John 1:18]? So that you might learn that he is speaking about the perfect comprehension of God and about the precise knowledge of him. For that all those incidents [where people saw a vision of God] were condescensions and that none of those persons saw the pure essence of God is clear enough from the differences of what each did see. For God is simple and non-composite and without shape; but they all saw different shapes" (*ibid.*, 4:3).

AUGUSTINE

"In created and changeable things what is not said according to substance can only be said according to accident. . . . In God, however, certainly there is nothing that is said according to accident, because in him there is nothing that is changeable, but neither is everything that is said of him according to substance" (*The Trinity* 5:5:6 [A.D. 408]).

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

"We are not by nature simple; but the divine nature, perfectly simple and incomposite, has in itself the abundance of all perfection and is in need of nothing" (*Dialogues on the Trinity* 1 [A.D. 420]).

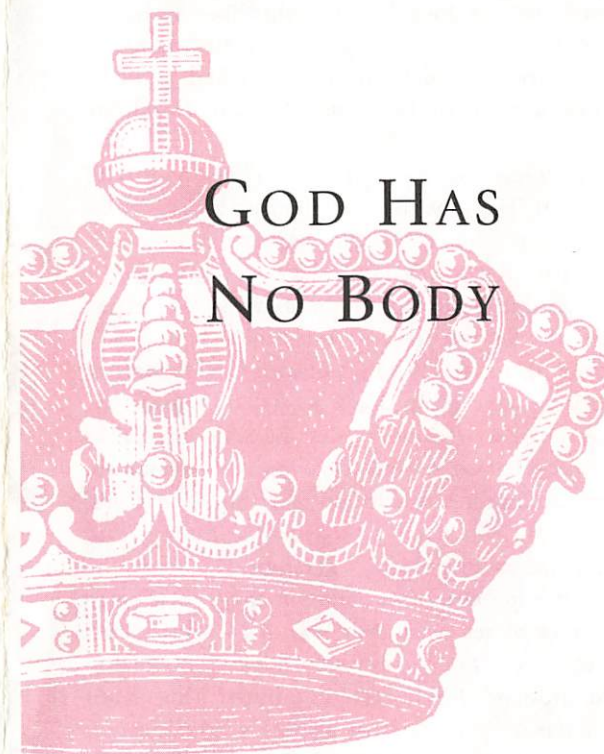
"The nature of the Godhead, which is simple and not composite, is never to be divided into two" (*Treasury of the Holy Trinity* 11 [A.D. 424]).

"When the divine Scripture presents sayings about God and remarks on corporeal parts, do not let the

mind of those hearing it harbor thoughts of tangible things, but from those tangible things as if from things said figuratively let it ascend to the beauty of things intellectual, and rather than figures and quantity and circumscriptions and shapes and everything else that pertains to bodies, let it think on God, although he is above all understanding. We were speaking of him in a human way, for there is no other way in which we could think about the things that are above us" (*Commentary on the Psalms* 11[12]:3 [A.D. 429]).

God & Christ

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