

A Spirituality for the Soul *and* Body

“It’s what’s inside that counts.” After years of working to believe this, I’ve found a book that confirms my suspicions — this hollow phrase is only half-true.

Eve’s Revenge by Lilian Calles Barger gives us a thoughtful, grounded perspective on what it means to be human as well as woman. We experience all of life from within a body, but often think that we must choose between a narcissistic culture that would reduce all of life to the body and its desires, and a “spiritual” perspective that seeks to overcome our bodies in the quest for the “true self,” which resides in the soul.

Barger offers a refreshing third approach. “We need a spirituality that can help us see further than our cultural experience but that takes our body as seriously as we do,” she writes. “Can we find in the Jesus narrative a spirituality that embraces our body instead of one that continually ignores or assaults it?”

The answer we find in her book is a heartening “yes.” The God who is the “Word made flesh” created both the body and the physical world. God valued physical existence enough to redeem it by becoming human in Jesus. God did not redeem only the spiritual components of the world, but the physical as well.

Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection in a physical body, much to the satisfaction of one disciple who has taken a lot of flack through the centuries: Thomas.

Barger gives some interesting insight here: “Not willing to settle for disembodied faith or to hold on to a phantom ... Thomas wants to experience the certainty and nowness of the body of Jesus.” And Jesus gives this to Thomas, showing him the scars on his body, asking him to touch the wounds. The body of Jesus works in harmony with the spirit, bearing the signs of the atonement.

The teachings of Plato and Gnosticism have influenced much of Western thought about the body and the soul, the author reminds us. Their ideas, rather than biblical teaching, have caused us to see a sharp division between body and soul, with the soul being touted as infinitely more important and “real” than the body.

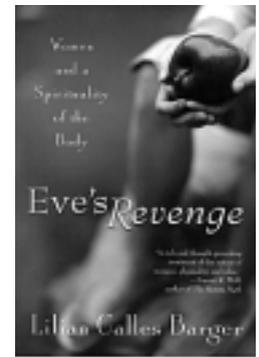
Shattering another unhealthy duality, Barger skillfully negotiates the needless chasm often drawn between gender differences and equality. “Equality generally gets implemented as sameness rather than equal value of genuine difference,” she says. And too many discussions of difference serve only to grossly simplify and stereotype people based on gender, minimizing personal uniqueness and implying that to be a true woman or a true man, one must look or act in certain ways. She also reminds us how difficult it is to conclusively prove that any perceived behavioral difference between the genders is

based in biology rather than cultural expectations.

Barger’s discussion of “women and a spirituality of the body” covers a lot of ground. Eve, Jesus’ mother Mary, Plato, Augustine, Catherine of Siena, the art of Renoir and Rubens, the Industrial Revolution, the contemporary media, and many aspects of secular feminism all are examined in some way for the influence they’ve had on our cultural understanding of the female body.

In a wonderfully subtle affirmation of women’s personhood, Barger moves freely from talking about women’s bodies specifically to making applications for the common experience of both male and female. In the last two chapters, she explores in depth the weaving of body and spirit in Jesus’ incarnation and its implications for the church. As the living body of Christ here on earth, the church should be “the Word made flesh” in our world.

So what is Eve’s revenge? It is the promise God gave her that through her body would come a redeemer — and through his body, redemption for the whole world.



Eve’s Revenge: Women and a Spirituality of the Body

By Lilian Calles Barger

224 pages, Brazos Press, 2003.

B256P \$14.99/**Introductory Price \$11.24**

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