

**C.S. LEWIS ON THE TRUE
NATURE OF MORALITY AND
THE SEXES**

Louis Markos

**GENDER ESSENTIALISM
IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL,
COVENANTAL, AND
CHRISTOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE**

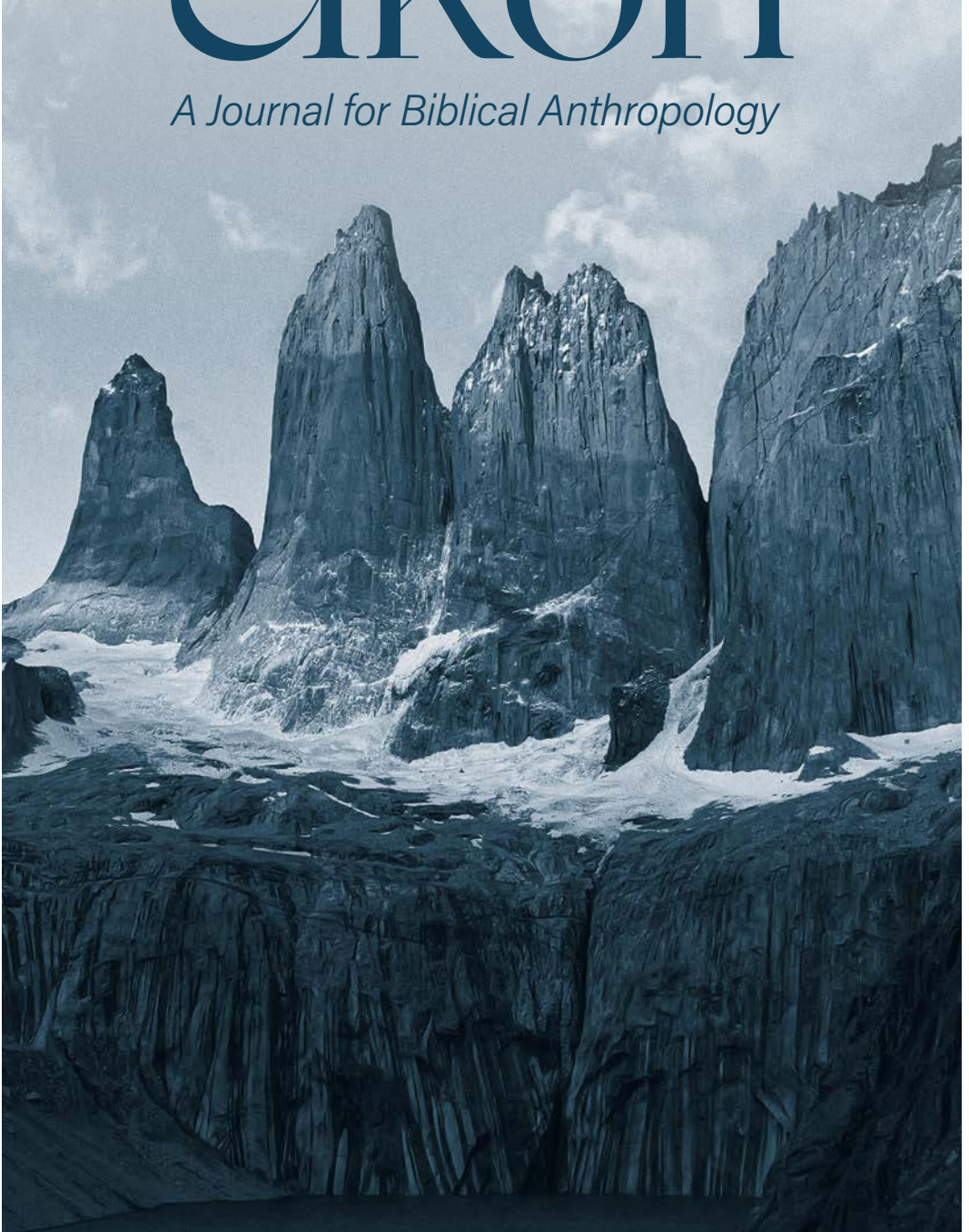
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Editorial: Enduring Natural Differences

A very strange thing happened a couple of years ago. During Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's Senate hearings for her appointment to the Supreme Court, Senator Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee read an excerpt from former Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's majority opinion in *The United States v. Virginia* (1996). Her citation reveals just how much ground the sexual revolution has covered. In her opinion, Ginsburg wrote, "physical differences between men and women, however, are enduring. '[T]he two sexes are not fungible.'"¹ Senator Blackburn then asked Justice Jackson whether or not she agreed with Justice Ginsburg that "there are physical differences between men and women that are enduring." After a long pause, Jackson responded that she did not know enough about the case to provide an answer. When pressed about whether she agreed with Ginsburg's

"meaning of men and women as male and female," she again pleaded ignorance. Unsatisfied with Jackson's obvious evasion, Senator Blackburn asked Justice Jackson a question whose answer exemplifies our current cultural moment. The exchange went like this:

Senator Blackburn: "Can you provide a definition for the word, woman?"

Justice Jackson: "Can I provide a definition? No. I can't"

Senator Blackburn: "You can't?"

Justice Jackson: "Not in this context. I'm not a biologist."

This back-and-forth demonstrates that we have apparently reached that point in civilizational history when the social

¹ Justice Ginsburg cited *Ballard v. United States*, 329 U. S. 187, 193 (1946), in this quotation. "*United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515 (1996)," *Justia US Supreme Court* (accessed October 27, 2024), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/518/515/>.



and educated elite who are tasked with analyzing sophisticated texts in order to interpret the law are unable to interpret the basic realities of human nature. As ethicist J. Alan Branch begins his essay in the subsequent pages of this journal, “Defining male and a female has become difficult for educated people.”

But defining the sexes has also become difficult for powerful people, as the appointment of transgender Richard L. Devine (known now as Rachel) to Secretary for Health and Human Services illustrates. Dr. Devine’s appointment clearly represented President Joe Biden’s attempt to virtue signal to the left and normalize transgender ideology in the highest halls of power. It seems rather difficult, however, for an institution whose mission is “to enhance the health and well-being of all Americans” to succeed when its executive seems not to discern the enduring natural differences between male and female.

It has taken seismic worldview shifts to

lead our culture to the point where it is not only acceptable, but celebrated that a cross-dressing, gender-confused man can hold one of the highest offices in the most powerful nation in human history — while pretending to be a woman. It is nevertheless curious that, even after the canonization of such gender dogma, we still have basically two commonly accepted genders: cis- or trans-gendered *men* and *women*. We suggest that these inconvenient observations are reflective of certain enduring natural differences that exist between male and female. Despite our attempts to escape the binary inherent in the created order, “the natural law finds a way.”²

For our part, we maintain that this failure to recognize the “fundamental facts”³ of human nature is not owing to any ambiguity in the facts themselves. Rather, the basic, dimorphic nature of mankind is as apparent now as it has always been (Rom 1:26–27). God’s original design for man and woman endures: “So God created man in his own image, in the

image of God he created him; *male and female he created them*” (Gen 1:27). We conclude that ideological rejections of these truths amount to willful suppression (Rom 1:18). And although we are grieved by this particularly destructive form of rebellion against our Lord, we are not surprised, given the naturalistic worldview that animates it. According to this worldview, creatures take the place of the Creator, determine the meaning of their bodies, and re-create them in their own image.⁴

But while our culture is captured by the blinding ideologies that prevent the patently obvious from being acknowledged as such, we seek in this installment of *Eikon* to do just that. Rejecting the politically correct for the theologically true, we declare that God made man *male* and *female* and that this design is *very good* (Gen 1:31).

Natural Complementarianism

CBMW began more than thirty years ago in response to forms of feminism taking root within evangelical churches and institutions. Central to the debate between those who became known as complementarians and their evangelical feminist (egalitarian) interlocutors was a concern for the roles of men and wom-

en in the home and the church. At the time, evangelicals seeking faithfulness to Scripture faced an evangelical feminism that challenged the traditional notion of gender *roles* between men and women. Today, however, biblically faithful Christians face challenges to the *idea* of men and women. In other words, the battlefield has moved from the *roles* of men and women to the *fundamental reality* that men and women exist as such.⁵

Building on the faithful teachings of complementarians who have gone before us, *Eikon* continues CBMW’s mission to defend truth “about the complementary differences between men and women, created equally in the image of God,”⁶ especially on those points where it is most fiercely challenged today.⁷ This defense of biblical truth requires that we reflect on and contemplate the natural differences between men and women — *what* they are, *why* they matter. While it is not the case, as some have argued, that earlier complementarians ignored or neglected the issue of the natural differences between men and women, it was certainly not the core of the debate as it is today.⁸

Since its inception in 2019, *Eikon* has been devoted to renewing and deepening evangelical complementarian convictions by seeking to understand how

² We credit Colin J. Smothers for this apt phrase, and tip our caps to Andrew T. Walker for his efforts in popularizing it.

³ See Joe Rigney, “Indicatives, Imperatives, and Applications: Reflections on Natural, Biblical, and Cultural Complementarianism,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 4.1 (Spring 2022), 26–34.



⁴ See Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018).

⁵ “Before the third edition of *Discovering Biblical Equality*, complementarians had to demonstrate the connection between egalitarianism and the erasure of male-female distinction by logic and inference. But now McKirland’s chapter connects the dots for us, and it brings the Christian to a decision point. Instead of rejecting gender essentialism to embrace an ideology that leads to the overthrow of the very foundations of nature in God’s good design, we should hold fast to everything that is good, true, and beautiful, which includes complementary humanity created male and female in God’s image for his glory” (p. 53). Colin J. Smothers, “Rejecting Gender Essentialism to Embrace Transgenderism?: A Response to Christa McKirkland, ‘Image of God and Divine Presence,’” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.1 (Spring 2023), 46–53.

⁶ This is quoted from CBMW’s Mission Statement. See “Mission and Vision,” *CBMW* (accessed October 27, 2024), <https://cbmw.org/about/mission-vision/>.

⁷ Francis Schaeffer attributed the following quote to Luther, although its exact provenance is not definitively known: “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.” Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview: Volume One: A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 11.

⁸ John Piper rightly corrects those who — even in the pages of *Eikon* — have criticized earlier complementarians for a lack of focus on nature. John Piper, “Danvers, Nashville, and Early Complementarianism,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 4.2 (Fall 2022), 28–33.

our God-given *roles* reflect and fit our God-given *nature* as male and female. And in this issue we give special attention to these natural differences in hopes of continuing to articulate a “natural complementarianism” — a complementarianism that recognizes that our complementary *function* is fitted to our complementarian *form* as male and female.⁹

For this purpose, we have gathered essays and arranged a forum to further our discussion on the nature and purpose of God’s design for men and women. In this issue we feature a programmatic essay by Kyle Claunch and Michael Carli-no, which provides a dogmatic account of gender essentialism by employing the classic metaphysical distinction of essence and existence as a theologically warranted concept. Applying this metaphysic to the areas of anthropology, covenant theology, and Christology, Claunch and Carli-no seek to correct well-meaning but misguided attempts to articulate the natural differences between men and women. We expect this essay will provide a reference point for these discussions moving forward.

Our readers will also benefit from Louis Marcos’s explanation and contemporary application of C.S. Lewis’s idea of the *Tao*, Alexander Strauch’s biblical reflections on how the pastoral office is fitted to men, J. Alan Branch’s commentary on the innate sexual differences between male and female, James Wood’s exploration of courage as a feminine virtue, as well as many other articles and book reviews worthy of your attention. As mentioned, we have also included a forum of various voices to discuss the natural differences between men and women from a biblical-theological, philosophical, cultural, and practical perspective.

It is our privilege as an editorial staff to continue carrying the complementarian torch forward to new generations, and to continue applying complementarian truth to new challenges as they arise. We therefore pray that this issue of *Eikon* will further equip you “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). ✕

Jonathan E. Swan is
Executive Editor of *Eikon*

⁹ As far as I am aware, Joe Rigney was the first person to use this term. See his “Indicatives, Imperatives, and Applications: Reflections on Natural, Biblical, and Cultural Complementarianism,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 4.1 (Spring 2022), 26–34.

JONATHAN E. SWAN

The Ancient Paths

A Monk’s Unlikely Marriage

That an Augustinian monk and a nun would be credited with establishing the ideal of the Protestant family is truly one of the most remarkable surprises of all church history.¹ The marriage of the notorious German reformer Martin Luther to the runaway nun Katharina von Bora, though an unlikely matrimony, proved consequential for both the Reformer and the Protestant Reformation.²

¹ Roland Bainton wrote that, “The Luther who got married in order to testify to his faith actually founded a home and did more than any other person to determine the tone of German domestic relations for the next four centuries.” Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1950), 298. Likewise, Andrew Pettegree claims that “Luther’s home life, lived in a very public way, provided the new church with a powerful archetype of the new Protestant family.” Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2015), 259.

² This historical sketch is reliant on the following sources: Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1950); Ian Clary, “Luther





Having disappointed his father Hans by forsaking the study of law at the University of Erfurt, Martin Luther joined the Augustinian Order and devoted himself to life in the cloister. His decision to become a monk, of course, also required a life of celibacy. But his life as a monk did not endure — nor did his celibacy.

After Luther's excommunication from the church in October 1520 and his famous stand at the Diet of Worms in April 1521, the Protestant Reformation was well on its way, and with it a reformation of marriage. During this time Luther's increasingly popular teachings resulted in the evangelical conversion of a few nuns at a convent in Nimbschen, whose escape Luther himself helped arrange in the Spring of 1523. While a capital offense, Luther employed a merchant for the task, who gave the escapees

cover in the back of his delivery wagon. Luther not only assisted in their flight, but took it upon himself to help them find husbands.

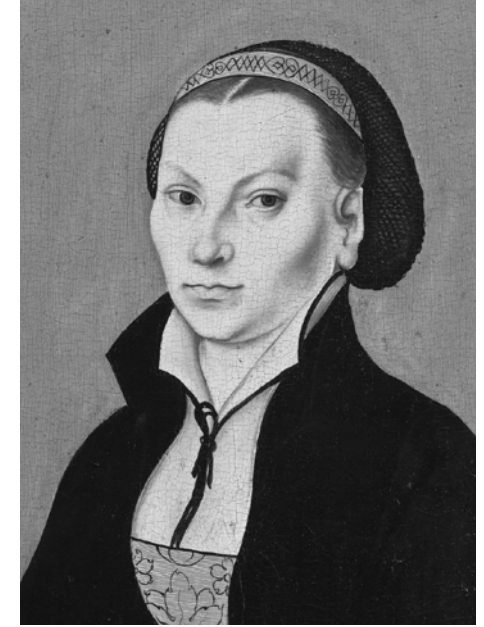
Luther capably paired each of the nuns to a husband, save one: Katharina von Bora. Katharina had set her heart on a young man whose family ultimately did not approve of the love match (something about a renegade nun), so the marriage was off. Brokenhearted, Katharina flatly refused to marry Kaspar Glatz, who was put forward as a subsequent marriage candidate. Instead, she suggested that she would marry either Nicholas von Amsdorf or Luther. But despite arranging marriages for others, Luther himself had no plans to marry. This decision was in part due to his age (he was forty-two at the time) and because "he expected daily the death of a heretic."³ He also knew that his marriage would be used as propaganda to criticize the Reformation as a ploy for sexual gratification.⁴ But with Katharina yet unmarried, the idea grew on him. And soon after making his decision, they were married in June 1525.

Luther did not marry Katharina because he was infatuated with her. He said as much.⁵ Even so, he clearly had a genuine love for her, and she for him. But rather than pursuing marriage as a quest for self-fulfillment, Luther stated rather unique motivations for pursuing marriage. As Roland Bainton summarized, Luther's motivations included his desire "to please his father, to spite the pope and the Devil, and to seal his witness before martyrdom."⁶ Although their marriage did not begin as a romance, Martin and Katharina's marriage grew into a beautiful companionship

of deep mutual love and appreciation. Luther once expressed his deep gratitude for Katharina when he wrote, "I would not exchange Katie for France or for Venice."⁷ Their marriage, while unlikely, proved to be an inspiring example to generations beyond their lifetime.⁸

We should hope that men and women in America would learn from the Luthers' example. In our feelings-driven, self-expressive age where marriage is often viewed as merely an avenue towards self-fulfillment, Luther's commitment to marry Katharina in spite of his initial lack of romantic desire (or fill in the blank with your preferred cliché: "connection," "chemistry," "attraction," "butterflies," etc.), demonstrates that satisfying marriages depend on something deeper than one's fluctuating feelings or the pursuit of personal happiness. Namely, they rely on one's *covenant commitment to love* their spouse. As it turns out, husbands and wives have to continually *make the decision to love* their spouse in order to become and to stay happily married.

In this way, Luther's marriage corrects what Brad Wilcox calls the "soulmate myth," which he explains is "the idea that marriage is primarily about feeling an intensely emotional or romantic connection with 'the one' that makes you happy and fulfilled."⁹ The colorful and committed marriage of the defected monk and the deconverted nun instead proves "the paradox of marital happiness," which is that "husbands and wives who don't seek to be 'in love' but instead recognize that 'love is a decision' to care for their spouse, their kids,



and their family are more likely to find themselves happily married."¹⁰

We would also do well to encourage men and women — unless called to singleness — to pursue marriage as a testimony of their faith as Luther did. Just as Luther's marriage scandalized the religious orthodoxies of his day, an ordinary life of marriage and procreation scandalizes the orthodoxies of the sexual revolution today. In an anti-marriage, anti-family, and anti-child age, Christians display their faith by getting married, having kids, and raising them in the Lord. We should encourage men and women to follow the example of Martin and Katharina Luther, who in a spectacularly unexpected way, walked the ancient paths of God's glorious design and got married. ✕

Jonathan E. Swan is
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and the Reformation of Marriage," TGC (September 11, 2017), <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/luther-reformation-marriage/>; Heiko A. Oberman, *Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2015); Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

³ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 287.

⁴ Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 225–226;

⁵ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 288; Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 225; Oberman, *Luther*, 281.

⁶ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 288.

⁷ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 288.

⁸ This remarkable fact is attested by the following: "The power of Luther and Katharina as a model and exemplar is demonstrated in the proliferation of copies of Cranach's double marriage portrait. Quite quickly in these portrait pairs the haunted psychological study of Luther taken for his marriage was replaced by a dignified picture of the mature patriarch. Copies of this paired portrait hung in many sober Protestant homes, presiding over households where the Christian life was both lived and taught: the holy household as church." Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 259.

⁹ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York, NY: Broadside Book), 80.

¹⁰ Wilcox, *Get Married*, 93.



From the Pastor's Desk:

Biblical Complementarity, the Law Amendment, and the Southern Baptist Convention

The first time I knew myself to be a Southern Baptist was in the year 2000 when, while watching the news, I saw the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) had adopted an updated doctrinal statement making clear the biblical convictions that the office of pastor was reserved for qualified men and that wives were required to submit to their husbands. Before that news story, the only thing I really knew about my church was that they led me to Christ, faithfully taught the Bible, and loved and served others in Jesus' name. It would be another few years before I learned that the newsworthy revisions to the Baptist Faith and Message (BFM) were called complementarianism. But as a teenager, I was thankful to be part of a church participating in a convention that was willing to stand by what the Bible said.

That was nearly a quarter century ago. In 2024, the SBC was in the news again over the issue of complementarity, but this time, many conservative Southern Bap-

tists are afraid it is because we are moving away from a commitment to biblical complementarity rather than toward it. That concern is because of a proposed amendment to the SBC constitution known as the Law Amendment, which failed to pass.

The amendment was proposed because, even though the BFM is clear that the office of pastor is reserved for men, many believed it was necessary to repeat that conviction in the SBC constitution to clarify that churches could not be considered in friendly cooperation with the convention without affirming that principle. The failure to get it approved has led some to question whether the SBC is moving away from its historic complementarian convictions.

There are four reasons why I do not believe the failure of the Law Amendment represents such a shift.

1. THE BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE IS COMPLEMENTARIAN

The first reason has to do with the BFM, which is unmistakably complementarian. As I mentioned, it communicates the countercultural convictions of biblical complementarity in the home and church. It communicates these convictions even when so many other denominations are moving away from them.

Even the leaders who strongly argued against the amendment made clear that they were in favor of the complementarian convictions of the BFM and believed they should be upheld.

In failing to pass the Law Amendment, the SBC made no decision to change its complementarian confessional document.

2. REMOVAL OF EGALITARIAN CHURCHES

The second reason we can have confidence that the SBC has not abdicated its complementarian convictions is because of their votes to remove churches with female pastors. Over the last few years, the SBC's messengers have removed several such churches. One of those churches was Saddleback Church, perhaps the most famous church in America. The SBC removed them from membership in 2023 because of their installation of a female preaching pastor. Another example was an historic SBC church who became vocal about their belief that women could serve as pastors. The SBC voted to remove that church by a vote of over 90% at the same meeting where the Law Amendment failed to pass.



A convention that votes to remove large and historic churches that ordain female pastors is not open to the charge of faithlessness on the issue of biblical complementarity.

3. A COMPLEMENTARIAN PRESIDENT

2024 saw a relatively crowded field for the election of SBC president. Each candidate was on the record either in support of or in opposition to the Law Amendment. In the end, Clint Pressley won the election with over 56% of the vote. He is a conservative pastor who was an outspoken proponent of the Law Amendment.

Even though the Law Amendment failed, Southern Baptists did not choose as president any of the men who opposed it.

4. THE LAW AMENDMENT FAILED BY THE NARROWEST OF MARGINS

Even the failure of the Law Amendment to pass, which many conservatives have feared as a sign of creeping egalitarianism, is itself evidence of the complementarian convictions of the SBC. The evidence of complementarity is found in the appropriately high bar that is set for constitutional amendments to pass. In order to change the SBC constitution, amendments must receive two-thirds of the vote in two consecutive conventions.

2023 was the first year the convention voted on the Law Amendment, and it was approved by at least 80% of messengers. Some estimates say it received as much as 90%. In any case, it was overwhelmingly approved.

Then, opponents of the amendment began a loud and organized campaign to vote it down in 2024. I was profoundly concerned that many of the arguments advanced by the opposition were untrue, unhelpful, and mischaracterized the issues. Those arguments were ultimately enough to prevent the amendment from passing in 2024.

But it is important to remember that the



amendment failed to pass only because it required a two-thirds supermajority. In fact, over 61% of Southern Baptists voted to approve the amendment. The loud and misleading opposition only succeeded in shaving a few points off what would have otherwise been a victory for the amendment.

In the end, the vote revealed that a large majority of Southern Baptists agreed with the amendment, even if there weren't quite enough votes to change the constitution.

I was a vocal supporter of the amendment. I thought the constitutional language it proposed would have added necessary clarity to the SBC's guiding documents. I was disappointed that it did not pass. But my disappointment does not make me think the SBC is moving in the direction of faithlessness regarding biblical complementarity. Instead, our Convention's confessional documents, our commitment to remove egalitarian churches, the complementarian commitments of our elected representatives, and even the majority support for the amendment, which fell just shy of the required supermajority, make me encouraged about the complementarian faithfulness of the SBC. ✕

Heath Lambert is pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, FL (SBC).

C.S. Lewis on the True Nature of Morality and the Sexes

In Book I of *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis argues that moral/ethical standards are not arbitrary but connected to a universal moral/ethical code. Since that code transcends any given time or place, it must have an origin that is supernatural and meta-physical. If it were a product of nature, it could not stand outside and above it; if it were man-made, it would not possess the cross-cultural binding power it does.

All people know this standard exists, for it defines the way we expect other people to treat us, even if we do not reciprocate in kind. If this universal, cross-cultural code did not exist, or were it not engraved in the conscience of all men, then the Nuremberg Trials, during which Nazi war criminals were tried for crimes against humanity, could not have taken place.

Many European philosophers had long prior embraced naturalism, relativism, and nihilism, but when Europe mounted the trials, they proclaimed to the world their belief in three things: 1) there are actions that are objectively wrong; 2) the Nazis knew such

actions were wrong; 3) they did those actions anyway. Of course, the Nazis could have claimed that they did not know that what they were doing was wrong. Had they done that, however, the court would not have let them go. They would have taken their ignorance of right and wrong as proof that they were sociopaths and put them in an asylum for the criminally insane.

Many in Lewis's day, as well as many today, claimed that this universal moral/ethical law code is neither divine nor transcendent, but a product of natural instincts we share with the animal kingdom. Lewis concedes that we all possess, and are driven by, natural instincts, but that is not the whole story:

"If two instincts are in conflict, and there is nothing in a creature's mind except those two instincts, obviously the stronger of the two must win. But at those moments when we are most conscious of the Moral Law, it usually seems to be telling us to side with the weaker of the two impulses. You

probably want to be safe much more than you want to help the man who is drowning: but the Moral Law tells you to help him all the same."¹

And do not think, Lewis adds, that the fact that we must teach this Moral Law to our children proves it to be a creation of man's design rather than a given — something we argue *from* rather than *for*. Those who think "the Moral Law just a social convention, something that is put into us by education... are usually taking it for granted that if we have learned a thing from parents and teachers, then that thing must be merely a human invention. But, of course, that is not so. We all learned the multiplication table at school. A child who grew up alone on a desert island would not know it."² It is true that prophets and holy men often play a major role in formulating and passing down the Moral Law to the next generation, but they no more invent it than do teachers and parents. If they did, they would be false prophets.

In the second chapter of *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis gives a name to this Moral Law that often confuses Christian readers, especially evangelicals. Lewis dubs it the Tao, a word he borrows from the ancient Chinese philosophy/religion of Taoism, known in the West by its iconic use of yin and yang. Why would Lewis use a word from an Eastern school of thought that does not think in theistic, much less monotheistic, terms? To show that the Moral Law written in our hearts is indeed universal, crossing barriers of East and West, as well as non-theism and theism.

Knowledge, both intuitive and intellectual, of the Tao is a defining element of being human. The fact that there exist sociopaths who lack it is the exception that proves the rule. We immediately recognize the sociopath, as we do the cripple, as a person who

lacks a mechanism (conscience; working legs) that is the natural possession of all human beings. We could not measure, or recognize, brokenness, disease, or injustice if the standard for wholeness, health, and justice were not engraved in our conscience. The ancient Taoists themselves understood this. Though yin and yang do not embody a universal, divinely-delivered moral code like the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, the Taoists perceived *behind* yin-yang a shadowy Way (the meaning of the word Tao) that transcended both.

To ensure his readers understand what he means by Tao, Lewis helpfully provides a list of synonyms: "This thing which I have called for convenience the *Tao*, and which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes, is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained."³ Lewis's Tao is not a hidden, esoteric system of morality or code of ethics. It is simply that system and code that has always been recognized under various names.

In "The Poison of Subjectivism" (anthologized in *Christian Reflections*), Lewis offers two propositions to explain the nature of the traditional values that rest on, and flow from, the Tao:

- (1) The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of planting a new sun in the sky or a new primary colour in the spectrum.
- (2) Every attempt to do so consists in arbitrarily selecting some one maxim of traditional morality, isolating it from the rest, and erecting it into an *unum necessarium* [Latin for "one thing needful"; see Luke 10:42].⁴

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 22.

² Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 24.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 56.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 75.

The Tao is our sole and final source of transcendent values, binding codes, and fixed standards. And yet, history, especially modern history, is replete with ideologies (utilitarianism, Marxism, fascism, consumerism) that claim to have invented a new and better Tao. How can that be?

Lewis's second proposition explains how: the "inventors" of those new ideologies simply removed one virtue or principle or dictum from the Tao and expanded it into a pseudo-Tao. The utilitarians did this with utility (the greatest good for the greatest number), the Marxists with equality, the fascists with national pride, and the consumerists with happiness. Tragically, in their pursuit of that isolated virtue, they were willing to break every other part of the Tao to achieve the triumph of utility, equality, national pride, or happiness. In modern America, such fragments from the Tao as patriotism, freedom, and individualism (on the right) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (on the left) continually threaten to unweave the unitary force of the Tao.

The importance of the Tao in reviving true (traditional, perennial, Judeo-Christian) morality in our country should be obvious. But does it have any bearing on one of the most contested areas of the church: the essential, God-given differences between the

sexes? It does. For Lewis, the Tao is more than a list of dos and don'ts. It is a statement about the nature of reality. As such, it is more akin to gravity, the rotation of the earth, and the laws of thermodynamics than it is to fashionable political causes, the effects of socialization, or the laws of propriety. Of course, individuals and groups can marshal sociopolitical forces to refuse the "patriarchal tyranny" of "gender gravity," but they will lose in the end — and they will do a lot of damage along the way.

We can no more invent a new Tao than we can redefine the nature and function of the sexes. God *made* us male and female (Gen 1:27) and decreed we should join in the complementary union of marriage (Gen 2:24). That these two statements from the opening chapters of the Bible are statements about reality is made clear by the stunning fact that Jesus directly quotes both when he is questioned about marriage (Matt 19:4-6). Jesus does not reference the social customs or sexual mores of first-century Palestine, but God-created realities about men and women.

That Lewis would agree with what I am here arguing is made clear in one of the most remarkable and beautiful passages in all his writings. In his novel *Perelandra*, Lewis takes us on a journey to Venus where he is

vouchsafed a vision of the true and essential nature of masculinity and femininity as he gazes on the guardian spirits of Mars (Malacandra) and Venus (Perelandra).

Gender is a reality, and a more fundamental reality than sex. Sex is, in fact, merely the adaptation to organic life of a fundamental polarity which divides all created beings. Female sex is simply one of the things that have feminine gender; there are many others, and Masculine and Feminine meet us on planes of reality where male and female would be simply meaningless. Masculine is not attenuated male, nor feminine attenuated female. On the contrary, the male and female of organic creatures are rather faint and blurred reflections of masculine and feminine. Their reproductive functions, their differences in strength and size, partly exhibit, but partly also confuse and misrepresent, the real polarity.... The two white creatures were sexless. But he of Malacandra was masculine (not male); she of Perelandra was feminine (not female). Malacandra seemed to him to have the look of one standing armed, at the ramparts of his own remote archaic world, in ceaseless vigilance, his eyes ever roaming the earth-ward horizon whence his danger came long ago.... But the eyes of Perelandra opened, as it were, inward, as if they were the curtained gateway to a world of waves and murmurings and wandering airs, of life that rocked in winds and splashed on mossy stones and descended as the dew and arose sunward in thin spun delicacy of mist.⁵

Masculinity and femininity, far from social constructs or categories of oppression, are written into the very weave and fabric of reality. They are real, concrete, elemental things, not arbitrary accretions or

frivolous window dressing. Masculinity and femininity run through every aspect of God's good creation and do not confine themselves to male and female bodies.

Had Lewis written this passage today, he would have had to alter his word choice, since the word "gender" has been hijacked by those bent on emptying masculinity and femininity of their essential meaning and nature. The reason Lewis uses "gender" here is to try to find a way of expressing a deeper dichotomy that transcends even our biological differences. Masculine and feminine are fundamental, God-fashioned things that meet us on many levels, including the sexual distinctiveness of men and women.

Sadly, the same kind of forces that have sought to fashion new-fangled Taos out of fragments of the old have attempted to do the same to the natural complementarity of the sexes. Removing from the Tao the virtue of equality (expressed in its fullest form in Gal 3:28), the would-be re-makers of essential masculinity and femininity have expanded it into the idol of egalitarianism and then, in the name of that idol, deconstructed all that is most real and essential about our God-given sexual nature. They are doomed to fail in their project, but not before causing serious damage to men and women, marriage and family, church and society, politics and economics.

Lewis and the Tao would beckon us back to reality — and sanity! ✕

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⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 200-201.



Gender Essentialism in Anthropological, Covenantal, and Christological Perspective

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In this essay, we seek to provide a clear and robust dogmatic foundation for a distinctly Christian anthropology, one that coheres with critical covenantal distinctions and pressing Christological concerns. We are convinced a lack thereof is plaguing the discourse on this matter in broader Protestant and Evangelical circles. Our thesis is that the classic distinction between essence and existence is the best conceptual tool for articulating an account of gender essentialism, and proves useful in evaluating proper covenant distinctions — between the Creation Covenant, the Covenant of Works, and the marriage covenant — and in understanding the fittingness and necessity of the Son of God’s assumption of humanity as a male.

To prove our thesis, we first demonstrate how the essence-existence distinction for humanity — flowing from the reality that humans are composed of parts, unlike God — is crucial for maintaining a proper perspective on human nature and gender. We then connect the essence-existence distinction to God’s covenantal arrangements to ground male and female equality in the Creation Covenant, and more specifically, the *imago dei* (essence). Then we show why man is properly and fittingly the covenant head of the woman in the Garden of Eden (existence).



Significantly, Adam is the covenant head of Eve in two respects: (1) he is the federal head for the entire human race (Eve included) according to the Covenant of Works (CoW), and (2) he is *exclusively* Eve's head according to God's design in the covenant of marriage. Adam's headship is typological in *both* respects, as his headship over Eve in marriage is both the norm for all subsequent marriages, and according to the Apostle Paul, is itself a type of the Christ-church union (Eph 5:31–32). Moreover, Adam's federal headship in the CoW over all humanity is a type of Christ's headship over his elect, such that in the CoW Adam is a pattern for the Second/Last Adam; and as such, being male is a necessary precondition by God's appointment for representing humanity before God. One implication of this that we will draw out is the reality that male leadership is not only good and fitting covenantally in marriage and the home (and the household of God, i.e., the church), but more broadly in society as well, as these covenantal arrangements are reflective of created order. Thus, Christ can truly be said to be made like his brothers (and sisters!) "in every respect," becoming a merciful and faithful high priest on their behalf, because to be male (existence) is to partake in human nature (essence), *and* to be male is a prerequisite to represent men and women alike in the capacity of federal representative under God (Heb 2:14–18; 4:15; Eph 1:22, 5:23–24; 1 Cor 11:3).

To amplify why this dogmatic foundation is necessary, as we build our case we will highlight various examples in which influential contemporary theologians in the broader

Protestant/Evangelical world lack precision with vocabulary and/or express fundamentally flawed views on human essence¹, gender, and/or the *imago dei*. We are convinced these flawed perspectives necessarily have deleterious entailments on anthropology and/or Christology. Put differently, how one understands Christ's atoning work for fallen human beings is interconnected with how one conceives of human nature, the image of God, and covenant. We find these other perspectives fail to provide a satisfactory account for how these crucial doctrines synthesize. In their place, we argue for a kind of gender essentialism which flows out of a clear distinction between the existence and essence of humanity, so that our anthropology and Christology hold together.

GETTING GENDER ESSENTIALISM RIGHT

To begin, it is necessary to give some account of gender essentialism.² We are convinced that a sexual binary of male/female is *essential* to being human. As such, every individual human person is either male or female. We believe this to be the clear teaching of holy Scripture. This section of the essay demonstrates this claim exegetically from Genesis 1 before considering the classic distinction between essence and existence as providing conceptual terminology that is particularly fruitful to preserve the unity of male and female as truly human, while also accounting for the robust difference between men and women.³ The essence-existence distinction upholds the biblical teaching that both men and women are created in the image of God and that covenant headship belongs uniquely to men. The dogmatic account of gender essentialism offered here also gives us tools to affirm that the male Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the redeemer of both men and women without the need to say his assumed human nature is androgynous⁴ or that he needed to

¹ Throughout the essay, we will use the terms essence and existence precisely and consistently as defined herein. Other related terms will appear as well. *Ontology* refers to the being of existing things and includes aspects of both essence and existence under its purview. Thus, the term ontology is broader in scope than essence and existence. The term *nature* will be used, at times, as a synonym with essence, as when we speak of human nature as a universal. The term nature can also be used to correspond more closely with existence, as in when we speak about the particular human nature assumed by the Son of God. This use of nature, with both universal and particular frames of reference, is common in classical philosophical and theological literature and corresponds with fine distinctions that are beyond the scope of this essay to discuss at length.

² In this essay, we are intentionally avoiding the vast body of literature on gender theory and different ways to account for gender essentialism. Our aim is to give a positive account of gender as essential to humanity on the basis of biblical teaching and the use of classic conceptual terms. We will leave it to others to sort out where this proposal fits among the categories of gender essentialist proposals. For a survey of different types of gender essentialism, see Jordan Steffaniak, "Saving Masculinity and Femininity from the Morgue: A Defense of Gender Essentialism" *Southeastern Theological Review*, 12.1 (Spring, 2021): 15–35.

³ Some accounts of gender essentialism speak in a way that obscures the unity of man and woman as belonging to the same universal human nature while also holding to some kind of gender essentialism. The result is that men and women are different kinds of beings essentially, which raises significant problems for proper understandings of *imago dei*, covenant, and Christology.

⁴ Feminist theologians have long argued that Jesus of Nazareth was not male, nor was he particularly female, but he was androgynous (a combination of the Greek words for male, *andros*, and female, *gyne*), having the particular properties constitutive

have a unique biological relation to female human nature.⁵

EXEGETICAL OBSERVATIONS: GENESIS 1

In the Genesis account of creation, God makes each living thing “according to its kind” (kind = *מין*; see Gen 1:11, 21, 24). Each animal kind created consists of a reproducing pair of male and female. When God creates the sea-dwelling creatures and the birds of the sky “according to their kinds” on the fifth day, we read, “And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth’” (1:22). When God creates *mankind* (*אדם*, *adam*) in his image on the sixth day, he makes them “male and female” and says to them, “Be fruitful and multiply” (1:28).

Two observations are important for our purposes. First, living things can be categorized into types that are broader than and inclusive of individual existing instances of the type. This is clear from the fact that different kinds of things are created, each kind including at least two individuals from the first moment of their creation. Thus, the biblical creation account demands our affirmation of what later thinkers would refer to as universal natures, or essences, as distinguished from individual instances, or existing things. There is a kind of thing (its universal nature/essence), the properties of which necessarily characterize the individual instances of the kind (existence). Epistemologically speaking, rational observers of created things can know the universal nature of a thing by observation. As professors, we can look at a room full of students and observe that they are all instances of a common type of being. Of course, there is great diversity among them — size, skin color, hair color, gender/sex, etc. — but they all, without exception, recognizably have many things in common. That is, they are all observably the same “kind” of thing, namely human. In terms of epistemology, the particular existence of the living beings precedes the knower’s apprehension of the universal kind that is shared among them. It is important to note, however, that the creation of each living thing “according to its kind” alerts us to the fact that, ontologically speaking, the logic runs in the other direction. If each living being is created “according to its kind,” then the kind functions as a pattern according to which the existing thing is fashioned

by God. In terms of ontology, the universal kind precedes the particular, existing beings. According to Scripture, universal kinds are present to the mind of God who creates according to such wise designs.

Second, *being gendered/sexed as either male or female* is a necessary property of the kind of living beings identified on days four through six of creation week. It is clear that the universal kinds, according to which living things are created, include both male and female. Living things are created “according to their kinds,” and as such, they are “fruitful and multiply.” In other words, both the male and the female individuals in the reproducing pair belong to the same kind. Stating this coherently requires some careful thought. Neither maleness nor femaleness, as such, can be identified as a necessary property of the kind. Otherwise, the other gender/sex would be excluded, and the reproducing pair would not be of the same kind. The male would be his own kind and the female her own kind, which is not what the text of Genesis 1 indicates is the case. Rather, each existing being within the kind is gendered/sexed as either male or female. What is entailed by the account of the creation of living animals according to their kinds is made explicit by the account of the creation of *mankind*. “He created them male and female” (Gen 1:27) and both are clearly identified as *mankind* (*אדם*, *adam*) in the previous verse (v. 26). We cannot, therefore, exclude the idea of gender/sex from the universal kind. It seems the only coherent way forward is to recognize that *being gendered/sexed as either male or female* is a necessary property of the kinds of living beings identified on days four through six of the creation week. This is what we mean when we say that a gender binary of male/female is essential to being human.

DOGMATIC ELABORATION: ESSENCE, EXISTENCE, AND GENDER ESSENTIALISM

The notion that things exist according to the common properties of a universal kind, and that the properties of one kind differentiate it from another kind, has been recognized by philosophers throughout human intellectual history, even traditions whose key thinkers may have known nothing of the text of Genesis or the rest of the Scriptures. This is not surprising, given the fact that the common properties that constitute a kind are observable from the existence of the particulars. Perhaps no philosophical tradition is more closely identified with the notion of universals than the platonic philosophical tradition. Platonism as a philosophical tradition is complex and multifaceted, and the debate over what constitutes

of both men and women in his assumed human nature. Consider the words of Virginia Ramey Mollenkot: “[T]he whole issue concerning modern woman’s representation *by and in* Christ is solved by the realization that *Jesus is clearly depicted in the Bible not as a male, but as androgyne*” (“The Androgyny of Jesus,” *Daughters of Sarah Magazine*, March 1976).

⁵This is the argument advanced by Amy Peeler in *Women and the Gender of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 118–151. Peeler argues that Jesus’ male nature raises the difficult question of his ability to represent females. Her solution is to point out that his male human flesh was female-only derived because he was born of Mary without a human father. The virgin conception thus grounds Jesus’ solidarity with women.

real Platonism is not easily settled. In an effort to identify the broadest boundaries of the platonic tradition, Lloyd Gerson has articulated five key principles of negation, which he believes are the *sine qua non* of Platonism. That is, he identifies five philosophical claims about the nature of reality that all Platonists reject. He calls this set of principles Ur-Platonism (UP). Gerson explains, “Platonism in general can be usefully thought of as arising out of the matrix of UP. . . . To be a Platonist is, minimally, to have a commitment to UP”⁶ One of Gerson’s five principles of UP is *anti-nominalism*. Nominalists deny that different individuals can be the same in any meaningful sense. That is, nominalism is the denial of the reality of a universal kind by which an individual is *what* it is. Thus, the anti-nominalist principle of Platonism is consistent with the Genesis account of creation. The other principles of UP are: anti-materialism, anti-mechanism, anti-relativism, and anti-skepticism. While not developed in the exegetical observations above, these other four principles of UP are also entailments of the Genesis account of creation and the worldview upon which it is based.

The fact that the principles of UP are consistent with the basic worldview demanded by Scripture has led many Christian theologians to argue that orthodox Christianity is fundamentally Platonic. Building on Gerson’s observations, such thinkers as Craig Carter⁷ and Hans Boersma⁸ have argued extensively that a kind of Platonism is essential to the theological commitments of the orthodox Christian faith and that it is necessary for a right reading of holy Scripture. In these arguments for the necessity of Christian Platonism for the Christian faith, it can seem as though the logic of dependence is such that sound Christian orthodoxy depends on Platonic philosophy, as though one cannot have the former without the latter.⁹ For our part, while we happily acknowledge that there is considerable correspondence between the theological commitments of Christian orthodoxy, as revealed in holy Scripture, and the principles of UP, we do not believe that Christian orthodoxy is in any way dependent on the articulations of these principles in the Platonic philosophical tradition. Rather, Scripture itself, as the Word of God written, articulates the content of Christian orthodoxy in its own idiom.

“Scripture itself, as the Word of God written, articulates the content of Christian orthodoxy in its own idiom.”

Philosophers who do not know God are able to understand much truth about the cosmos by rational observation and analysis. It is evident to them by general revelation because God made it evident to them (Rom 1:19–20). Furthermore, the reality of the Fall of man into sin and the presence of false teachers among the people of God have generated the need for extra-biblical terminology to articulate in precise conceptual idiom the revealed judgments of holy Scripture.¹⁰ When false teachers arise who read the same Bible as orthodox thinkers, it will not do to simply read Bible passages back and forth to one another. Extra-biblical terms that emerge from philosophically precise systems of thought have proven immensely useful over the centuries in the defense of the revealed faith against error. We happily acknowledge that the conceptual terminology of the platonic philosophical tradition has been invaluable to this end. We would include Aristotle and, many centuries later, Thomas Aquinas, in this tradition. In fact it is Aquinas who articulates the essence-existence distinction we draw upon here, a distinction that became a mainstay in Christian theological reflection for centuries to come and can rightly be identified as classical for its ubiquity in the late medieval period throughout the periods of post-Reformation Protestant Orthodoxy. In building our argument for gender essentialism from Genesis 1 before moving into dogmatic elaboration aided by Thomistic categories and terms, we are hoping to model the right kind of relationship between divinely revealed judgments and the conceptual terms deployed to articulate and defend those judgments adequately.¹¹

⁶ Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca, NY: Coarnell University Press), 9–10.

⁷ Craig Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018) and Idem., *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021).

⁸ Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) and Idem., *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2021).

⁹ For example, Boersma claims, “The Bible cannot be interpreted without prior metaphysical commitments, and we need Christian Platonism as an interpretive lens in order to uphold Scripture’s teaching” (*Five Things*, 39).

¹⁰ For the distinction between conceptual terminology and judgments, see David Yeago, “The New Testament and Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis” *Pro Ecclesia*, 3.2 (1994): 152–164.

¹¹ The online think-tank *Christ Over All* published a theme on the issue of Christian Platonism in August 2024. For a helpful introduction to Christian Platonism written at the popular level, see Robert Lyon, “What is Christian Platonism? (Part 1): An

We believe that the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence is a particularly helpful way to articulate the version of gender essentialism revealed in Scripture, as made explicit in the creation account of Genesis 1. Thomas Aquinas famously drew on the categories of Aristotelian metaphysics, putting the conceptual terminology to good use in the *Summa Theologiae*, especially his treatise on the one God,¹² his treatise on the triune God,¹³ and his accounts of creation and anthropology.¹⁴ One way that Thomas modified Aristotelian thought in service of Christian theology is in his account of the distinction between *essence* (Latin, *essentia*) and *existence* (Latin, *esse*). Whereas the distinction between universals and particulars is woven into the Platonic/Aristotelian philosophical tradition beforehand, it was Thomas who deployed the particular conceptual terms of essence and existence to state this distinction with precision.¹⁵

Essence, in the Thomistic sense, corresponds closely (if not exactly) with the understanding of *kind* suggested above in our analysis of the Genesis account. For Thomas, essence is an abstract notion of common properties by which a being is *what* it is. Existence, on the other hand, is the individual instantiation of essence. Whereas essence is an abstract notion of common properties, existence names the reality of an actual, particular being belonging to the essence.¹⁶

Thomas explains the essence-existence distinction with respect to anthropology: “[T]he essence or nature connotes only what is included in the definition of the species;

as, humanity connotes all that is included in the definition of man, for it is by this that man is man, and it is this that humanity signifies, that, namely, whereby man is man”¹⁷ Notice how Thomas uses the word “humanity” to name the essence of a man. The word “man,” on the other hand, names the individual existing being who instantiates the essence, which is humanity. Put very simply, *a man (existence) is human (essence)*.

Because essence, considered in itself, is an abstract notion of common properties, it belongs to the category Thomas calls *potential*. Potential means, in short, non-existence with the possibility for existence. Existence, on the other hand, belongs to the category of *act* or *actuality*. Existing things are in the *act* of being what they are. Thus, in Thomistic metaphysics, all beings are a composite of *essence* (potential, universal kind or nature) plus *existence* (the actual being of a thing as instantiation of the abstract essence). Put concretely and in terms of anthropology, human nature as a universal kind, like what we see in Genesis 1, belongs to the category of essence. It denotes the kind: humanity. Individual human beings, like Adam and Eve, belong to the category of existence. Adam and Eve *exist* as instantiations of the *essence*, humanity.

Since all existing humans are the same with respect to essence,¹⁸ they can only be distinguished in terms of their individual existence. Distinction between individuals of the same essence can be accounted for in two ways. First, all individuals are distinguished by the particularity of their essential properties. Take rationality, for example. All humans are rational beings, as rationality is an essential property of humanity. But this co-authored essay is written by Kyle and Michael, two males with two distinct rationalities. No matter how much one of us may wish to have the other’s mind, it remains the case that we have our own mind and no one else’s. Thus, we share the essential property of rationality while each possessing our own rational mind. The relation of rationality to this or that rationality is ultimately the same as the relation between essence and existence. The second way that beings of the same essence are distinguished is by their *accidental properties*. While essential properties name those characteristics that are necessary to being a particular kind of thing, accidents are the properties

Introduction in Three Steps,” *Christ Over All* (August 5, 2024), <https://christoverall.com/article/longform/what-is-christian-platonism-part-1-an-introduction-in-three-steps/>. For Lyon’s critique of Christian Platonism, see “What is Christian Platonism? (Part 2): A Preliminary Critique,” *Christ Over All* (August 6, 2024), <https://christoverall.com/article/longform/what-is-christian-platonism-part-2-a-preliminary-critique/>.

For a critique of Christian Platonism as undermining *Sola Scriptura*, see Michael Carlino, “Know Scripture, No Need for Platonism: Revelational Epistemology has Priority over Remnantal Sophistry,” *Christ Over All* (August 26, 2024), <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/know-scripture-no-need-for-platonism-revelational-epistemology-has-a-priority-over-remnantal-sophistry/>. Finally, for a critique of the hermeneutics of Christian Platonism, see Knox Brown, “The Wild, Wild West, The Sirens of Rome, and the Hermeneutics of Christian Platonism,” *Christ Over All* (August 7, 2024), <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/the-wild-wild-west-the-sirens-of-rome-and-hermeneutics-of-christian-platonism/>. The above *Christ Over All* essays were accessed Oct. 1, 2024.

¹² ST I, QQ. 1–26

¹³ ST I, QQ. 27–43

¹⁴ ST I, QQ. 75–76

¹⁵ Thomas Joseph White says of this Thomistic distinction, “[It is] the central article in Aquinas’s treatment of divine simplicity.... It addresses what he takes to be the most fundamental type of composition in created beings, more profound and universal than the form-matter distinction.” White goes on to note that the essence-existence distinction is “one of [Aquinas’s] more original philosophical contributions to the history of human thought.” See Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God*, Vol. 19 of Thomistic Ressourcement Series (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 249.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of essence and existence is taken up by many of the leading thinkers among the post-Reformation Reformed Orthodox. For definitions of these terms as they are put to use by the Reformed Orthodox, see Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017). Muller’s entries for *essentia*, *esse*, and *essential dei* summarize the common understanding of the Reformed Orthodox on this matter.

¹⁷ ST I, Q.3, A.3, *Respondeo*.

¹⁸ To anticipate our later discussion of Christology, this is precisely why the Definition of Chalcedon says that the Lord Jesus Christ is “consubstantial with us according to the manhood.” “Consubstantial” translates the Greek *homoousios* where *homo* means “same” and *ousia* means “essence.” Quite literally, the Chalcedonian fathers are saying that the Lord Jesus Christ is of the same essence (humanity) as those he came to save.



by which an existing being can change while remaining the same kind of thing. The accidental properties of one existing individual differentiate it in a great variety of ways from other individuals of the same kind. Such properties as size, strength, location, relations, etc. can all change without a change in essence, and all serve to differentiate one existing being from others of the same kind.

Thomas subtly applies these two ways of distinguishing individuals of the same kind to anthropology in a telling passage:

Now individual matter, with all the individualizing accidents, is not included in the definition of the species. For this particular flesh, these bones, this blackness or whiteness, etc., are not included in the definition of a man. Therefore this flesh, these bones, and the accidental qualities distinguishing this particular matter, are not included in humanity; and yet they are included in the thing which is man. Hence the thing which is a man has something more in it than has humanity. Consequently humanity and a man are not wholly identical.¹⁹

Notice how Thomas refers to “individual matter” and “individualizing accidents,” not as the same thing, but as different ways of distinguishing individuals of the same kind. In Thomistic metaphysics, “individual matter” exists

by inseparable union with its form. In the case of a human being, the individual matter, which Thomas describes in terms of embodiment as “this particular flesh, these bones,” exists in union with a particular form, the soul of this or that particular human being. The form (soul in the case of a human being) and the matter are united in the existence of this individual person.²⁰ It is essential to humanity to have a material body — matter organized as flesh, bones, etc. Therefore, without exception, every individual human being will be identifiable as “individual matter . . . this flesh, these bones.” This is what we mean by distinction according to the particularity of essential properties. Thomas distinguishes this from “individualizing accidents,” which he illustrates in terms of “this blackness or whiteness.” Blackness and whiteness (or any other variety of skin tone among humans) is an accidental property in Thomas’s account.

Interestingly, the clearest articulation of the essence-existence distinction in Thomas comes in his discussion of the one situation in which this distinction must be denied — the doctrine of God. In his treatise on the one God (*De Deo Uno*) in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas takes up the issue of divine simplicity in Question 3. Divine simplicity is the doctrine that God is not, in any way, composite. In Article 4 of this Question, Thomas asks whether essence and existence are the same in God. He answers in the affirmative; God is not a composite of essence plus existence. Drawing on the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, Thomas explains why God is the only being for whom essence and existence are the same thing rather than distinct things:

[T]hat thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another. But this cannot be true of God; because we call God the first efficient cause. Therefore it is impossible that in God His existence should differ from His essence.²¹

The identity of essence and existence in God further helps explain what is meant when classical Christian theists say that God does not belong to a *genus* (kind). There is no essence (potential) that logically precedes his existence (act) as the eternal God. He does not instantiate an abstract essence, so he is not one being among others of the same kind. Again, Thomas’s explanation is helpful in drawing the concepts together. He argues that God cannot belong

²⁰ This Aristotelian account of metaphysics is called hylomorphism from the Greek words for matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). Thomas modifies the Aristotelian account when it comes to human beings by saying that the soul, which is the *form* of the body, has a subsistence independent of its matter. This is necessary to account for the intermediate state in which the soul persists after the death of the body. A robust account of Thomistic hylomorphism is well beyond the scope of this essay.

²¹ ST I, Q.3, A.4, *Respondeo*.

to a *genus* because all in one *genus* agree in the *quiddity* [whatness] or essence of the *genus* which is predicated of them as an essential, but they differ in their existence. For the existence of man and of horse is not the same; as also of this man and that man: thus in every member of a genus, existence and quiddity — i.e., essence — must differ. But in God they do not differ, as shown in the preceding article. Therefore it is plain that God is not in a genus as if He were a species.²²

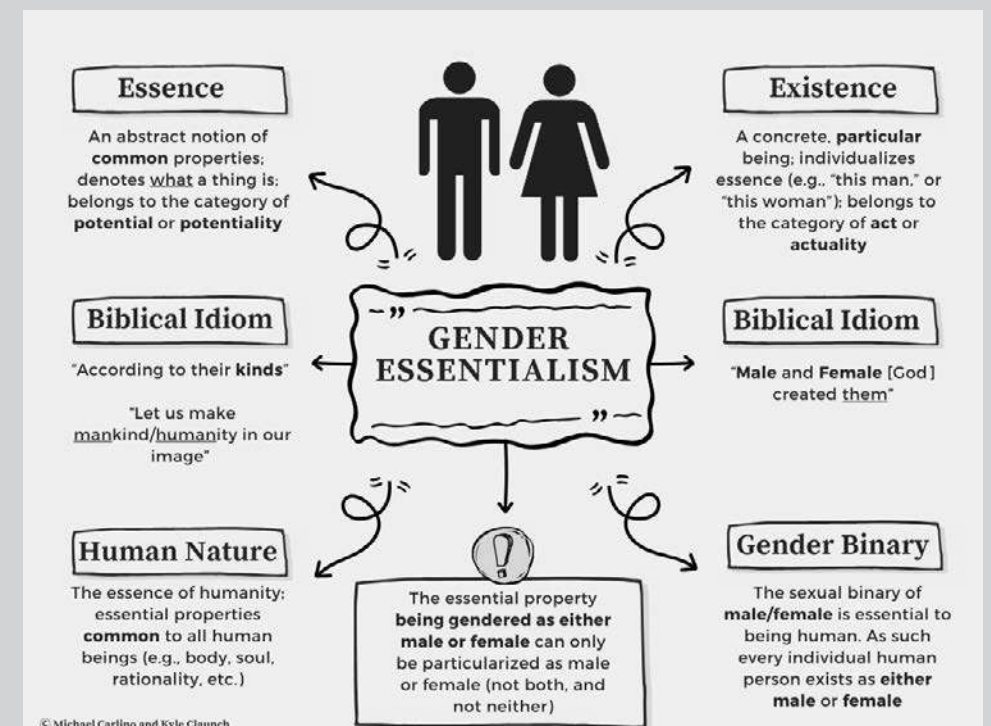
Notice that Thomas treats *essence*, the whatness of a being, as synonymous with *genus*, a being's kind. This demonstrates that our identification of the Thomistic concept of essence with the Genesis concept of kind does not do violence to Thomas's intended use of the terminology. The same judgment is being articulated in different conceptual terms. To sum up thus far, essence, as a category in itself, names the kind or *genus* of a being. Existence instantiates essence as an actual being. While the essence and existence of God are identical (he is pure actuality), all created beings, including humans, are a composite of essence (potential) plus existence (actuality). The use of this essence-existence distinction is a fitting and faithful way to respond to the pressure of divine revelation to give a precise metaphysical account of how individuals, like Adam and Eve, can be the same kind while being distinct in meaningful ways.²³

GENDER AS ESSENTIAL, NOT ACCIDENTAL

How exactly does the issue of gender map onto this discussion? Given the observations we made above from the Genesis account of creation and our identification of the Thomistic notion of essence with the Genesis notion of kind, we believe it is accurate to affirm that *being gendered as male or female* is a property belonging to the essence of humanity such that every individual existing human being will be either a man or a woman. Now, being a man is a very different thing than being a woman. How should we account for this distinction? Some might be inclined to say that the particularity of maleness and femaleness represents a distinction of accidental properties. This would suggest that gender is something that admits degrees or may change without altering the essence of the being. On this account, gender would not be essential to humanity. We believe identifying gender as an accidental property would be a fatal flaw because of the way the biblical creation account includes both male and female

in the kinds of beings that reproduce in the world, a fact made most clear with respect to the creation of mankind, as argued above.

Recall, however, that there is another, more fundamental way that existing beings of the same essence can differ — particularization of essential properties. Because of the strictures of the Genesis 1 account of creation, we contend that being either man or woman is a case of the particularization of an essential property. The essential property *being gendered as either male or female* can only be particularized as male or female (not both, and not neither). Thus, the particular form of a human person in union with the matter of that person is such that the person *is* this gender, just as he *is* “this flesh, these bones.” In saying all this, we are contending that gender is an essential property of humanity. This is what we mean by our affirmation of gender essentialism.



Scripture depicts the ontology of created things in a way that corresponds to the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence. Human gender is best understood as essential according to this paradigm, which fittingly articulates the judgments of the creation account of Genesis 1 and is consistent with the rest of scriptural teaching. Therefore, theological accounts that deny or misappropriate the reality of universal human essence or fail to distinguish adequately

²² ST I, Q.3, A.5, *Respondeo*.

²³ For a helpful discussion of the way the biblical text “pressures” its readers to explain its revealed truths in a coherent way, see C. Kavin Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics” *Pro Ecclesia*, 11.3 (Summer, 2002): 295–312.

between universal human essence and the individual existence of human persons are bound to result in errors of various kinds.

In the next section, we take up the important theological issues of creation and covenant as these relate to gendered humanity and the respective roles of men and women within various divinely ordained covenantal economies. In so doing, we draw from the dogmatic approach of Herman Bavinck to the biblical idiom of the image of God and the Dominion Mandate related to the covenant of marriage under the rubric of the Creation Covenant and/or created order. We find his appropriation of the Reformed tradition to this topic to be a faithful guide. After building our case, we respond to arguments for the “Christotelic image” advanced by such thinkers as Marc Cortez, in which he and other proponents of this position collapse the Son’s incarnational mission into his divine life. This leads to serious errors as it relates to theology proper, Christology, and anthropology. Following our critique of and response to the Christotelic image approach, we analyze the anthropological imprecision of writers like Michael Clary, Michael Foster, and Dominic Bnonn Tennant, who speak of men and women having “differing natures.” This imprecision graduates to error when these men argue gender distinctions are symbolic of and even image the Creator-creature distinction. We find this to expose the need for more anthropological precision, as found in the dogmatic elaboration on the essence-existence distinction in which the *imago dei* reflects the triune God’s superiority and authority over all creation.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE COVENANT OF CREATION, THE COVENANT OF WORKS, AND THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

At its most basic level, a covenant is a formal arrangement between at least two parties. As heirs of the Reformed tradition, we are convinced covenants are central to the biblical storyline. Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum highlight the critical role that God’s formal arrangements with federal/covenantal heads plays in the Bible: “The biblical covenants form the backbone of the Bible’s metanarrative, and apart from understanding each covenant in its immediate context *and* then in relation to its fulfillment in Christ, we will potentially misunderstand the Bible’s overall message and misapply Scripture to our

lives.”²⁴ In agreement with this line of thought, we aim to understand how the Creation Covenant, the CoW, and the covenant of marriage function together, so as to rightly apply Scripture to our lives as it relates to gender, marriage, the image of God, dominion, male headship, Christology, etc. We are convinced covenants truly carry the progress of revelation across the canon of Scripture, and therefore we must understand the terms, conditions, context, and fulfillment of these covenants in order to arrive at a sound anthropology and Christology.

The word *covenant* (ברית) does not appear in the opening chapters of Genesis until Noah enters the scene (see Gen 6:18; 9:9). Gentry notes the important difference between “creating a covenant” (ברית כרת) and “renewing/establishing a covenant previously created” (ברית קום).²⁵ He also observes that only the latter phrase is used for the Noahic covenant (Gen 6:18; 9:9, 11, 17) as opposed to the typical expression for the creation of a covenant. For example, כרת ברית is invoked when the Lord initiates the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15:18), but by using the language of ברית קום in the Noahic covenant (Gen 6:18), God means “to affirm (verbally) the continued validity of a prior commitment — that is, to affirm that one is still committed to the covenant relationship as established or initiated previously.”²⁶

This logic raises the question: if the word *covenant* is not used in Scripture until Genesis 6 and 9, how can God speak of reaffirming a *previous* covenant? Since, as Gentry rightly highlights, God reveals that the Noahic covenant affirms the validity of a prior covenant, it is incumbent upon us to rightly locate the original. To answer this question, we first suggest the need to distinguish between the Creation Covenant and what is commonly referred to as the Covenant of Works (CoW).²⁷ We affirm the reality of the CoW.²⁸ We believe this doctrine is necessary to getting the creation narrative right. Furthermore, while we are convinced we must not affirm *less* than the traditional Reformed account

²⁴ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 32n2.

²⁵ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 187.

²⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 187.

²⁷ We find the Reformed tradition has correctly affirmed an original covenant of works/Adamic covenant. The covenant of works is defined well by Richard Barcellos, “The covenant of works is that divinely sanctioned commitment or relationship God imposed upon Adam in the garden of Eden. Adam was a sinless representative of mankind (i.e., a public person), and an image-bearing son of God. The covenant God made with him was for the bettering of man’s state, conditioned upon Adam’s obedience, with a penalty for disobedience. Here we have: 1) sovereign, divine imposition; 2) representation by Adam (i.e., federal headship), a sinless image-bearing son of God; 3) a conditional element (i.e., obedience); 4) a penalty for disobedience (i.e., death); and 5) a promise of reward (i.e., eschatological potential).” *Getting the Garden Right: Adam’s Work and God’s Rest in Light of Christ* (Cape Coral, FL: Founder’s Press, 2023), 38.

²⁸ A crucial prooftext for understanding Genesis 2:15–17 as covenantal is Hosea 6:7, which reads: “But like Adam [Israel and Judah] transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.” Passages like this one give sound biblical and theological grounds to conclude God made a covenant with Adam as the federal representative of all humanity, one that Adam failed to keep.

of the CoW, we believe it is necessary to affirm *more* than this. Why? Because God is the Creator-covenant LORD, and in the creation account, this is not reducible to the probationary command with the promise of glorification upon perfect and perpetual obedience (see Gen 2:15–17; Lev 18:5). We find sound warrant for this distinction in the fact that the Bible itself labels God’s creation of the world in covenantal categories. One such example is found in Jeremiah 33:20–21:

Thus says the Lord: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers.

Harrison Perkins offers interpretive insight on these verses: “The early Genesis narratives do not say that God covenanted with the sun, moon, day, or night, but Jeremiah does. This passage also reconfirms that God’s promises to David were covenantal [the original narrative recorded in 2 Samuel 7:8–16 does not].”²⁹ By distinguishing the Creation Covenant from the CoW, our aim is to confirm the biblical idiom of creation order in covenantal terms, while distinguishing the CoW with Adam from these broader covenantal structures in the Creation narrative. We contend the concept of the CoW/*pactum* merit is best understood as a (primary/integral) *aspect* or *subset* of God’s broader covenantal activity and arrangement with the original creation order. The terms set forth in the Noahic Covenant of Genesis 6 and 9 correspond closely to the mandate the LORD gave Adam and Eve at the end of Genesis 1, the principle differences relating to the reality of a fallen world when the covenant is renewed to Noah and his offspring. We observe that nothing akin to a probationary command whereby the covenant partner might merit life or death for his posterity is given to Noah. We find the Noahic covenant then to ratify God’s *previous* broader covenantal activity with creation, and, significantly, this arrangement undergirds God’s creation of male and female in the image of God with its entailments.

There is one more distinction we wish to make as we consider God’s covenantal arrangements in Genesis 1–2. And this is the covenant of marriage found in Genesis 2:18–25. The marriage covenant is under the broader creation mandate, but it cannot be strictly identified with it. It is a “sub-covenant,” designed and instituted by God for one

man and one woman (two covenant partners) for life.³⁰ As with the Creation Covenant and the CoW, marriage is also not explicitly referred to as a covenant in Genesis 2; however, it is clearly understood in covenantal terms later in Scripture (Exod 20:14; Mal 2:14–16; Matt 19:6). Children enter into this covenantal domain and remain under it until they depart from their parents’ household and form their own (Gen 2:24; Exod 20:12; Eph 6:1–2). They do so in distinct/engendered ways, though, in which a son (who by his masculinity carries the potentiality to be a husband and father) takes on the role of covenant head over his wife in marriage, as the father of the bride “transfers” headship over his daughter (who by her femininity carries the potentiality to be a wife and mother) to her husband (see Num 30).³¹ Biblically speaking, a man *leaves* his father and mother to be united to his wife, while the woman is *given* (hence the long-standing and scriptural tradition of the marriage officiant to ask: “who gives this woman in marriage”), so that the *two* become *one* flesh and thereby a new family unit under the husband’s headship (Gen 2:24).

As such, Adam has a unique (as opposed to shared with Eve) federal headship limited to his household in the marriage covenant *and* a unique federal headship over the whole human race in the CoW. In the Creation Covenant more broadly, Adam’s rule over the created order is shared with Eve. Therefore, men do not have headship over women *generally* as image bearers/rulers. Each husband following Adam is *only* the covenant head of his wife and children *exclusively* within the institution of marriage and family. He does not take up Adam’s or Christ’s role as head/representative/mediator for humanity (Adam) or God’s elect (Christ). We find that these distinctions are crucial for marriage and gender, because they provide a firm covenantal rationale as to why it is proper to say that not all women are under the headship of all men, rather all humanity is either under Adam in the CoW or Christ in the Covenant of Grace (CoG)³², and each wife is to

³⁰ Herman Bavinck captures this well, “God created the woman *from* the man and *for* the man (1 Cor. 11:8–9), but also simultaneously *unto* the man, even as he created the man *unto* the woman. God made two out of one, so that he could then make the two into one, one soul and one flesh. This kind of fellowship is possible only between two. From the very beginning, marriage was and is by virtue of its essential nature monogamous, an essential bond between one man and woman woman, and therefore also a life-long covenant, indissoluble by human authority; therefore what God has joined together, let not man put asunder (Matt. 19:6, 8). A man separates from his parents, forsakes father and mother, and cleaves to his wife; but he never abandons his wife! Love for parents is surpassed in both intensity and extent by love for one’s wife. Such love is stronger than death. No other love resembles God’s love so closely, or reaches such height.” *The Christian Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Christian’s Library Press, 2012), 7.

³¹ See Joe Rigney’s essay, “Indicatives, Imperatives, and Applications: Reflections on Natural, Biblical, and Cultural Complementarianism,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 4.1 (Spring 2022): 28–36.

³² When we use the term Covenant of Grace (CoG) in this essay, we use it synonymously with the concept of the New Covenant. We are convinced the CoG was first *promised* in Genesis 3:15 but not *inaugurated* until Christ’s death (Luke 22:20). We maintain that every saint throughout all redemptive history is rightly conceived of as members of the New Covenant/CoG. However, prior to Pentecost and the inauguration of the New Covenant in Christ’s person and work, the CoG was not constituted, so we find saints who hoped in the promised Seed of the woman are proleptically members of the CoG (Heb 11:39–40).

²⁹ Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2024), 27.

submit to her *own* husband in the covenant of marriage (see Eph 5:22–24; 1 Pet 3:1).

COVENANTAL HEADSHIP'S FITTING CORRESPONDANCE WITH CREATION ORDER

The CoW we read of in Genesis 2:15–17 is made exclusively between God and Adam (Eve was not yet created, see Gen 2:18), which is natural, good, and fitting, and explains why the progenitor principle (i.e., “for Adam was formed first, then Eve”) is cited by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12–13 as the grounds for male-only preaching (function) and thus pastoring (office) in the New Covenant church. What we mean to highlight here is *not* that male-only eldership is grounded in the CoW, but that the CoW/CoG, and the reality of male-headship in the marriage covenant (Eph 5:22; 1 Cor 11:3) and God’s household (i.e., the church, 1 Tim 3:1–7; 15) flow from God’s creation order design. So, the progenitor principle is therefore revelatory of God’s election of Adam as federal head, such that being created prior to Eve explains how his headship is propagated. In short, Adam’s appointment to this role is not a result of his order of creation, rather his order of creation reveals his appointment. Furthermore, this appointment was not arbitrary, such that God could have interchangeably created Eve first and appointed her the head.

As natural complementarians, we readily affirm male *headship* (covenantally defined) in the church and home, and male *leadership* (naturally fitting) as the norm in broader society are not merely a product of Bible verses, as though Scripture speaks such concepts into existence *ex nihilo*.³³ Rather, the Bible ratifies God’s design and thus reality. Put differently, we maintain that covenantal headship in the church and home is built upon God’s created order, and therefore the principle of male leadership cannot be confined only to these domains, as though it has no bearing on the broader society.

³³ The term “natural complementarianism,” to our knowledge, is coined by Joe Rigney, who uses it as a synonym with “broad” or “thick” complementarianism. We prefer the language of “natural complementarianism,” for the reasons Rigney provides in his explanation: “For natural complementarians, the biblical restriction of the ministerial office to qualified men simply cuts with the grain of God’s design in creation. Biblical imperatives are built on divine indicatives. Nature and Scripture speak with one voice. Male headship in the home is unavoidable; it’s not a command, but a baseline reality, a fact, and the only question is whether a husband will be a faithful head or an unfaithful head. Likewise, male leadership in the church is simply an outworking of the way that God made the world and the way that he is remaking it in Christ. The Pauline restriction in 1 Timothy 2 is built on God’s design as testified in Genesis 1–2 and manifested in the concrete ways that he has made men different from women. Thus, for natural complementarians, male leadership outside the home and the church is normal and expected, and is why the Bible regards a nation ruled by women and children as a sign of God’s judgment (Isaiah 3:12).” “Empathy, Feminism, and the Church,” *American Reformer* (last modified January 26, 2024), <https://americanreformer.org/2024/01/empathy-feminism-and-the-church/>. For more on natural complementarianism, see Doug Ponder and Bryan Laughlin’s essay “Complementarianism and the Rise of Second-Wave Evangelical Feminism,” *Sola Ecclesia* (February 26, 2024), <https://solaecclesia.org/articles/complementarians-and-the-rise-of-second-wave-evangelical-feminism/> and Ponder’s essay(s) “Different From and Different For,” *American Reformer* (last modified, April 5, 2024), <https://americanreformer.org/2024/04/different-from-and-different-for/>, and “A Biblical Vision of the Sexes: Harmonious Asymmetry,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 6.1 (Spring 2022), 28–40.

“Unless we find God’s order for the church and home is either arbitrary or outmoded, natural complementarianism is the logical and fitting understanding of God’s design for men and women...”

Since we affirm that male headship in the home and church is a reflection of created order being restored, we conclude that it would be unnatural for egalitarian principles to ground the broader society. God’s gracious covenantal arrangements correspond with nature, meaning they are not arbitrary but fitting with *who* he has made men and women to be and *what* he calls them to do. Again, this is not to suggest that all men are the head of all women, as the covenantal headship of men over women is limited to the husband and wife relationship, and the church under its male pastors/elders. So, while natural law or created order as it relates to men leading in broader society does not speak with the revelational specificity that Scripture does regarding male headship in the church and home, we find it foolish and even rebellious against God’s clear design to confine this principle only to these covenantal domains (church and home). In other words, to decry the universal norm of men leading in society implicitly charges God with capriciously placing Adam over the human race as federal head, husbands over their wives in the covenant of marriage, and appointing only men to be pastors/elders/overseers in the church. Moreover, just as a (male) pastor who is over male and female congregants alike in his church office by no means degrades the human dignity of either in this capacity, we contend it is likewise good and fitting for qualified and prudential men normally to govern in society (over both men and women). Unless we find God’s order for the church and home is either arbitrary or outmoded, natural complementarianism is the logical and fitting understanding of God’s design for men and women, such that his design for the church, home, and society correspond with reality.



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE IMAGE OF GOD AND THE DOMINION MANDATE

In ratifying the Creation Covenant, the Noahic Covenant reaffirms the Dominion Mandate (Gen 1:28–30), which flows from man being created in God’s image with Noah and his sons in a now sin-cursed world (Gen 9:1–7). God is not reaffirming the CoW with Noah, because upon Adam’s transgression this covenant was/is damning for all his posterity and terminated in accord with the covenant stipulations (see Gen 2:17). We take the time to distinguish the Creation Covenant from the CoW because this then allows for us to preserve the vital concept of God’s CoW with Adam as a positive law,³⁴ which provides a pathway to everlasting life,³⁵ while not conflating this probationary arrangement found in Genesis 2:15–17 with the universal *and* abiding norms recorded in Genesis 1:26–30 (*imago dei* and Dominion Mandate) and 2:18–25 (covenant of marriage). Significantly, the image of God is *located* or *found* in the broader Creation covenant, outside the probationary arrangement.

There has been considerable debate throughout the history of the church over *what* the image of God is and *whether* it is retained or lost upon the entrance of sin. We contend the image of God is intimately connected to human nature, such that just as God later speaks of his covenanting with the day and night from Genesis 1, so too he has irrevocably arranged that male and female be in his image and therefore reign over the created order together (cf. Gen 1:26–28; Ps 8:5–8). Being created in God’s image entails that humanity is created by the Creator-covenant LORD *for* dominion, such that humanity is elected to rule over creation according to their essence through God’s covenantal appointment. In other words, the image of God is a formal arrangement through which God places humanity over the rest of creation.

³⁴ Positive laws are those laws added to the natural or moral law. They are dependent upon the will of God. The first example of such a law is in God’s probationary commandment with Adam as recorded in Genesis 2:15–17. Positive laws are “good because God commands them.” Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–97), II: 174. They *become* righteous, because they are commanded by God (because God said so), and since they become righteous by the will of God, they can also be abrogated. Other examples of positive laws in Scripture are the old covenant rite of circumcision, the ceremonial and sacrificial laws in the Mosaic covenant, and in the NT, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are positive laws.

³⁵ We are in full agreement with Francis Turretin’s understanding of *pactum merit*: “If therefore upright man in that state had obtained this merit, it must not be understood properly and rigorously. Since man has all things from and owes all to God, he can seek from him nothing as his own by right, nor can God be a debtor to him—not by condignity of work and from its intrinsic value (because whatever that may be, it can bear no proportion to the infinite reward of life), but from the pact and the liberal promise of God (according to which man had the right of demanding the reward to which God had of his own accord bound himself) and in comparison with the covenant of grace (which rests upon the sole merit of Christ, by which he acquired for us the right to life). However, this demanded antecedently a proper and personal obedience by which he obtained both his own justification before God and life, as the stipulated reward of his labors.” *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, I: 578.



The triune God provides us with a remarkable glimpse into the creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26: “Let us make man in our *image*, after our *likeness*. And let them have *dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (emphasis ours). While “image” and “likeness” are near synonyms (cf., Col 3:10 and Eph 4:24), Gentry has insightfully suggested that תוֹמֵךְ, or “likeness” likely refers to man’s vertical relationship to God via his obedient sonship, while מִלִּצְ, or “image,” likely refers to man’s horizontal relationship as vice-regent/king over creation.³⁶ This office (directly flowing from human essence and dignity) confirms the purpose and function of humanity. Or to use the biblical idiom: male and female are created in God’s image (Gen 1:27) and therefore “have dominion . . . over all the earth” (Gen 1:28–30). God’s covenant dealings with male and female ratify who male and female are and how they relate to each other and the rest of creation.

We find it significant that within the Creation Covenant, when God created male and female in his image, there is no mention of superiority/inferiority or differentiation as it relates to being human (essence) or being created in God’s image (office of dominion over the created order). This by no means undermines the reality that God’s other

³⁶ Peter Gentry, “Humanity as the Divine Image in Genesis 1:26–28,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 2.1 (Spring 2020), 56–70.

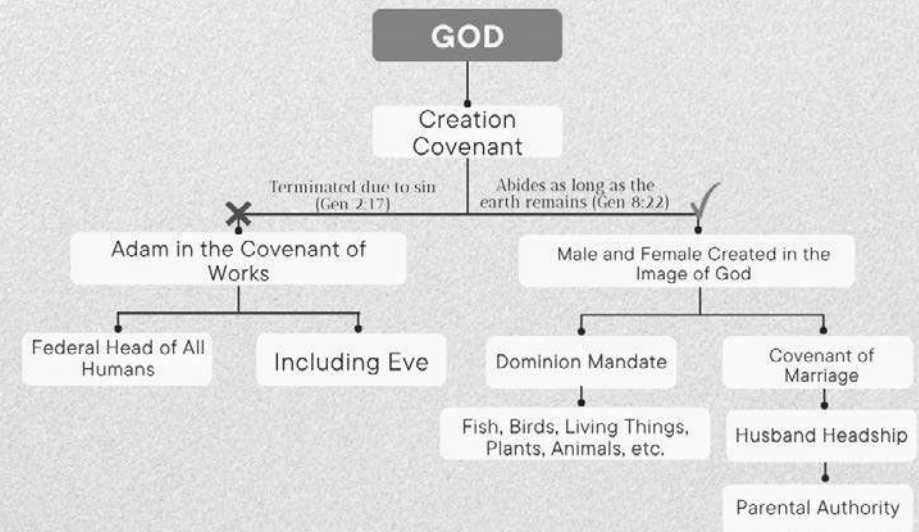
covenantal arrangements in creation (male headship in the CoW and male headship in marriage) are fitting with his design for men and women, and it even helps amplify why men bear a unique responsibility to lead, protect, and provide in God’s created order (Gen 2:15). Humanity, or “mankind,” after all, is named after Adam, not Eve. This is right and proper. Scripture is also exceedingly clear that male and female essence and status before God and over creation is one of essential equality/sameness. This helps clarify why the office of sonship and kingship are intricately connected within the biblical narrative.³⁷ And it provides a framework for grasping why Paul argues that in Christ there is “no male and female,” and therefore all Christians (male and female) are “sons of God through faith” (Gal 3:26–28). The “sons of God” language here flows from the saints’ adoption in Christ, which guarantees their inheritance as a royal “son” (regardless of gender) of God (see Gal 4:4–7).

Paul is not upending the created order or arguing for androgyny between the sexes now that Christ has come in Galatians 3 and 4. Rather he is, we find, grounding the saints’ present and future reign with Christ in the shared essence *and* image human beings (male and female) equally possess. In the creation narrative, Adam equally shares the image of God with Eve, and is simultaneously, by God’s ordination, her covenant head in marriage *and* her representative before God as the federal head of all humanity. Upon his fall into sin, Adam fails miserably on both counts. In the New Covenant/CoG, Christ replaces Adam as the federal head of all Christians, while modeling for the Christian husband how he is to love and lead his wife in the covenant of marriage (Rom 5:12–21; Eph 5:22–33; 1 Cor 11:3, 7–9, 15:45–49).

We must distinguish the concept of federal representation whereby the covenant head stands before God vertically — Adam in the place of humanity and Christ in the place of the elect — and the husband’s covenantal headship horizontally between the spouses in marriage. In the creation account, Adam fulfills both roles of covenantal headship, which is not the case for each subsequent husband. The Dominion Mandate naturally follows being created in God’s image, therefore it is not bound up in Adam’s federal headship. Eve’s status as a true instantiation of human nature (she is *essentially* human) is not diminished by the fact that her

particular human nature is derived from Adam. Therefore, her share in the *imago dei* is not diminished.³⁸ She and Adam bear the image equally, as the mandate in Genesis 1:28–30 makes clear.

Distinguishing Between Covenants in the Creation Narrative



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DISTINGUISHING HUMAN DOMINION OVER THE REST OF CREATION FROM A HUSBAND’S HEADSHIP AND PARENTAL AUTHORITY

We maintain that it is only in view of sin and the curse that Eve is told Adam will “rule” over her in a domineering way as she undermines and subverts his headship in marriage (Gen 3:16). Male headship within the covenant of marriage is not properly understood as dominion over one’s wife, and the biblical authors are careful to not conflate such categories. While male and female together — by virtue of the *imago dei* — are called to take dominion over creation, the authority and submission structure for the covenant of marriage/family is different in nature. Thus, the husband’s headship over his wife and parental authority over children reflects an ordered relation of authority and submission and obedience, not dominion. We do not make such a claim to water down the notion of the headship of husbands or the authority of parents, but to not lose the togetherness of the dominion mandate. When

³⁷ Tom Schreiner rightly notes that the author of Hebrews was well-aware of this sonship/kingship connection and argues, “Hence, the author has not randomly found the word *Son* and applied it to Jesus. He applies a text to Jesus that relates to kingship, so Jesus fulfills the covenant promise that a man will always reign on David’s throne. Sonship is again tied closely to ruling and reigning.” *Hebrews: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 65. For more on this, see Robert Jamieson’s excellent treatment on the twofold sonship of Christ in *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021).

³⁸ For more on this, see Rigney’s essay “Indicatives, Imperatives, and Applications,” 33–4.

instructing Christian households in Ephesians 5, Paul distinguishes between the wife’s submission (ὕπατάσσω) to her husband and children’s obedience (ὕπακούω) to their parents. However, in 1 Peter 3:6 we are told Sarah “obeyed (ὕπήκουσεν) Abraham, calling him lord.” Are Paul and Peter contradicting one another here? No. First, we think it highlights the semantic overlap between “submit” and “obey.” We ought not exaggerate the distinctions between the two words.³⁹ Peter, for example, exhorts Christian wives to submit (ὕποτασσόμεναι) to their own husbands (3:1), and then cites Sarah’s obedience as exemplary for wives to imitate in their submission. Second, we would suggest Sarah’s obedience to Abraham must of course be distinguished from that of a child to their parents from Ephesians 6:1–3, due to the nature of the marriage covenant.⁴⁰

The phrases “as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22) for the wife and “in the Lord” for the children (6:1) tethers her submission and their obedience to God-honoring acts. So, while the husband is the head of his wife, and parents over their children, it is not an unqualified authority for either. In both relationships the man specifically is warned to not abuse his authority (see Col 3:19, 21; Eph 6:4). Moreover, the husband is nowhere authorized to take dominion over his wife, or make her submit. Instead the wife is called to voluntarily submit to her covenant head, which is “fitting in the Lord” (5:22–24; Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1–7). Grace restores created order.

The husband is instructed negatively in Colossians 3:19 “to not be harsh” with his wife and positively in 1 Peter 3:7 to “live with your [wife] in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since [she is an heir] with you of the grace of life,” followed by the warning: “so that your prayers may not be hindered.” It is just as unruly for a husband to act harshly or domineeringly in his role of authority towards his wife as it is for a wife to not submit to her husband. While fathers are called to not exasperate their children, “but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (6:4), these same men are instructed to “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (5:25). Parents are

authorized and expected to wisely and righteously coerce obedience from their children in a way that husbands are not in relationship to their wives (Prov 13:24; 22:15; 23:13–14; Heb 12:7–11). A husband is not called to enforce submission, he is called to live with his wife as one who is in authority, because he is the head.

We conclude from passages on marriage and the family like the ones cited above that male headship in marriage is a real authority that simply *is*. It is not so much a command as it is a reality. Thus in a fallen world, sinful men will plague society as domineering despots or apathetic abdicators. The question is not whether men will lead, but *how*? A Christian husband will lovingly lead his wife as Christ leads his corporate bride, living with her in an understanding way as the weaker vessel, cherishing her as a fellow heir of the grace of life (1 Pet 3:7). A Christian wife will readily and voluntarily submit herself to her husband in everything as the church submits to Christ, respecting and supporting his leadership (Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1–6). Christian fathers (and mothers) will raise their children in the fear and instruction of the Lord, without exasperating them, training them in the way of wisdom, such that their children never depart from it (Prov 22:6; Col 3:21). Christian children will obey their parents in the Lord, for this is right and proper, anticipating a long life in the land as they apply the wisdom learned from their father and mother (Prov 1:8–9; Eph 6:1–3). The gospel of grace restores Christian households to operate in alignment with God’s created order, yielding the fruit of love, peace, and harmony.

We take the time to unpack the husband’s headship and parental authority under the rubric of the covenant of marriage so as to distinguish it from the Dominion Mandate, which is given equally to husbands and wives, and reflects the triune image in which male and female are each created.

THE IMAGE OF GOD IS REFLECTED IN MALE AND FEMALE TAKING DOMINION OVER THE EARTH TOGETHER

Like the marriage covenant, since the *imago dei* is located under the broader Creation Covenant structures that are ratified in the Noachic covenant “as long as the earth remains,” we conclude humans retain the image of God postfall (Gen 8:22; 9:5–7). One takeaway from the Creation Covenant and CoW distinction is that there are no stipulations given whereby male and female could cease to be the image of God in Genesis 1:27–28, unlike how in the CoW, sin

³⁹ To be clear, we are not suggesting there is no value in distinguishing these words, but that Paul and Peter use these same words differently to articulate the same theological judgements. Our interest in this essay is on the apostles’ shared judgements and their implications on the marriage covenant.

⁴⁰ We find the referent in 1 Peter 3:6 is to Genesis 18:12, wherein Sarah laughs to herself upon overhearing the news she would have a son in her old age. When God calls her out on this, she refers to Abraham as lord, and then obeys him and ultimately God in having a child (Isaac). Would Abraham have been justified in enforcing her obedience in this context? Of course not, rather Sarah, who like Abraham, had a body “as good as dead,” chose not to “fear anything that was frightening,” models how a holy woman hopes in God (Rom 4:19; 1 Pet 3:5).



and death terminate that specific covenant arrangement in Genesis 2:17. As Bavinck explains, “Humans are fully human even after the fall. But when man lost his original righteousness, he lost the harmony and health of his nature and became a sinner through and through. His nature in the sense of substance or essence remained, but the moral qualities naturally belonging to his nature were lost.”⁴¹ Since the whole person is the whole image, and since sin affects the whole person, Bavinck is right to conclude that the Reformers acknowledged there is both a sense in which the image of God is lost (narrower) and retained (broader), even with our sin nature.⁴² The fact that humans retain the image and likeness of God is evidenced in texts like Genesis 5:1–3, Genesis 9:5–6, and James 3:9.

If the image of God remains, which we affirm, then so too does the Dominion Mandate and its entailments for humanity. Bavinck is therefore correct to suggest, “Psalm 8 testifies, human royal dominion remains, together with wealth and culture, as part of God’s rich provision, given to

us to enjoy.”⁴³ As we seek to demonstrate in the table below, when Genesis 1:27–28 is compared with Psalm 8:4–8, the language of “image” and “crowned him” are conceptual parallels, highlighting the reality that being created in the “image of God” speaks of God’s irrevocable appointment of male and female to rule and reign over the created order.

Genesis 1:27–28	Psalm 8:4–8
So God created man (27a)	What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings (4–5a)
in his own image , in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (27b)	crowned him with glory and honor (5b)
And God blessed them. And God said to them , “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it , and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth. ” (28)	You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet , all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (6–8)

Dominion is not a constitutive element of the image of God, rather, as Bavinck argues, “Genesis 1:26, 28; 2:19–20; 9:2–3; and Psalm 8:7–9 clearly teach that this dominion is most closely tied in with the creation in God’s image and given in it. It is not an external appendix to the image; it is not based on a supplementary special dispensation; but being the image of God, man is thereby at the same time elevated above all other creatures and appointed the lord and king over them all.”⁴⁴ In other words, the fullness of what God intends for the office of image/son/king is realized as those created in and for this office fulfill their calling. Bavinck helpfully distinguishes between dominion being *constitutive* of the image of God versus a *consequence* of it:

To have dominion over the earth was not an end goal for human striving through considerable conflict. It was not a distant ideal, a destination at the end of a path of exertion. No! It was a part but not the sole content and consequence of being made in God’s image. Adam did not have to become lord and master of the earth and conquer it, and exercise dominion over it. Instead, he was the lord and master and sovereign and had to demonstrate this fact and continue to exercise lordship.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), II:553.

⁴² According to Bavinck, “Reformed theologians continued to speak of the image of God in a broader and a narrower sense. In Holy Scripture they read that man, on the one hand, is still called the image of God after the fall and should be respected as such (Gen 5:1; 9:6; Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 11:7; James 3:9); and that, on the other hand, he had nevertheless lost the primary content of the image of God (i.e., knowledge, righteousness, and holiness) and only regains these qualities in Christ (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). The whole being, therefore, and not something in man but man himself, is the image of God. Further, sin, which precipitated the loss of the image of God in the narrower sense and spoiled and ruined the image of God in the broader sense, has profoundly affected the whole person, so that, consequently, also the grace of God in Christ restores the whole person, and is of the greatest significance for his or her whole life and labor, also in the family, society, the state, art, science, and so forth.” *Reformed Dogmatics*, II:550, 554.

⁴³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics, Volume 1: Created Fallen, and Converted Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 162.

⁴⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II:560–561.

⁴⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, I:42.

Now, in speaking of Adam becoming lord and master of the earth in keeping with his status as the image of God, ought we include Eve (as his wife) under his *dominion*?

In a word, *no*. Just as covenant must be distinguished but not separated from creation (i.e., the CoW corresponds with creation and beckons it to glory), the existence of humanity cannot be separated from essence. This means that while the gender distinctions between men and women are grounds for ordering relationships in church, home, and society, we do not then conclude that men take dominion over women—either generally in society or in the covenant of marriage/the church. Men and women take dominion over creation *together* as image-sons in distinct/engendered ways that are both covenantally appropriate and aligned with their existence as male and female. We are not suggesting there is no hierarchy, or that hierarchy is antagonistic to the shared image status between men and women, but to clarify that it is categorically distinct from dominion. In other words, to return to the passage we considered in the previous section, it is fitting for Sarah to refer to Abraham as “lord” due to his headship within the covenant of marriage (1 Pet 3:6). Abraham’s headship over Sarah and his children is an ordered covenantal relation between those who are in essence complete equals. The Dominion Mandate, on the other hand, is God’s formal arrangement in which those with a superior essence (male and female, who are crowned with glory and honor due to being created in God’s image) are elected to rule over that which is inferior in essence (the rest of creation). The Creator-creature distinction is therefore imaged and represented in male and female (who are the same in essence) taking dominion over creation and subduing the earth together (Gen 1:26–30).

Immediately after revealing to us the shared image status of male and female, Moses writes, “And God blessed *them*. And God said to *them*, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen 1:28, emphasis ours). The third person suffix on the particle סָם is singular here, but collective, as it also is in Genesis 1:27. We know this must be the case because (1) otherwise only men are said to be created in the image of God in 1:27; and (2) obviously man alone cannot be fruitful and multiply (see Gen 2:18). The fruitful multiplicity and the dominion in these verses are therefore interlocked and accomplished as men and women enter into distinct marriage covenants, build households, and subdue the earth together. Man can only subject the earth under himself with the assistance of

woman, whose God-honoring and voluntary submission, with her wisdom, support, and child-bearing/rearing helps “in fostering a kingdom of rational and moral citizens, and thereby in bringing the earth into subjection to the human race that comes forth from her.”⁴⁶ Not only do the man and woman “become one” in the marriage covenant, the Dominion Mandate is a sacred calling so inextricably bound in this union it is only rightly conceived of as a *single* work. And what God has joined together, let not man separate.

The Dominion Mandate is directed toward a single objective: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Hab 2:14). Bavinck rightly maintains, “For only in the human race is the image of God unfolded, and only in its dominion over the whole earth does the human race achieve its vocation and purpose.”⁴⁷ Adam and Eve’s divine task was to be fruitful and multiply and thus expand the borders of Eden to the ends of the earth. As Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2 remind us, this task was *not* accomplished under Adam’s headship. Tragically, rather than expanding the borders of Eden, Adam and Eve sinned and were exiled outside Eden’s boundary markers, never to return (Gen 3:23–24). This is why Hebrews 2:9 teaches, “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to *him*” (emphasis ours). The “him” in context, we contend, can be none other than the “man” from the Psalm 8 citation the author of Hebrews just quoted in 2:5–8. Therefore, the author highlights how mankind *in* Adam cannot fulfill the Dominion Mandate. However, fallen humanity retains the *imago dei* and is still responsible to fulfill this task, as it is irrevocably stamped upon them. Due to sin, fallen man can only follow in Adam’s footsteps: abdicating responsibility, blame-shifting, and/or domineering and exploiting others and the creation God has called them to steward. Just as the institution of marriage is hampered and complicated by sin, so too the Dominion Mandate is impeded but not rescinded. The reason for the continuation of both is the same: they are Creation Covenant callings and vocations, which naturally flow from the *imago dei*.

God in his mercy and grace has not left fallen sinners to their own devices. Adam and Eve surely left Eden both heartbroken for what they had done, but heartened by the *protoevangelium* (Gen 3:15). Their only hope was the divine promise that *the* Seed of the woman (“the mother of all living,” see Gen 3:20) would crush their enemy and “deliver all those who through fear of death were subject

⁴⁶ Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 6–7.

⁴⁷ Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 7.

to lifelong slavery” (Heb 2:15). In the fullness of time, the Bible makes it known that this serpent crushing Son would allow the snake to bruise his heel on the cross, such that “through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (2:14). But no mere man could die and destroy the devil, sin, and death. Hebrews teaches that since Adam/mankind has failed to subject the world to themselves, “We see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2:9).

The “him” in Hebrews 2:8 (Adam) was “crowned with glory and honor” (*imago dei*), but “at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.” So, we “see him” (Christ) in 2:9 is “made lower than the angels” (as the Athanasian Creed explains, Christ is “equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity”), so that *because of the suffering of death* Christ can be crowned with glory and honor. The author of Hebrews brilliantly weaves together the Psalter in his opening two chapters and connects how Psalm 2 and 8 are fulfilled in Christ’s person and work. The crown of thorns was a necessary precursor for the crown of glory as the Last Adam fulfills God’s promise to David in Psalm 2:7 through his obedience unto death and resurrection unto eternal life (Isa 9:6–7; Acts 13:33; Heb 1:4–5; 2:5–18; 5:5–10). Adam and Eve, by virtue of being created in God’s image, were “crowned with glory and honor,” but they failed to subdue the creation. However, in Christ’s person and work, what was once lost is regained. Under Adam’s failed headship in the CoW, both Adam and Eve experienced the curse of sin in their marriage and distinct vocations, and the curse of sin would eventually lead to their physical death (see Gen 3:16–19; 5:5). Therefore, in the CoG Christ “partook of flesh and blood” (Heb 2:14, i.e., assumed a human nature), to take the penalty of death. In so doing, Christ takes upon himself the covenant sanctions of Genesis 2:17 and becomes the faithful head who can restore fallen humanity to their image-son vocation.

Since Christ perfectly kept the New Covenant/CoG, as Wellum correctly avers, “In Christ and his work, the last Adam, we, as his people, are restored to our Adamic role as image-sons in relation to God and the creation (Heb 2:5–18).”⁴⁸ Thus, while the image remains (though vitiated) in fallen man, and while the Dominion Mandate is ratified in the Noahic covenant, the curse of sin which impedes

the proper exercise and/or realization of this mandate due to the broken CoW has *already* begun to be restored in Christ’s New Covenant people even as we await the full realization at the consummation. Just as grace restores human marriages and realigns them with God’s created order, so too grace restores human dominion, such that in Christ believers are restored and conformed to the image of Christ, enabled to righteously fulfill their office over the rest of creation, according to God’s intention.

CONTEMPORARY CONFUSION: CONFUSING THE IMAGO DEI WITH BEARING ADAM OR CHRIST’S IMAGE AND LIKENESS

In the same way that it is proper to speak of God the Son becoming son, thus succeeding where Adam “the son of God” failed (Luke 3:38), we can also say God the Image (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3) became the image to succeed where the “first image” failed. This is *precisely* what Paul means to communicate in 1 Corinthians 15:47–49 when he writes, “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.” Here we must distinguish between the notion of *bearing the image of Adam/Christ* in which his fate is our fate, and the reality that humans *are* “crowned with glory and strength,” that is, made in the *image of God*. We agree with Bavinck’s insistence on this point: “In our treatment of the doctrine of the image of God, then, we must highlight, in accordance with Scripture and the Reformed confession, the idea that a human being does not bear or have the image of God but that he or she is the image of God.”⁴⁹ Humanity is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–28), and Seth is born in the image and likeness of Adam (Gen 5:1–3). The former is an irrevocable covenantal office written into the very constitution of humanity, the latter speaks to the CoW and Adam’s fallen headship. Seth, therefore, joins the chorus of all ruined sinners who appeal to Christ: “Adam’s likeness now efface, Stamp Thine image in its place.”⁵⁰

It is crucial that we not conflate being in the image of God with bearing Adam’s image/likeness under the now broken CoW, or even bearing Christ’s image under the now inaugurated New Covenant. It is increasingly popular in our

⁴⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II:554.

⁵⁰ This glorious line is from the often forgotten fifth verse in “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” since George Whitefield edited Charles Wesley’s hymn down to four verses, and this rendition became the norm in Christian hymnals. For a brief explanation on this verse, see Rob Brockman’s essay, “The Forgotten Verse of ‘Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,’” *TGC*, (last modified December 24, 2021), <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-forgotten-verse-of-hark-the-herald-angels-sing/>.

⁴⁸ Stephen Wellum, *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), 131.

day for some to posit that Christ is the archetypal image of God and that human beings are ectypes. According to this logic, leaders in this movement, like Marc Cortez, explicitly reject the notion that the image of God is “possessed” by humans, and posit “the image of God is shown to be something that unfolds over time as God manifests himself in and through the narrative of his covenantal relationship with humanity . . . the image of God involves the continual unfolding of God’s personal being as he manifests himself in and through his covenantal relationships with his people, Israel and the Church.”⁵¹ We find this notion to be fundamentally at odds with the biblical teaching that all humans are created in God’s image. The logical entailment of this claim is that only Jews under the old covenant and Christians under the New Covenant would be participants in “God’s image.” The anthropological, theological, and even ethical repercussions of this error are manifold and catastrophic.⁵²

Sadly, the errors with this approach to the *imago dei* do not remain in anthropology, but they infect theology proper. The Christotelic model posits that the incarnation of the Son discloses true humanity and the fullness of the *imago dei* for the first time, revealing that humanity had been created in the Son’s image from the beginning. To substantiate this notion, Cortez appeals to divine timelessness, according to which there is no distinction in God’s perspective between a time when the Son was incarnate and a time when he was not incarnate. We find the rejection of a logical distinction between the divine Son’s life apart from the incarnation and the same Son’s having become incarnate to be a fatal theological error.⁵³ When its entailments are considered,

this move collapses the Creator-creature distinction, thus eroding the proper starting point for all faithful theological reflection.⁵⁴ This model conspicuously lacks a classical/orthodox doctrine of God.

The Bible teaches that the Son is indeed the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3); however, such texts reveal divine *processions*, not *missions*.⁵⁵ This vital biblical-theological distinction is lost in Cortez’s account of the incarnation, and as a result, the Son’s procession cannot be logically distinguished from his mission. Instead, we argue texts like Colossians 1:15 and Hebrews 1:3 do not imply Christ is the archetypal man, rather they reveal the Son’s eternal generation/begottenness. Missions reveal processions, they do not ground processions.

A “proof-text” often cited by proponents of the Christotelic image approach is Romans 8:29, which reads: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” They find Paul’s phrase “conformed to the image of his Son” to support their conclusion that humans were made in the Son’s image from the beginning, because Christians are being restored/conformed to the image of the Son. We would note that Paul is by no means indicating here that the image of God exclusively belongs to the Son, nor is he revealing humanity was always created in the Son’s image. We know this because Paul predicates the image in this context on the Son’s human nature when he says the Son is the “firstborn among many brothers.” In other words, because of Christ’s perfect obedience unto death, those who are “in Christ” are united to or conformed into his life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and ultimately, his glorification. Therefore, Paul

⁵¹ Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 36–37.

⁵² Colin Smothers has drawn attention to a clear example of how fraught with anthropological error this perspective is in his review of Christa McKirland, “Rejecting Gender Essentialism to Embrace Transgenderism?: A Response to Christa McKirland, ‘Image of God and Divine Presence,’” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.1 (Spring 2023): 46–53. McKirland, a leading proponent of the Christotelic image approach, suggests gender essentialism is to blame for the “internal angst of some trans persons,” and that the biblical emphasis “is on following Jesus, not being ‘real men’ or ‘real women.’ For those who are discerning whether their givenness should be altered, the New Testament rubric for any such choice (which would include all bodily modifications, not just those affecting sexual anatomy) is how such can be done in submission to the Spirit and in order to become more like Christ.” In agreement with Smothers, we find such arguments from the likes of McKirland to be not just the trajectory of problematic approaches to the *imago dei*, but the application of it to anthropology, in which “rejection of gender essentialism inevitably leads to an ontological interchangeability, which is the complete abandonment of God’s design, who makes us male and female in his image” (Smothers, 53). If gender is at best an accident then it can be treated as an obstacle to be overcome in pursuit of Christlikeness. However, as we have sought to establish with the essence-existence distinction, such an understanding of gender denigrates human dignity, and treats God’s good design for creating humans male or female as arbitrary and even at odds with some humans’ best interests. This perspective is offensive to the Creator and harmful to those made in his image.

⁵³ We are convinced this is the same error relating to the image and incarnation that Cortez and others who hold to this model make in claiming the universal is an effect of the particular in their confusion on the essence-existence distinction, and that is backward causation. This is also known as retrocausality, and is the idea that an effect can occur before its cause in time, which is a metaphysical absurdity, in our estimation. Appeal to divine eternity (timelessness) does not help because such an appeal collapses the Creator/creature distinction. A created effect cannot precede its cause temporally because time is the condition of creaturely life, change, cause, effect, etc. Divine timelessness rightly affirms that God is not somehow experiencing the cause-effect relationship in himself. But the temporally constrained cause-effect relationship among creatures cannot just be erased

because the Creator is timeless.

⁵⁴ Cortez appeals to the well known mantra of Karl Barth that there is no *logos asarkos*, no Son of God behind the incarnate Son (see Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010], 33). We find this way of thinking about the incarnation to be highly problematic. Given divine eternity, of course it is true that there is no time differential between the Son’s experience of non-incarnate life and his experience of life incarnate. Indeed, even speaking of an “experience” of anything, in the proper sense, only applies to the Son’s human life. Nevertheless, the logical distinction between the absolutely necessary, full plenitude of God’s triune life in himself and the contingent existence of creation must be maintained to uphold the clear biblical teaching of *creatio ex nihilo* and to avoid collapsing the Creator/creature distinction altogether. One way that biblical idiom and traditional Christian theologians have maintained this distinction is by the use of temporal language analogically applied to a situation in which temporality is not a proper category. For example, Paul says that the elect are chosen “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). Moses praises God for his glorious existence “before the mountains were brought forth,” even before he “brought forth the earth and the world” (Ps. 90:1–2). This same Creator/creature distinction must be maintained in the incarnation. The Son assumed a created human nature. If there is no logical category for the Son’s fullness of eternal divine life apart from or before the incarnation, we collapse the Creator/creature distinction in the person of the Son. Both John and Paul are explicitly maintaining this very distinction by speaking of the Word who *was* God in the beginning and who *became* flesh (John 1:1, 14) and the Son who *existed* in the “form of God” and *took* the “form of a servant” (Phil. 2:6–7). Long live the glorious and beautiful notion of the *logos asarkos*!

⁵⁵ *Processions* refers to an eternal relation by which one person (the Son or the Spirit) is in relation to another person eternally (Son from the Father, Spirit from the Father and Son). *Missions* refers to the temporal sending of a divine person (the Son or the Spirit) that reveals the eternal procession.

is saying the exact same thing in Romans 8:29 that he does in Colossians 3:10-11: “You have put off the old self [man] with its practices and have put on the new self [man], which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here [in Christ] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” In Ephesians, Paul says something rather similar: “Put off your old self [man] . . . and . . . put on the new self [man], created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22, 24).

Notice first, how *image* and *likeness* are virtual synonyms in the parallel passages above. And second, the image that is being restored in these passages is said to be *after* the likeness of “God” and “Creator.” So, when the “us” of Genesis 1:26 (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) is aligned with the “God” and “Creator” language in Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24, we conclude the image is reflective of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, not only is humanity created in the image of the triune God, but this image (an office, *not* a “manifestation of God’s personal being”) is whole and healthy in the state of integrity, because human nature was not yet corrupted by sin.

In place of Cortez’s model, we find Bavinck is correct to contend that “the Son is not only the mediator of reconciliation (*mediator reconciliationis*) on account of sin, but even apart from sin he is the mediator of union (*mediator unionis*) between God and his creation. He is not only the exemplary cause (*causa exemplaris*) but also the final cause (*causa finalis*) of creation.”⁵⁶ The language of *exemplary* and *final* cause is vital to comprehend, as Bavinck uses it to suggest the *telos* of creation is inherently Christological. For the Son is preeminent over creation (Col 1:15–20). It is therefore proper and fitting to appropriate to the Son preeminence over creation as the “Image of God.” Bavinck rightly adds, however, that God’s *telos* for the *imago dei* will be fulfilled only when “humanity in its entirety — as one complete organism, summed up under a single head, spread out over the whole earth, as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and the whole of creation — only it is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God.”⁵⁷ He clarifies what he means by “fully finished image” when he adds, “the image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be,” and as a result, “Humanity cannot be conceived as a

completed organism unless it is united and epitomized in one head. In the covenant of grace Christ has that position, and he is the head of the church; in the covenant of works that position is occupied by Adam.”⁵⁸ Bavinck is assuming and explicating here the idea that the image as an office (e.g., prophet, priest, king) is demonstrated and realized as the whole of humanity (each member equally representing God) spreads out across the glorified cosmos to God’s glory and praise. It is not, therefore, God’s personal being that is manifested in the *imago dei*, but humanity’s *telos* — both form and function — that is realized.

A crucial point for the purposes of this essay is how Bavinck pins the full realization of the *imago dei* in the completed CoW, and ultimately, the CoG in Christ as the Last Adam. Since the CoW/CoG is the pathway to glorification, the glorified image of God is found in humanity living under their faithful covenant head, who blazes the trail to glory. Those created in God’s image need a faithful federal representative, not *necessarily* the Son’s incarnation. The incarnation *becomes* necessary once humanity breaks covenant with God in Adam. We therefore strongly disagree with the notion that “everything we think we know about humanity must be reinterpreted in light of the supernatural *telos* we see in Jesus.”⁵⁹ Any proposal that makes the image of God synonymous with the image of Adam/Christ fundamentally confuses God’s restoration of his image in fallen man for the image and likeness of Adam/Christ. Neither humanity nor the image is somehow incomplete until the incarnation of Christ. This undermines the integrity of the CoW, and locates the human problem in either human nature or the lack of revelation, rather than in human rebellion against God’s goodness and authority. The clearest statements of the Son’s incarnational mission in Scripture refer explicitly to the need for salvation and redemption from sin (Gal 4:3–5; John 1–18; 3:16–18; Phil 2:6–11). The Nicene Creed captures this as well with its language that Christ assumed human nature and came down from heaven “for us and for our salvation.” If the image is found in the divine life of the Son and is only understood in his incarnation, then humanity and the *imago dei* are rendered incomplete without the Son’s incarnation. Therefore, if recent Christotelic treatments of the image are accurate, then Adam and Eve were incomplete and incapable of keeping the Creation Covenant and the CoW *by nature and design*. We find this notion fundamentally irreconcilable with Scripture. Adam’s disobedience, not his created nature, is the problem, and Christ’s person and work is the solution.

⁵⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV:685.

⁵⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II:577.

⁵⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II:577–578.

⁵⁹ Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology*, 66.

CONTEMPORARY CONFUSION: CITING THE MALE-FEMALE GENDER DISTINCTION AS SYMBOLIZING/IMAGING THE CREATOR-CREATURE DISTINCTION

Since male and female are *both* created in the image of the triune God, the dominion of mankind over the rest of creation symbolically reflects the triune God's dominion over creation. This is what it means to be created in the *imago dei*. While on the one hand, some in our day (as evidenced in the previous section) are collapsing the Creator-creature distinction in defining the image in relation to the incarnation, others imprecisely speak of "differing natures" between male and female, or even invoke the Creator-creature distinction as the archetype for the male and female relationship. We do not find this error to be as dangerous as the previous, but we do find it to undermine the essential equality shared by men and women that its proponents claim to want to uphold. We will return to two recent books, the first by Michael Clary, and the second by Michael Foster/Bnonn Tennant that were previously reviewed in *Eikon*, not to beat a dead horse, but to demonstrate how the essence-existence distinction may bring some closure to these discussions.

Michael Clary. In his otherwise insightful book *God's Good Design: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Guide to Human Sexuality*, Clary claims men and women have "differing natures,"⁶⁰ and he does so after connecting gender roles in the Creator-creature distinction. While we appreciate his quickness to qualify such a claim with the assurance that "this does not mean that men are more like God than women, or that women are less like God than men," we find it theologically misguided to claim that the "creator-creature distinction is mirrored in the sexual differences between men and women."⁶¹ As natural complementarians, we resonate strongly with Clary's desire to defend the biblical practice of referring to God in strictly masculine terms.⁶² We also are in agreement that God's design for male headship in the church and home, and the fittingness of men to lead in society are both natural and good. Speaking of differing natures between men and women, however, and especially claiming gender distinctions reflect the Creator-creature distinction, are significant categorical errors.

The position that men and women have differing natures opens the door for the equal and opposite error of EFS/ERAS,⁶³ because while rightly avoiding the mistake of reading creaturely realities back into the nature of God, this wrongly cites the ontological transcendence of Creator over creation as being symbolized in distinct male and female nature(s) and roles. Instead, as Samuel Parkison argues in his review of Clary's work, men and women "do not have different natures . . . they substantiate a common nature (i.e., human nature) in distinctly gendered ways — an individual existence of the human essence is always either male or female. Unfortunately, Clary's imprecision of language opens the possibility that he intends to communicate that men and women are of a different ontological kind."⁶⁴ It is this very miscommunication (we are convinced Clary does not intend to make such an argument) we seek to correct and avoid by clearly distinguishing between existence and essence. The need for this we trust will be further proven as we move into Christology below.

Michael Foster and Bnonn Tennant. Foster and Tennant, in their popular work *It's Good to Be a Man: A Handbook for Godly Masculinity*, likewise cite the Creator-creature distinction as being imaged or symbolized in gender distinctions and maintain:

Man is the image of God; yet also, male and female are an image of the creator and creation. . . . the principle of male and female doesn't originate in Adam and Eve, but in God and creation. . . . What happens when [man] denies the distinction between God and creation? He continues following the devil in confusing, denying, and ultimately trying to obliterate the image of that divide.⁶⁵

Matt Damico has offered a salient response to this logic:

The distinction between God and his creation is absolute — there is an ontological chasm between God and man that finds no parallel among image bearers. Further, the Creator-creature distinction, in

⁶⁰ Michael Clary, *God's Good Design: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Guide to Human Sexuality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Reformation Zion Publishing, 2023), 46.

⁶¹ Clary, *God's Good Design*, 29, 32.

⁶² For more on why we find this to be proper, see Kyle Claunch's essay "Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God: An Exegetical and Dogmatic Account," *Eikon*. See also Kyle Claunch's forthcoming book, *The Trinity and the Gender of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2026).

⁶³ For more on why complementarianism is in no ways dependent upon ERAS, see Stephen Wellum's excellent treatment of this topic: "Does Complementarianism Depend on ERAS?: A Response to Kevin Giles, 'The Trinity Argument for Women's Subordination,'" *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.1 (Spring 2023): 60–67. Therein Wellum argues, "When Scripture does unpack the relation between husbands and wives as analogous to Christ and the church, and how God as the head of the incarnate Son (1 Cor. 11:3) is analogous to human relations, it is not in terms of the eternal relations among the persons, but more in terms of the incarnation and the divine economy. The main warrant for complementarianism, however, is Scripture itself, starting in creation and culminating in the new creation."

⁶⁴ Samuel Parkison, "God's Good Design: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Guide to Human Sexuality (Book Review)," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.2 (Fall 2023): 109.

⁶⁵ Michael Foster and Dominic Bnonn Tennant, *It's Good to Be a Man: A Handbook for Godly Masculinity* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2022), 61, emphasis original.

addition to highlighting the superiority of God over his creation, actually accentuates the similarities between men and women, not their differences: both bear the divine image, both are given the creation mandate, and both reside on the "creature" side of the distinction.⁶⁶

Both authors have since offered appreciative responses to Damico's critique, and we wish to draw attention to Tennant's in particular. He contends, "This is actually basic biblical symbolism . . . it should be obvious that the hierarchical, spiritual, and physical distinctions between men and women are symbolic of the distinction between creator and creation. As should it be obvious that symbols must not be confused with, or collapsed into, the ontology they symbolize."⁶⁷ While we are grateful for Tennant's clarification that he and Foster only intend to use the Creator-creature distinction "symbolically," not ontologically, we would reiterate that nowhere does the Bible invoke the Creator-creature distinction as being illustrated or symbolized in marriage/gender distinctions and/or roles.

If the marital relationship is patterned after the Creator-creature distinction, even "symbolically," we find it to be an example of wanting to have one's cake and eat it too, because then gender is patterned after an ontological distinction, even admitting men and women have "differing natures," while also saying they share in human *nature*. In his response, Tennant seems to imply that to not see gender distinctions as patterned after the Creator-creature distinction is to "sacralize androgyny." This misses the point of Damico's critique. One need not use the ontological distinction between God and his creation as symbolized in male and female distinctions to provide a robust (albeit biblically chastened) account of gender essentialism.

Curiously, Tennant cites Genesis 2:4–7 in defense of his position, arguing that Adam's (literal) creation from the dust, combined with the reference in Genesis 2:4 to the "generations" (or "offspring") of the earth means he was "physically formed from the earth, the dirt, the ground — which is his mother. And he is spiritually formed from heaven, from God — who is his father."⁶⁸ He then cites Job

1:21 and Psalm 139:13–15 as prooftexts which (in his mind) legitimize the language of "mother earth." First, we agree that Adam was literally formed from the earth. But we disagree that Job 1:21 and Psalm 139:13–15 validate Foster/Tennant's argument that the image of the Creator-creature divide is male and female. Recall that we have already established male and female are each equally created in the image of the triune God. In other words, the image does not reflect the divide between God and creation, but the equality of Father, Son, and Spirit over creation. Foster/Tennant argue they do not intend for such symbolism to reject the ontological equality of male and female, however to say that God as Creator is imaged by Adam, while mother earth/creation is imaged by Eve, decouples the *imago dei*. We would reiterate that Scripture is clear male and female *are* the image of God and therefore image or symbolize God's authority over creation. We argue below for the fittingness of the Son in taking on a male gender (body and soul) as it pertains to both his eternal relation to the Father, and because only men can function as covenant heads. The Bible, however, does not cite Christ's *divine* nature as Creator, but his shared *human* nature as incarnate Savior to ground headship/representation, and therein he sets the example for Christian husbands in relation to their wives.

Far from being an argument from silence, we contend the incarnation and Christ's headship over his bride (the church) is the anti-type of which the husband and wife relationship is the type. For Paul, the Christ-church union *is* the "profound mystery" to which marriage always points (Eph 5:31–32). Tennant wants to read the "hierarchical, spiritual, and physical distinctions between men and women as patterned after the Creator-creature distinction," but the Bible instead stresses the husband's covenantal headship is a type of the Christ-church union. In Christ, God the Son assumed human nature, therefore becoming a human "in every respect," and is thus the head of the church, since he shares in the same nature as the people for which he gave his life. It was a necessary precondition that the divine Son assume a human nature in order to become the Savior and Redeemer of his corporate bride, to bridge the very Creator-creature distinction Clary/Foster/Tennant cite.

But Ephesians 5 is not the only place where Paul uses the language of headship in relation to Christ and gender distinctions/marriage. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul writes, "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God . . . [man] is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but

⁶⁶ Bnonn Tennant, "Masculine & feminine symbolize creator & creation: a response to Matt Damico's critique of It's Good To Be A Man," *True Magic* (Substack), last modified June 19, 2024, <https://www.truemagic.nz/p/masculine-and-feminine-symbolize>.

⁶⁷ Tennant, "Masculine & feminine symbolize creator & creation."

⁶⁸ Tennant, "Masculine & feminine symbolize creator & creation."

woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (11:3, 7–9).⁶⁹ Does this passage cite male headship as symbolizing the Creator-creature distinction? If, as we are convinced, the reference to Christ is predicated on his human nature, then is this not potentially an example of Paul teaching God’s (divine) nature over Christ (who is inferior as it relates to his humanity) as the archetype for gender roles in Scripture? We find such logic both unconvincing and problematic, because this text is not using the God-Christ connection as Paul uses the Christ-church union in precisely the same way. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul’s concern is that the Corinthians “maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you” (11:2). As is well-known, Corinth was a most perplexing and disordered church, and in chapter 11, one particular manifestation of this disorder is found in husbands and wives and/or men and women within the congregation eschewing cultural customs which displayed gender distinctions (see 1 Cor 11:10–16). Paul therefore ratifies the created order and instructs men and women to realign themselves with God’s design. We are thus in full agreement with Foster and Tennant when they interpret this passage as follows: “Authority flows downward from God, to Christ, to man, to his wife.”⁷⁰

This is where the distinction between Adam’s two forms of covenantal headship is crucial. Had Adam never sinned, humanity would not have needed Christ (according to his human nature) as a federal head. Because Adam sinned, a new and better representative before the throne of God is needed. So, when Paul teaches God is the head of Christ, he is assuming Christ is the Last Adam (cf. 1 Cor 15:45–49) under whose representational authority both Christian spouses now live in 11:3. When the church gathers, if gender distinctions are blurred or despised, or if marital

order is cast aside, the corporate bride/body of Christ defames their Creator and Redeemer by rebelling against his design for men and women. When Paul writes that man is the image and glory of God, while woman is the glory of man, he is by no means suggesting women do not bear the image of God, or that they bear God’s image to a lesser degree. Paul is not addressing the essence of male or female generically, rather he is specifically arguing that when a man covers his head and a woman does not in the Corinthian church’s gatherings, each maligns the gospel by defaming God’s created order. Paul’s intention, then, is to recalibrate the Corinthian church’s disordered loves to realign with God’s design. Unlike Ephesians 5, which explicitly calls for Christian marriages to conform to the Christ-church union as a model for the husband-wife relationship, in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul is emphasizing the proper order: (1) God, (2) the federal headship of Christ over all humanity (including husbands and wives), and then (3) the covenantal headship of husbands in marriage.

To sum up, in Ephesians 5, Paul instructs husbands and wives to reflect the Christ-church union in their marriages. In 1 Corinthians 11, he is rebuking and correcting the Corinthians, urging them to: (1) realign with God’s creation order design for husbands and wives, and (2) readily display God’s goodness in gender by honoring cultural customs which admit and appropriately amplify such distinctions. In fact, the three phrases in 11:3: “the head of every man is Christ,” “the head of a wife is her husband,” and “the head of Christ is God,” are just what we would expect given the connections and distinctions between creation order, the CoW/CoG, and the covenant of marriage established previously. Since the CoW/CoG and the marriage covenant correspond with creation order, Christian men and women ought not act out or adorn themselves in church gatherings in ways that subvert God’s design.

Our aim in drawing attention to this is for correction *and* unity, in that we find the error of citing the Creator-creature distinction here as following the grain of created order, but misplacing the type-antitype. In short, we find such arguments to be earnestly pursuing both the biblical idiom and the reality undergirding the biblical teaching. As both Parkison and Damico have pointed out in their reviews of Clary and Foster/Tennant, we find it both refreshing and invigorating to read these authors’ non-anxious approach to biblical sexuality. Even though we disagree with the usage of the Creator-creature distinction as being imaged in gender distinctions, we resonate with their indefatigable commitment to follow the grain of created order. Below, we

⁶⁹The term ἀνὴρ can be translated man or husband, and γυναῖκα may be translated woman or wife, as the *ESV* translation alternates from husband to man in this passage, because context is determinative. Tom Schreiner offers a good mediating position between the debate that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is referencing husbands/wives or men/women, arguing: “It should also be noted that when Paul addresses husbands and wives exclusively, there are clear indications in the text of a married relationship (see 1 Cor 7:2–5, 8–16; Eph 5:22–23; Col 3:18–19; cf. 1 Pet 3:1–7). Still, some of the evidence for seeing wives in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is quite strong. I suggest, therefore, a mediating solution. Paul’s instructions in this text are for both married and unmarried women in the congregation. Nevertheless, there is a fluidity and a looseness in his discussion; thus, even though Paul refers to women in general, he glides over to the relationship between husbands and wives, especially in 11:4–5. Such a move is not surprising since most of the women were probably married. Indeed, the corresponding discussion in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36 may suggest that wives in particular were the offenders in this case. When we think about 11:3 in particular, Paul does not restrict himself exclusively to husbands and wives. It does not follow from this that every man is the head of every woman in the congregation. Instead, Paul thinks more generally and cosmically — we could say ecclesiologically — in the passage; thus in verse 3 he reflects on the creational differences between men and women. Paul’s instructions, then, naturally apply in a specific way to the marriage relationship, but his main concern in this text is not marriage but the adornment of women in the corporate assembly. Hence, he naturally thinks of the relationship between men and women in general, not just wives and husbands.” *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2018), 226. For more, see Andy Naselli’s helpful essay, “Women and Head Coverings: Explaining and Applying 1 Corinthians 11:2–16,” *Christ Over All*, (last modified March 28, 2023), <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/women-and-head-coverings-explaining-and-applying-1-corinthians-11-2-16/>.

⁷⁰Foster and Tennant, *It’s Good to be a Man*, 47.

respond to the unbelief of feminist theologians as expressed in manufacturing a so-called “problem of the male Savior,” because such efforts kick against the goads of both Scripture and Nature.⁷¹ We rejoice in the shared commitment we have with those we critique in this section to unashamedly confess the goodness of God’s design for male headship in the CoW and the covenant of marriage prior to and after sin. It is indeed good to be a man (and a woman), and we find the gender essentialism (essence-existence distinction) and covenantal distinctions (Creation Covenant, CoW, and marriage covenant), combined with the relationship between the image of God and the dominion mandate we unpack in this essay, provide a firm dogmatic rationale for holding all these pieces together coherently.

Now that we have established these crucial distinctions, we are ready to move into the doctrine of the person of Christ where the metaphysics of the essence-existence distinction and the observations regarding covenant and creation will be applied to the question of the male Savior’s ability to save women. Here, we critique the distinct errors of Marc Cortez, Amy Peeler, and a host of feminist thinkers as we seek to offer a better way forward.

IN EVERY RESPECT: THE SON’S ASSUMPTION OF MALE HUMANITY

The author of Hebrews makes a clear case for the necessity of the Son of God’s true humanity. If the assumed humanity of the Son is not the same as those he came to save, then he is not qualified to be the Savior. He says, “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17). According to this text, if Jesus Christ’s humanity is not like the humanity of those he came to save “in every respect,” then cannot be a “merciful and faithful high priest,” cannot “make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Gregory of Nazianzus summarized the point well in his famous line to Cledonius: “Whatever is not assumed is not healed.”⁷² In order to save Adam and his posterity, the Lord Jesus Christ has to be everything Adam was, and he had to succeed where Adam failed.

But what about Eve? What about women who need saving? Did Jesus need to be everything Eve was? The most enduring

articulation of this question comes in the infamous words of feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether: “Can a male savior save women?”⁷³ She answers no. In her view, the inescapable maleness of Christ positions Christianity against women and their liberation in irredeemable ways. Since that time, this question has been ubiquitous in feminist literature, representing the centerpiece of feminist theological revisionism.⁷⁴ Some feminist theologians find the problem without solution and therefore abandon Christianity altogether rather than attempting to “save” it.⁷⁵ Others take an approach more in line with the liberal German theologian Schleiermacher in their optimism that Christianity can be preserved as a true religion if only some of its core, historic commitments are revised. Thus, it has become commonplace among feminist theologians to argue that Jesus was, in fact, androgynous. That is, the human nature assumed by the Son of God was both male and female.⁷⁶ Of course, the idea of an androgynous Jesus cannot stand up to the scrutiny of faithful exegesis because of the clarity and consistency with which the Old Testament anticipation and New Testament presentation declares him to be a man, not a woman.

So what are we to make of the so-called problem of the male Savior? Given the need for the Redeemer of humanity to be like humanity “in every respect,” does the maleness of Christ present an obstacle to traditional Christianity? We stand in continuity with the prophets and apostles and with the consensus of Christian theological orthodoxy across all Christian traditions in saying, emphatically, no. The fact that the Son of God assumed human nature as a male is not a problem to be solved but a truth to be celebrated.

Why can we so confidently assert that Jesus’ maleness does not jeopardize his ability to save all who will believe in him, both men and women? At one level, this is a simple matter of believing the Bible to be true. Scripture says Jesus is a male, and Scripture says he saves women, even going so far as to say that the very real differences between men and women are of no consequence in terms of the soteriological benefits of the New Covenant (Gal 3:28).⁷⁷ Nevertheless,

⁷¹ See Joe Rigney’s essay, “With One Voice: Scripture and Nature for Ethics and Discipleship,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 2.1 (Spring 2019): 26–37.

⁷² Gregory of Nazianzus, “Letter 101: To Cledonius,” in *On God and Christ*, ed. and trans. Lionel Wickham (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 158.

⁷³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), chapter four.

⁷⁴ See Felipe Do Valle, “Can a Male Savior Save Women? The Metaphysics of Gender and Christ’s Ability to Save,” *Philosophia Christi*, 21.2 (2019): 309–324. Do Valle says that Radford’s question has been the “departure point” for most feminist theology. He further observes that most feminists have answered the question in the negative (309). According to the logic of feminism, a male Savior cannot, in fact, save women.

⁷⁵ Recall Mary Daly’s famous one-liner: “If God is male, then male is God” (*Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1973, with a new Introduction by the author added in 1985]. Daly abandoned Christianity because of its radical incompatibility with feminist ideals.

⁷⁶ As noted earlier, this is the argument of feminist theologian and cultural critic Virginia Ramey Mollenkot. See fn. 3.

⁷⁷ The fact that Jesus was born as a male is declared in manifold ways in Scripture. The prophetic expectation and New Testament testimony is that Jesus is born as the Son of Mary, not the daughter (Isa 9:6, Luke 1:31). The apocalyptic description of the cosmic

it is legitimate to inquire into the coherence of this claim, so long as the inquiry is a matter of faith seeking understanding, as opposed to a matter of demanding understanding as the basis for faith (see Prov 3:5–6). We believe Scripture itself leads readers to think about such questions as the maleness of Christ in relation to the claim that he is the vicarious substitute for all humanity, men and women, as a “merciful and faithful high priest.”

The essence-existence distinction, discussed in some detail above, gives a wonderfully coherent and biblically faithful account regarding how Jesus can be a particular human being, complete with a wide variety of particularizing distinctives, all the while being like all human beings “in every respect.” We contend that when the writer of Hebrews declares the necessity of Jesus’ solidarity with those he came to save, he is saying that Jesus had to have all of the essential properties of humanity. That is, the concrete, particular existence of Jesus of Nazareth (according to the human nature he assumed) had to be a genuine instantiation of the *essence* of humanity. Jesus’ maleness does not differentiate him from females *essentially*. Rather, his particular maleness demonstrates his solidarity with *all* gendered human beings, male and female, because *being gendered as either male or female* is an essential property of humanity. In principle, the question of Jesus’ ability to save women is no different than the question of how this particular human being, whose body is composed of “this flesh and these bones,” this soul rather than that one, can save other human beings who have their own flesh and bones, their own souls. The question is one of the particular (human existence) and the universal (human essence). Jesus can save particular human beings whose *existence* is distinct from his own because he shares in common with them the *essence* of humanity.

The notion of shared essence is the preferred way that the Christian tradition has spoken about both Jesus’ unity with the Father as divine Son in eternal relation and his unity with mankind as our Savior. The Nicene Creed famously declares the Son to be of the same essence as the Father with its use of the Greek word *homoousios* (*homo* = same; *ousia* = essence).⁷⁸ Of course, saying that the Son is of one

essence with the Father means that he shares identically and numerically the same divine essence because, in God, essence and existence are the same. Later, the Definition of Chalcedon takes up the word *homoousios*. The Chalcedonian fathers affirm that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father according to the Godhead, and they add that he is *homoousios* with us according to the manhood.⁷⁹ To be *homoousios* with the rest of humanity is different than being *homoousios* with deity simply due to the difference between the Creator and the creature. In the case of all creatures, including humans, existence is distinct from essence. Thus, the only way to be of the same essence with humanity is to be distinct in concrete existence.

As we have attempted to demonstrate above, the essence-existence distinction is stated in the Genesis account of creation in the idiom of “kind.” We find this distinction further clarified in the Scriptural account of the creation of both male and female in the image of God and the shared dominion of men and women over the rest of creation on behalf of God who made them. The so-called “problem” of the male Savior is a problem fabricated by minds held captive to the spirit of the age. The male Savior can most certainly save all men *and women* who believe in him, as the Scriptures testify. The only obstacle to experiencing the saving benefits of the male Savior’s atoning work is not one’s gender, but one’s unbelief.

THE NECESSITY OF CHRIST’S MALENESS FOR COVENANTAL HEADSHIP

All of this raises a further question: was it necessary for the Son of God to assume *male* human nature? Since all that is required *vis-a-vis* gender to be truly human “in every respect” is that the Redeemer be particularly gendered as either male or female, might it have been possible for the Savior to have been a woman? Could a woman have saved people from their sins? We believe the biblical answer to this question is a clear and resounding *no*, for two reasons.

First, there is a fittingness to the Son’s incarnation as a man owing to his eternal identity as the Son of God. It would be confusing, to say the least, for the eternal *Son* to enter history and live a human life as a *daughter*. The Redeemer would then be both a Son and a daughter (in two different respects). The theological mistakes that result would be manifold. Imagine how much easier it would be to conceive of

battle between the serpent (dragon) and the seed of the woman in Revelation 12 names the focal seed of the woman, destined to rule the nations as God’s anointed king, as “a male child” (Rev 12:5). The fact that Jesus saves women is equally clear in Scripture. Consider the beloved sisters of Bethany, Mary and Martha, whose confession of faith in Jesus is central to the narrative of their brother Lazarus being raised from the dead (John 11). The story of Lydia of Philippi is a wonderful testimony of the power of the Spirit awakening a woman to faith in Jesus by means of the preaching of the gospel (Acts 16:14). One need look no further than Jesus’ own mother Mary, who, upon hearing and believing the angelic announcement that she would bear a Son, declared, “My spirit rejoices in God my *savior*” (Luke 1:47).

⁷⁸ The Creed declares the “only begotten Son of God” to be “of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father.”

⁷⁹ The wording of the *Definition* is: “truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood.”

Christology on Nestorian terms in which the Redeemer is two persons based on this scenario. The Chalcedonian repetition of the phrase “one and the same Son” to refer to the unity of Christ’s person contra Nestorianism would be a muddled phrase, nonsensical at worst, if the Savior was both Son and daughter. Further, consider how much more confusing a proper understanding of human gender would be if we were committed to the belief that a Son became a daughter. Uniqueness of the incarnation aside, this would result in massive confusion over the fixed difference between men and women according to God’s created design. No. The fact that the eternal Son of God entered history and lived a human life as a human Son is supremely fitting.⁸⁰

Secondly, the Son of God had to assume human nature as a male because God has ordered creation in such a way that only men function as covenant heads. This is owing to the elective purpose of God who “made them male and female” with gender-specific ordered relations in view. In the argument above regarding covenantal structures, we sought to distinguish between the dominion men and women share over the created order as bearers of the *imago dei* (Creation Covenant) and the kinds of covenantal headship Adam bears in relation to all mankind (CoW) and in relation to his wife (marriage covenant). We also sought to show how Christ, as the last Adam, succeeded where Adam failed and became the covenant head of his elect in the New Covenant/CoG. Thus, the essential solidarity of Christ with all those he came to save (men and women) is not the only relevant factor with respect to the specific gender of the Son’s assumed humanity. The Son had to be gendered as either male or female to be truly human; he had to be gendered as a male to be the last Adam and federal head of the redeemed people of God.

CONTEMPORARY CONFUSION: ESSENCE-EXISTENCE CONFLATION IN CHRISTOLOGY

Marc Cortez. In his influential monograph *Resourcing Theological Anthropology*, Cortez is reluctant to affirm the reality of a universal human nature as ontologically prior

⁸⁰ We contend, against the current of feminist and egalitarian literature, that human sonship is the analog to the eternal sonship of the second person of the Trinity in relation to the first. That is, we do not believe that the second person of the Trinity is named Son as a metaphorical extension of human sonship. This would make the analog of sonship run from the creature to the naming of the divine person, and the name of the second person of the Trinity would be a mere figure of speech. We believe it is exactly the opposite. Just as human fatherhood is an analog to the original Fatherhood of God, as Ephesians 3:14-15 makes explicit, so human sonship is an analogy to the original Sonship of the eternal Son in relation to the Father. For a more detailed account of the logic of analogical predication in the doctrine of God and the difference between proper and figurative analogical predication, see Kyle’s essay, “Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God: An Exegetical and Dogmatic Account” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.2 (Fall 2023): 46-77.

to the existence of particular human beings. He takes pains to ensure that his argument is not dependent on such a commitment. In his chapter entitled, “The Male Messiah: Sexuality, Embodiment, and the Image of God,” Cortez takes up the question of whether a male Savior can save women. He considers the possibility that the Son’s solidarity with both men and women might be grounded in a universal human nature, only to dismiss this view as problematic. He says, “The challenge of this approach for many is that it requires the existence of a universal human nature in which we all somehow participate.”⁸¹ He goes on to propose another answer, one he believes to better preserve a “universal/particular distinction.” Following the work of David Bentley Hart,⁸² Cortez suggests that a universal human nature cannot be prior to the existence of particular humans. Rather, the order of the relation runs the other way. For Hart (and presumably Cortez), universal human nature is the *effect* of the totality of the particulars. Cortez explains:

In other words, the universality of humanity derives from the very particularity and multiplicity of all those individuals who comprise the totality of the humanum, which is itself grounded in Jesus. Rather than leading with the undifferentiated essence and then dealing with particularity as a problem, this approach emphasizes particularity as essential to being human.⁸³

The fact that this view names particularity as essential should alert wary readers that this is a radical departure from the classical essence-existence distinction. This way of framing things, in fact, turns the classical understanding completely on its head. It so redefines the notion of essence as to render it unintelligible. In historical accounts of essence, as well as most contemporary philosophical models of essentialism, the essence names what the particulars have in common *a priori* and therefore cannot be particular itself. In this account by Cortez, the very distinction between the common essence and the particular individuals is collapsed, as what is *essential* seems to be the sum total of all particulars *a posteriori*. On the classical account, rational knowers can apprehend the reality of the universal (essence) by observation of what is common among the particulars (existing beings). This is the way of knowing. But this is distinguished from the way of being in which

⁸¹ Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology*, 196. Cortez shows his own confusion regarding the coherence of a universal human nature by his use of the word “existence.” As we have shown, universal human nature (essence) does not exist, as such. It is a category of potential. The actual existence of the human essence is always particular and individual.

⁸² Cortez appeals for the view summarized here to David Bentley Hart, “The ‘Whole Humanity’: Gregory of Nyssa’s Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 1 (2001): 64.

⁸³ Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology*, 196.

the universal is ontologically prior to the particulars. To use the idiom of Genesis 1, the individual beings are created “according to their kind.”

Furthermore, it is difficult to see how this view of the universal/particular distinction solves the so-called problem of Christ’s maleness and his ability to save females. In fact, it seems to undermine the particularity of Christ’s maleness altogether. For Cortez, Christ is the archetype of humanity and the true *imago dei*. If, as he suggests, the totality of the *humanum* (the universal) is comprised of the multiplicity of all individuals, and if the *humanum* is grounded in Jesus, it is impossible to maintain the particularity of Christ’s maleness at all. The totality of the *humanum* consists of male and female. As the ontological ground of the *humanum*, Christ would have to be the basis for every particular, male and female. This leaves one to wonder if an androgynous Savior (having the properties of both male and female humanity) is the logical entailment of Hart’s view (which, again, seems to be the view favored by Cortez). Of course, this is not what Cortez wishes to suggest, and he would rightly reject the idea of Jesus as some kind of androgyne. But this account of the relation between the universal and the particular suggests just such a view. We contend the only coherent way to preserve the particularity of Jesus’ maleness alongside his solidarity with both men and women is to uphold the classical essence-existence distinction.

Amy Peeler. In her recent book *Women and the Gender of God*, Peeler takes up the question of how the male Savior can save women. Peeler acknowledges with appreciation the “intriguing and often fruitful speculation” of radical feminist theologians who have proposed that Jesus may have been intersex in such a way that he bore the distinct features of both male and female humanity in his own flesh.⁸⁴ She ultimately rejects this view, recognizing it to be inattentive to the clear biblical portrayal of Jesus as a man.

Even in her affirmation of the true maleness of Jesus, we find Peeler’s account to be lacking. In her view, the maleness of Jesus was by no means necessary. As an egalitarian, Peeler would reject the notion that only men are appointed by God as covenant heads. She also would reject the argument that the Son’s assumption of human nature as a male is particularly fitting given his eternal identity as *Son* of God the Father. For Peeler, the logic runs the other way. The names Father and Son for the first and



second person of the Trinity are fitting precisely because the second person assumed humanity as a male and was born to a human mother. While contending that we should favor the revealed names of Father and Son, Peeler suggests that feminine or gender-neutral names for the first and second persons of the Trinity are not improper and can be appropriate because the names Father and Son are metaphorical. The reason these masculine names for God are given in Scripture is simply because of the historical reality of the incarnation. It would be confusing to call the second person of the Trinity “daughter” since, in the incarnation, he is a Son. Furthermore, it would be confusing to call the first person of the Trinity “Mother” since, in the incarnation, the Son has Mary as his mother.

We find this argument to flip the logic of Scripture on its head. We contend, against the current of feminist and egalitarian literature, that human sonship is the analog to the eternal sonship of the second person of the Trinity in relation to the first. That is, the second person of the Trinity is not named Son as a metaphorical extension of human sonship. This would make the analog of sonship run from the creature to the naming of the divine person, and the name of the second person of the Trinity would be a mere figure of speech. On the contrary, just as human fatherhood

⁸⁴Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 140.

is an analog to the original Fatherhood of God, as Ephesians 3:14–15 makes explicit, so human sonship is an analogy to the original Sonship of the eternal Son in relation to the Father. Peeler’s reversal of this paradigm represents a failure to understand the diversity of ways analogical language functions in Scripture and in theological discourse. Not all analogical language is figurative. Some theological predications are proper, meaning the primary referent is God and the analogical reflection is in creation.⁸⁵

Peeler’s account of Christ’s maleness suffers from another problem as well. Having rejected the common feminist solution to the problem of Christ’s maleness (appeal to androgyny), Peeler proposes another way to account for his ability to save women. For Peeler, Jesus is a “male who became embodied like no other.”⁸⁶ Because Mary was a virgin when she conceived, there was no male involved in Jesus’ conception in her womb. Therefore, the male flesh of Jesus is female-only derived. For Peeler, Jesus’ unique connection to female flesh qualifies him to save women: “In short, a male-embodied Savior with female-provided flesh saves all.”⁸⁷

It is not clear how a female-derived flesh renders Jesus’ particular male flesh a suitable representative to women. The so-called problem of Christ’s maleness, as expressed in feminist literature, is based on the fact that he is male, and the derivation of his male flesh from a female only does not change his maleness. As Peeler acknowledges, Jesus is a man, not a woman. It is hard to imagine this solution to be satisfying to those who find Christ’s maleness to be a serious problem for women. Even so, Peeler’s account also suffers from a failure to understand the essence-existence distinction and therefore a failure to understand the ontology of gendered embodiment. The so-called “problem” of Christ’s male flesh and his ability to save women assumes that men and women are not of the same essence. It assumes that men are of one essence and women are of another essence rather than that men and women share the same essence as humans. The argument runs thus: the Savior has to be like those he came to save “in every respect,” and this necessarily means he has to be like men to save men and like women to save women. But we have already shown that a proper understanding of human nature in the category of essence makes the so-called

problem of Christ’s male flesh go away entirely. The Savior does not have to be like women in the particularity of their female gender in order to save women. Rather, he has to be like humans in the essential properties of their shared human nature to save both men and women, and he must be male to properly act as their covenant head.

CONCLUSION

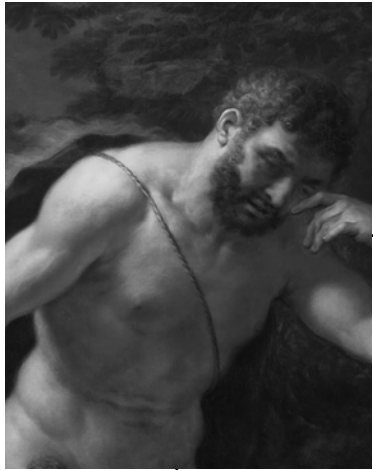
In this essay, we have sought to prove the classic/Thomistic distinction between essence and existence corresponds faithfully with holy Scripture. To do so, we synthesized this model with the key covenantal distinctions in the creation account — the Creation Covenant (which includes vital doctrines like the image of God and the Dominion Mandate), the Covenant of Works, and the marriage covenant. We find this approach provides a firm dogmatic foundation for gender essentialism and even natural complementarianism, granting theological precision to aid us in not conflating these categories to the detriment of our anthropology and Christology.

We pursued our argument in six steps: (1) All existing humans are the same with respect to essence, but they can be distinguished by the particularity of their essential properties and their accidental properties, gender being an essential property; (2) Male and female are each created in the image of the triune God *from* and *for* one another, and thus share equally in the Dominion Mandate over the rest of creation; (3) Adam was the covenant head of Eve in two respects, *both* as her representative before God – a federal representation which included the entire human race – *and* exclusively as her covenant head in marriage; (4) God’s covenantal arrangement for male headship in marriage – and the church – correspond with reality and thus reflect creation order; (5) It was necessary for the Son of God to assume human nature as a male due to the divinely ordained strictures of covenant headship; (6) In assuming a human nature, God the Son incarnate became a human in every respect, therefore the maleness of the Son’s human flesh in no way undermines his ability to be the Savior of both men and women who receive him by faith.

⁸⁵ For a more detailed account of the logic of analogical predication in the doctrine of God and the difference between proper and figurative analogical predication, see Kyle’s essay, “Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God: An Exegetical and Dogmatic Account” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.2 (Fall 2023): 46–77.

⁸⁶ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 121.

⁸⁷ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 137.



On Natural and Complementary Differences



DAVID HAINES | R. ALBERT MOHLER, JR. | DOUG PONDER
MILES SMITH | E. ERIK THOENNES

DAVID HAINES

On Natural and Complementary Differences

Perhaps I may begin by noting that, for the sake of this forum, I am taking for granted that there are natures or essences which are instantiated in individuals, and when I refer to something which is “natural” or “by nature,” I am referring to that which, all things being equal, is found in every individual of a species, because of their “nature” or “essence” (i.e., human, feline, canine), regardless of environmental factors. “Environmental factors” may be taken to refer to anything which influences the individual in question, ranging from the geographical and meteorological elements of some physical location (compare the way humans who live in Canada do things differently from those who live in Arizona), to the socio-cultural, historical, political, and religious influences on an individual, their actions, desires, and so on. These terms have sometimes been referred to as “nature” and “nurture.” The former (“that which is

by nature”) is often taken to be referring, in general, to the “sex” of the individual, which is determined by the genotypical and phenotypical characteristics of the whole individual human being. The latter, (“environmental factors”) are usually what is signified by the terms “gender,” “masculine,” “feminine,” and so on. Discussions on these subjects are often muddled when we point to socio-culturally bound signifiers of “masculinity” or “femininity” as if they were “natural differences.”

Q. What is Scripture’s basic teaching on the natural differences between men and women?

A: There are a variety of opinions on what the Scriptures teach concerning the natural differences between men and women. In my humble opinion, the Scriptures (Gen 1–2; Matt 19) teach that the primary, per-

haps the only, natural differences between men and women are related to the role they play in human reproductive activities. The woman and the man, equally made in the image of God, are together ordained to govern creation and to reproduce (Gen 1:26–28). Human reproductive activities include not only sexual intercourse, but also the nourishing, protecting, and raising of the children from infancy to maturity. Though the Bible does not go into great detail about the manner in which reproduction is to take place, it is very clear that God created humans, with genotypical, neurological, and phenotypical characteristics, such that the male and female of the species are both necessary for these activities.

Q. What is the relation between the natural law and the natural differences of men and women?

A: There are different approaches to Natural Law Theory, some of which may be amenable to versions of Nominalism. However, traditional Natural Law Theory, as it is found in the writings of Medieval and Reformation era Christian theologians, begins with the recognition that all created things are instances of some nature or essence. That essence is typically said to be the divine idea of the thing in question. So, if we are talking about humans, we first recognize that the creation of humankind began with the divine idea of humanity. All humans are particular instances of that idea, much like the pieces of a handmade chess set all began as ideas in the mind of the artisan, who then crafted them each individually. All of the pawns are recognizable as pawns because they conform to the idea in the mind of the artisan. In the same way, humans are recognizable as individual instances of human nature because they correspond to the divine idea of humanity. If this is the case, then (1) Natural Law

is simply the divine idea of humankind in the mind of God — it is the divine idea or standard of what humans are supposed to be, and (2) this entails that the natural differences between men and women are included in the divine idea — humans are, by divine design, either male or female. It is worth noting that this goes beyond simple recognition of individual phenotypical, neurological, and genotypical differences to, as Nicancor Austriaco points out, the end-directedness of the entire system of the human body — that is, the interaction of genotypical characteristics towards the development of neurological and phenotypical characteristics which are directed towards the specific ends of human males and females.¹

One major Natural Law tradition within Christianity argues that there are natures or essences which determine *what* we are; that the natural differences between men and women are grounded, not in the soul, but in the body — they might be referred to as essential accidents or properties of the bodies of living beings; that the person is a composite of body and soul (not one or the other, but united together), such that the human person is male or female because of their body, and not due to their personal character traits, desires, or actions; and that though it is true that psychological states, and socio-cultural norms, do influence our self-perception, actions, and desires, among other things, it is false to say that there are no natural sexual differences, or, that these natural sexual differences do not determine whether we are male or female.

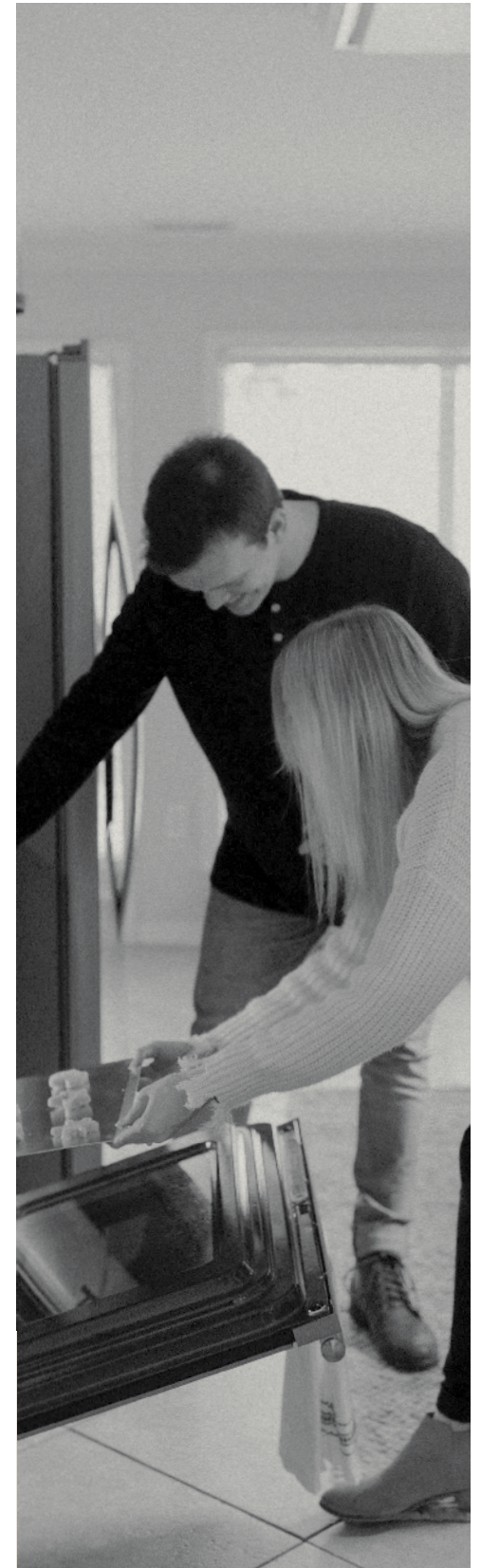
Q. How should natural differences between men and women inform their roles in the home, church, and society?

A: This question is more complicated than many assume, and many responses to this

type of question conceal socio-cultural signifiers of masculinity and femininity masquerading as natural differences. The question itself seems to assume that there is a straight line between the natural differences and the socio-cultural roles of men and women. There very rarely is. If, however, the natural differences between men and women are primarily related to their role in the reproductive activities of the human species (as defined above), then we may begin by suggesting that their roles in the home, church, and society may differ based upon (1) their natural engagement in these reproductive activities, and (2) the changing needs of their children and growing family. For example, all things being equal, the woman's role is to provide safety and nourishment for the infant from its conception until weaned from its mother's milk. The man's role, at this early stage of the child's life, may be to provide for the needs of the mother, as human mothers and their infants tend to be more vulnerable at this stage of life. As the infant grows into adulthood, the roles of both the man and the woman may shift as they both should be involved in raising and educating the children. As the parents age, their roles may change such that either one may become nurturer or provider of the other, and ultimately the children may become caregivers for their parents. In sum, all things being equal, the mother typically has the role of *nurturer*, and the father of *provider*. Both would play the role of *protector*, *educator*, *model*, and so on, though at different times and for different reasons. If space permitted, it might be possible to follow this line of thinking further for each of these areas of social life.

Q. Where is the Christian teaching of male-female natural differences most at odds with the prevailing narrative regarding men and women in the Western world?

A: Recent developments in Western philosophical, psychological, and scientific



¹ Cf. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, "The Specification of Sex/Gender in the human species," *New Blackfriars*, 94.1054 (2013): 701-15.

studies have contributed to helping us better understand human beings and human sexuality, though they have also caused a great deal of confusion. Three areas of serious disagreement concerning male-female natural differences, between Christian teaching and some major strains of contemporary thought in the Western world, can be found, first, (1) in the rejection of ontological realism — that there are natures or essences which determine what something is. The rejection of ontological realism appears to lead directly to the claim that we ourselves determine *what* we are (this can be seen in the writings of major twentieth-century philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and others), or that our socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts, as well as societal and historical power structures, determine what we are (Michel Foucault seems to lean in this direction). Secondly, flowing from the first major difference, (2) is the current agnosticism about, or rejection of, the biological differences between human males and females — as seen in the writings of influential psychologists, anthropologists, and gender theorists. Twentieth-century feminists such as Gayle Rubin and Monique Wittig have directly connected the first point with the second, sometimes noting that since there are no natures, it follows that everything is socio-cultural convention. A third difference, flowing from the first and the second, (3) is the tendency (found in Freudian & Lacanian psychoanalysis) to prioritize the psycho-analytical approaches

to masculinity and femininity over biological approaches (which has contributed to the notion that one may be a biological male, but truly — psychologically — a woman, or vice versa), and the conclusion that psychological states (not to mention socio-cultural structures) influence and even determine biological states. If there are no natures, or natural differences, then everything is determined in some other way: by socio-cultural, political, religious, or psychological structures and forces.

Q. What do you see is the greatest temptation or strongest challenge to Christian faithfulness with regard to male-female natural differences?

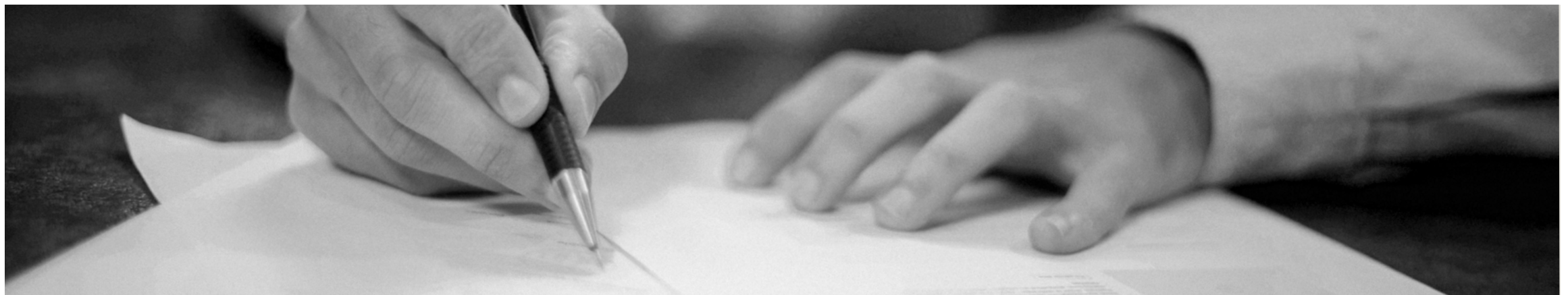
A: Some of the most influential scholars of the twentieth and twenty first centuries, such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Gayle Rubin, Jacqueline Rose, Judith Butler, and many others, present well-articulated and rigorous arguments which (1) assume that realism or essentialism has been refuted (often pointing towards arguments made by Nietzsche and others), and (2) call upon readily observable phenomena, such as hair length, musculature, clothing choices, leadership styles, certain aspects of character or personality, and so on, which are given socio-cultural meaning as signifiers of sexual difference,

and then use these observed differences to motivate us to discard all notions of natural sexual difference. Failing (1) to defend ontological realism and arguing that there are natures which determine natural sexual differences, and failing (2) to adequately distinguish between natural sexual differences and socio-cultural signifiers of masculinity and femininity, puts us in danger of easily and readily falling prey to the arguments brought by these scholars. This will be the greatest challenge to Christian faithfulness on these points. If Christian scholars elevate or overemphasize socio-cultural signifiers and fail to defend natural law and the importance of natural sexual difference, Christians will fall away from the traditional Christian understanding of the natural differences between men and women. It is worth noting that Christians are not the only ones arguing for natural sexual differences. We are joined by contemporary feminist Aristotelians such as Charlotte Witt and Martha Nussbaum, who, though they may disagree with some Christians on the socio-cultural signifiers, appear to agree with some aspects of traditional Christian teaching concerning the natural sexual differences between men and women — as well as how these natural sexual differences influence the roles of men and women in the family and society.

Q. How can Christians employ the Christian view of men and women as a witness in the midst of cultural opposition?

A: We need to be careful to not allow the argument to be situated around the socio-cultural signifiers, but, rather, must continually bring the argument back to the question of human nature, and the natural differences of male and female humans. We must recognize that to conform to “human nature” is not to impose our own views of what it means to be human upon ourselves and others, but, rather, it is to accept the natural limitations and proper ends of our species — as it was designed and created by God. Ultimately, to live according to nature (not against nature — Rom 1:26–28) is to submit to God’s plan for humanity. We may point to the very sad results of trying to rebel against that nature. We may do our best to model, simply and quietly, what it means to be human men and women in a variety of relations. We should confront and seek to abolish the socio-cultural signifiers of masculinity and femininity which have either caused people to reject the Christian view of men and women, or contributed to the breakdown of healthy relationships between men and women in society and in our churches. ✕

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R. ALBERT MOHLER, JR.

On Natural and Complementary Differences: A Forum

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., is President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Editor for WORLD Opinions



Q. What is Scripture's basic teaching on the natural differences between men and women?

A: Genesis 1 begins with a fundamental distinction between men and women: "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27b). To be human is to be male or female; therefore humanity requires the categories of male and female, which are clearly established by God at creation. Although these categories can be misconstrued or emphasized in a way far beyond what the biblical text permits, that is not our modern dilemma. Consider the Fall and God's subsequent judgment upon Adam and Eve. The two judgments are different: the Lord addresses Eve and Adam. Even in God's judgment, there is a distinction in the sphere in which Adam and Eve will experience it. To Eve, the Lord speaks of pain in childbirth (Gen 3:16). To Adam, he speaks of sweat and labor in the field (Gen 3:17–19). Throughout the Old Testament, the distinction of men and women is assumed and built upon. In the New Testament, Paul's teaching on men and women in the household codes, such as we find in Ephesians 5–6, is entirely consistent with what we find in Genesis 1: The husband is to be the leader in the home, a moral example, and a protector and provider; the woman is to be a helpmeet, a complement to him.

Q. What is the relation between the natural law and the natural differences of men and women?

A: The natural law is God's revelation through the natural, created order. The Creator instructs us through nature itself. Natural law is the expression and codification of what nature is teaching us. The natural differences between men and women are a part of this creation order; they are revealed in creation. These differences are revealed even in the physical nature of a man's and woman's body, and in the social nature of men and women. Additionally, men's and women's bodies are different in their func-

tional characteristics, down to something as basic as nurture and the feeding of children and the entire process of human reproduction. Even some who hold ideological commitments to the contrary know at some level that the order established around men and women is inescapable. This is why you can have conversations with liberals whose homes are ordered like conservatives. They believe it in theory, but they practice something different at home.

Q. How should natural differences between men and women inform their roles in the home, church, and society?

A: Genesis 1 and 2 establish the foundation for men's and women's roles. But the Bible also reveals God's intention in the Law, in the historical narratives concerning the patriarchs and matriarchs, in the experience of Israel, and in the wisdom literature. The natural differences are inherent to these texts, but it is interesting that these subsequent Scriptures do not have to go back and define those natural differences once they have been revealed and implanted within creation itself. As it pertains to men's and women's roles, there are passages where roles are addressed directly, and there are other passages that simply reveal them naturally in how husbands and wives are depicted in Scripture. The church instructions, for instance, in 1 Timothy 3 or in Paul's letter to Titus establish explicit direction for the roles in the church. But you also find these roles established in the ways various people interact throughout Scripture. Mothers and fathers interact with one another in positive and negative ways. Families interact with one another in positive and negative ways. To understand men's and women's roles requires a comprehensive reading of Scripture.

Q. Where is the Christian teaching of male-female natural differences most at odds with the prevailing narrative regarding men and women in the Western world?

A: The greatest opposition to Christian teach-

ing on male-female difference is related to the very fact that there are ontological differences between the male and the female that bear social and moral consequences. That in itself is the great stumbling block, because the secular world assumes that if there are differences, they have to be grounded in something other than ontology, and certainly grounded in something other than the intention of a divine Creator. The secularist worldview argues that any differences must be the result of some kind of social conditioning or anthropological project rooted in male aggression or male oppression. Yet, families and marriages tend to work their way towards established patterns, which, to be honest, cannot be explained away with reference to something like patriarchal oppression.

Q. What do you see is the greatest temptation or strongest challenge to Christian faithfulness with regard to male-female natural differences?

A: For Christians there is a danger of either exaggerating male-female differences, or undermining those differences. The most dangerous category here would be somehow impugning the fullness of the dignity of women. An exaggeration of differences could compromise the *imago dei* that is proper to all mankind, male and female. The other temptation is to minimize the differences in such a way that defies Scripture. A corruption in one direction

or the other would be at the expense of biblical fidelity and Christian faithfulness. This is one of the reasons why we need to consider this kind of question aloud, which is done most effectively in the context of a gospel congregation. It is in the context of the church that we reason with one another by the Scriptures, being confronted with the consistent preaching of God's Word, so that we would be led into a unity of understanding on these issues.

Q. How can Christians employ the Christian view of men and women as a witness in the midst of cultural opposition?

A: When you get down to the structure of thoughts and ideas, you are talking about the collision of two irreconcilable worldviews. Because of this, the more you engage, the more disagreement is going to become apparent. This is because there are disagreements at the level of first principles. We have no choice but to employ the Christian view of men and women as revealed in Scripture as a witness to the glory of God and the perfection of the Creator's plan. The cultural opposition makes this clearer and raises the stakes of the challenge. But when pressures increase, we better be sure we are faithful to Scripture, clear in our arguments, and respectful in our conversations. We better be sure we live out what we say we believe in our own homes, lives, and congregations. ✕



DOUG PONDER

On Natural and Complementary Differences: A Forum

Q. What is Scripture's basic teaching on the natural differences between men and women?

A: The basic scriptural teaching on the sexes is that God designed men and women in different ways and for different purposes. To say this another way, the Bible teaches that: (1) men and women are not the same, (2) the differences between men and women are meaningful features of God's design, and (3) the failure to embrace divinely instituted sexual differences is therefore harmful to life and doctrine. These teachings begin in the very beginning (Gen 1–3), where Moses records the origins of the first man and woman with careful detail, showing God's deliberate creation of each sex. The man is formed from the ground, named after the ground, commissioned as

a royal priest, and connected with working the ground (Gen 2:7, 15, 20; 3:17–19). The woman is created for the man (to be his helper), built from the man, named after (and by) the man, and connected with her capacity for bearing children (Gen 2:18, 22–23; 3:16, 20). There is significant asymmetry here, but also harmony.¹ God not only made men and women different from each other but also different for each other, that is, with mutually beneficial complementarity. In this way, God's creation of men and women both precedes and explains the differing imperatives he gives to each. For "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor 14:33); therefore, there is consonance between what God created and what he commands.² This is why men may do some things and must do other things but cannot do all things. The same

¹For a fuller discussion on the differences between man and woman in creation, see Doug Ponder, "A Biblical Vision of the Sexes: Harmonious Asymmetry," *Eikon* 6.1 (Spring 2024): 28–40.

²For more on the relationship between God's creation and God's commands, see Joe Rigney, "Indicatives, Imperatives, and Applications: Reflections on Natural, Biblical, and Cultural Complementarianism," *Eikon* 4.1 (Spring 2022): 28–37.

is true for women. Hence, while “there is no male and female” so far as access to the gospel is concerned (Gal 3:26–28), there *is* male and female in God’s design, and his design is “very good” (Gen 1:31).

Q. What is the relation between the natural law and the natural differences of men and women?

A: I take “natural law” here to mean those aspects of the moral law that God made discoverable by our encounter with the created order.³ In other words, when humans think clearly, we can learn something of how to live based on our observations of the world God made (see Prov 6:6–11 and Rom 1:19–21). Paul makes this point in 1 Corinthians 11, concluding his instructions to men and women not with the assertion, “The Bible tells me so,” but with the rhetorical question, “Does not nature itself teach you [these things]?” (1 Cor 11:14).⁴ And while we cannot always draw straight lines from the natural world to the moral one — sharks eat their young; praying mantises eat their mates; dogs eat their own excrement — some things are so obvious they cannot be denied.⁵ Among those obvious truths are the *fact* of male and female (we are different) and the *necessity* of male and female (without which there is no procreation). Looking at men and women specifically, we also see patterns of being and behavior that persist across vast stretches of time and cultural difference. Some of these align with what Scripture commands, while others show the corrupting effects of sin. Yet even the latter cases show that men and women have distinct tendencies to sin in different ways (e.g., men commit far more violent crimes) — a fact the biblical authors recognize and address (e.g., 1 Tim 2:8–10). So, then, nature can teach us *that* men and women are

different and something of *how* we are different, but it cannot tell us (much) about *why* we are different or *what* we should do with these differences. For a full account of the sexes, we need to look at the world God made and listen to the Word he gave.

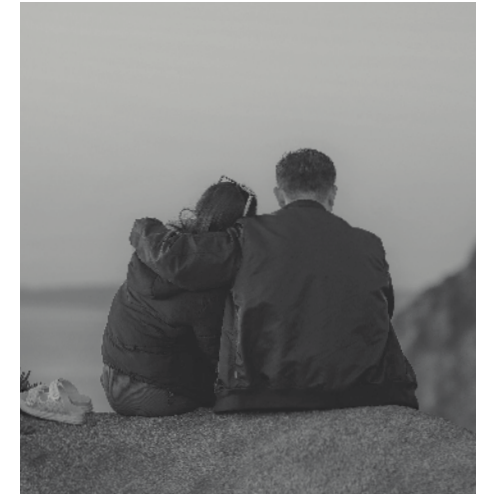
Q. How should natural differences between men and women inform their roles in the home, church, and society?

A: The God who knows the end from the beginning (Isa 46:10) did not create sexual differences without reason, nor does he give arbitrary commands. For among the good works “God prepared beforehand” for us to do (Eph 2:10) we find callings unique to each sex. God designed men and women for specific vocations, and he tailored these vocations to our differing natures. Thus Adam was told to work and keep the garden (Gen 2:15; cf. 3:19), but not because men “just so happen” to have superior strength (1 Pet 3:7). Rather, God gave Adam and his sons the capacity for greater strength (Prov 20:29; 1 John 2:14) because he means for men to provide (work) and protect (keep). Similarly, the Lord did not make the husband “the head of his wife” (Eph 5:23) without giving him various capacities needed for the role.⁶ The same goes for the men God calls to lead his church, who must be exemplary husbands (1 Tim 3:2) and fathers (1 Tim 3:5) as well as providers (John 21:17) and protectors (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:9). Corresponding to this, activities unique to women (e.g., conceiving and breastfeeding children) say something about feminine vocations. This is why gender-specific lists in the New Testament tend to highlight a woman’s capacity to nurture, to show hospitality, and to exhibit compassion (e.g., 1 Tim 5:9–14). This also explains why wom-

en are told “to love their husbands and children” (Titus 2:4–5). Such a domestic emphasis suggests not only a vocational priority but also a corresponding nature designed for the role. Taken together, the biblical indicatives that inform and imperatives that instruct can help us reason wisely about what is most “fitting” for men and women in various spheres of life.

Q. Where is the Christian teaching of male-female natural differences most at odds with the prevailing narrative regarding men and women in the Western world?

A: Objective views of nature and of divinely established purposes stand starkly opposed to the egalitarian wish-dream that anyone can be anything they want to be. This is true on many levels,⁷ but it is particularly pertinent to the West’s contemporary confusion about the sexes. For we live in an age which thinks that, if all persons do not have identical opportunities or responsibilities for any unchosen reason (even a natural or embodied one), then some injustice must be afoot. Hence people now insist a man can be a woman if he wants to be. This is not mere gender confusion; it is open rebellion against the entire category of nature and the truth that to be male or female means to be born into a predetermined pattern for human life. Whether or not most moderns have heard of Jean-Paul Sartre, they have fallen for his lie that “existence precedes essence,” that life does not come with any fixed substance or shape. Thus we say, “Life is what you make of it,” and by extension, the same is true of male and female. We are free to determine what it means to be a man or a woman, the thinking goes, and therefore no one can tell anyone what may or may not be done. It is here that the Christian teaching on nature, in general, and on the sexes, in particular, is most at odds with the modern West. We believe in a God who made male and female (Gen 1:27) and who determined



how the sexes are formed as well as what the sexes are for. He says to each man and woman both “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” And this is what a world that worships the myth of unbounded freedom is able to tolerate least.

Q. What do you see is the greatest temptation or strongest challenge to Christian faithfulness with regard to male-female natural differences?

A: The greatest temptation facing evangelical Christians is not to deny what God says about men and women but to downplay the significance that God gives to male and female differences. Giving in to this temptation takes on various expressions. Many pastors avoid teaching on the subject of sexual differences altogether. “Just preach the gospel,” they say, as if that were the only truth in the Bible.⁸ In this way many congregations are filled with Christians who are functionally androgynous and who recoil at the Bible’s gender-specific exhortations. Other pastors address the subject when they are forced to do so, yet they adopt a rueful tone, as if to apologize for what God says is good. Some churches invent an unbiblical distinction between “pastors” and “elders” so they can appoint women as chimerical “non-elder

³This definition corresponds with the consensus of the Christian tradition. See, Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 175.

⁴For more on how nature teaches us, see Steven Wedgworth, “Good and Proper: Paul’s Use of Nature, Custom, and Decorum in Pastoral Theology,” *Eikon* 2.2 (Fall 2020): 88–97.

⁵For more on what nature can and cannot teach us, see Brad Littlejohn, “Look Around You” A Natural Theology of the Sexes,” *Eikon* 2.1 (Spring 2020): 40–44.

⁶Whether a particular man makes good use of a God-given capacity does not destroy the latent capacity itself.

⁷I never could have been the next Michael Jordan, for example, no matter how many hours of practice I might have dedicated to that goal. People are born with certain natures, and these unchosen natures come with built-in limits.

⁸To be sure, the gospel is “of first importance,” Paul tells us (1 Cor. 15:3). But it is not “of *mono* importance.”

pastors.”⁹ Other professedly complementarian churches permit women to preach but not to pastor. And still others adopt novel practices like “women-led Sundays,” where everyone on stage during the service (except the preacher) is female. All these initiatives are little more than a temporary pressure-release valve for folks who are caught between a culture that wants to “smash the patriarchy” and a God who taught us to call him Father (Matt 6:9).¹⁰ But this strategy will not work. There are too many scriptural texts that unabashedly highlight the differences between men and women, their various strengths and weaknesses, and the callings and limitations that God has established for each. In the end, the choice invariably comes down to rejection of what God says or a joyful embrace of the whole counsel of God.

Q. How can Christians employ the Christian view of men and women as a witness in the midst of cultural opposition?

A: The basic need for Christians today is to build families and churches who love the Word of life in a culture that is confused unto death. This entails training up boys and girls in the way each should go (Prov 22:6), as sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, future husbands and wives, fathers and mothers — and not as interchangeable cogs in a gender-fluid society.¹¹ It means not flinching at the words of God, or qualifying them into oblivion. It means acting like people who believe that God is good and therefore his design for the sexes is good, too. This is part of the path that Paul commends to us, “that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you

shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life” (Phil 2:15–16). The world desperately needs this light, even as they vehemently deny they are in darkness. Yet the tide may be turning. The rise in popularity of men like Jordan Peterson and movements like sex-positive feminism, though still muddled in significant ways, are signs that many are growing tired of sexual chaos and longing to know what men and women are for. Christians know the answer. And though some will persist in seeing the Christian view of the sexes as a regressive refusal to part ways with the past, the reality is quite the opposite. Christians are the real rebels, as Peter Kreeft has said, “For in an age of relativism, orthodoxy is the only possible rebellion left; and [we] sing as [we] fight. [We] have hope even as [we] pronounce judgment on our civilization. All the prophets offer hope. The patient is not dead yet.”¹² ✕

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⁹ For more on the New Testament’s overlapping use of “pastor” and “elder” (and “overseer”), see Doug Ponder, “Who Shepherds the Flock? (A Response to Russ Barksdale),” *The Baptist Review*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.thebaptistreview.com/editorial/who-shepherds-the-flock>.

¹⁰ Not to mention this same God appointed men as the “heads” of their wives (Eph 5:22–32; Col 3:18–19), restricted the priesthood to the sons of Aaron (Exod 28:1; Num 3:10; cf. Lev 21:1ff), chose twelve males to be his apostles (Mark 3:13–19), inspired men to write Scripture (2 Pet 1:21), and calls only qualified men to be pastors and teachers in his church (1 Tim 2:11–12; 3:2, 5). Thus those who downplay the significance of sexual difference will repeatedly find themselves at a loss for why God would do these things.

¹¹ For more on the non-interchangeability of the sexes, see Colin Smothers, “The Fallacy of Interchangeability,” *CBMW*, June 5, 2019, <https://cbmw.org/2019/06/05/the-fallacy-of-interchangeability/>.

¹² Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 189.

MILES SMITH

On Natural and Complementary Differences: A Forum

Q. What is Scripture’s basic teaching on the natural differences between men and women?

A: Scripture teaches “male and female he created them.” The essential scriptural teaching is that there is a sexual binary that exists within a created natural hierarchy. You can see this in the narrative of Genesis 1–3. In Genesis 2 you have the roots of male initiatory formation of family units. This biblical pattern gets rendered in different ways. American evangelicals label it complementarianism. Historic Protestants defined it as patriarchy, although that term isn’t a synonym for the way it gets used by modern folk Calvinists. What is essential is that there is male and female in the divinely created natural order — and that that which is male and female is not naturally or supernaturally interchangeable. Matthew 19 states that there is a necessary functional unity — sexual and social — that is formed by males and

females. The Bible should chiefly be understood to teach that natural differences help form society. Male and female can’t be interchangeable because procreation and social formation rely on natural differences in the created order. There are inferential differences Christians have historically rendered from biblical texts, but the most basic difference defined by the Christian scriptures is a natural and unchangeable binary, male and female.

Q. What is the relation between the natural law and the natural differences of men and women?

A: Natural law picks up — for Christians at least — where Scripture leaves off. Historically Christians, including Protestants, understood that Scripture was not the only place that God revealed his teaching on the differences between men and women. In addition to Scripture, God reveals these

A FORUM

differences in the created order. These natural differences, therefore, have been recognized by both Christian and other ancient thinkers. Clement of Alexandria argued, for example, that Greek philosophy was one of the rivers that prepared the Greeks eventually to receive the Christian gospel; and so Greek, and subsequently Roman, thinkers offered important understandings of natural law to the early Christian lexicon. For the ancients, the natural differences between men and women mattered. Men were naturally — cognitively and physically — built to do different sorts of things than women were. Men fight, and build, etc., while women were understood to take the lead in aspects of society that needed finesse. There's a reason why even secular Americans will note that a home needs "a woman's touch." The ancients have been accused of ignoring or dehumanizing women; what is interesting is that the Jewish theocracy and later the early Christian church had capacious roles for women in ways that most ancient civilizations did not. One popular trope is that Christians revolutionized the place of women in Roman society. That's overstated; one of the reasons Christians were able to make their case for being good citizens of the Empire — and they were — is precisely because there was not a massive disconnect between Roman natural law understandings of the place of women and the place of women in the early Christian church.

Q. How should natural differences between men and women inform their roles in the home, church, and society?

A: Natural differences taken seriously mean Christians take seriously the idea that men and women are created with aptitude that excel in particular social and religious spheres. Men are, overall, larger than women and have bodies that are oriented towards specific types of physical exertion. There are also cognitive differences between men and women that have vocational ramifications. What is difficult is that many Christians want a definite answer for exactly how men and women are supposed to interact with their naturally defined roles. For example, it is clear that women are supposed to be mothers and take a role in nurturing their children, but the Bible does not tell women exactly how to do that or what it might look like. Can a woman have a job "outside the home"? How should a woman nurture her children?, etc. Christians have understood that the state, guided historically by natural law, orients society and law so that men and women can fulfill their naturally appointed vocations. Men, for example, are drafted into armies, not women. Nature makes it clear why that is the case. Women physically and emotionally nurture babies because their bodies and their psycho-emotional framework — their very DNA — orients them to that pursuit. The question of the church is somewhat differ-

ent because the church is a supernatural society in the way the home and broader society are not. That does not mean that natural law precepts do not guide some of what the church does; it just means that the church's final formation and churchly authority is defined by specific scriptural texts in a way leadership in the home and society are not.

Q. Where is the Christian teaching of male-female natural differences most at odds with the prevailing narrative regarding men and women in the Western world?

A: In the past century an interesting shift has occurred. One hundred years ago, it was the church's commitment to the supernatural — the Virgin Birth, the Miraculous, Original Sin, the reality of the spiritual world — that defined the antagonism between conservative Protestants and the liberalizing and secularizing zeitgeist of the 1920s United States. In the early twenty-first century, it is the natural teachings of the church that enrage the culture of the day. The mere claim that male and female are natural and not interchangeable is perceived as an assault on the unlimited autonomy to which modern Westerners believe they have a right. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this question is the confrontation not so much with the church's teaching, but with the state's teaching. Historically, the state upheld long-time

natural law frameworks of the male-female binary and oriented law towards that binary's maintenance. The social maintenance of historic natural-law teachings on male and female was the province of the state, not the church. The state's abdication of its duties has led to the reality where the church is, in some ways, trying to do the job of the state in taking the lead on teaching natural law to society. The extent to which the church — a spiritual and supernatural society whose mission is properly spiritual and supernatural — should take on the teaching of natural law is controversial, but it seems likely that as long as the state abdicates its responsibility, the laity will have no choice but to look elsewhere.

Q. What do you see is the greatest temptation or strongest challenge to Christian faithfulness with regard to male-female natural differences?

A: The greatest temptation stems from the church confusing the nature of its spiritual mission. All too often there is a tendency for "mission-minded" Christians to ignore natural teaching because they do not perceive it to have a spiritual consequence. This leads to situations wherein — in the interest of being loving — Christians treat certain natural teaching as *adiaphora* because it "doesn't have anything to do with a person's salvation," etc. The Apostle Paul does not let people off the hook so easily,



and in the sixth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, he anathematizes fornicators, thieves, adulterers, and other sexual deviants. This is not merely a situation where people being “bad” consigns them to hell. It means they give themselves over to certain sins to the extent they not only reject salvation, but they choose sins that so disorder their lives that they reject their basic humanity. Thinkers from Aristotle to Martin Luther and John Calvin warned about the consequences of rejecting nature; modern evangelicals’ weak doctrine of natural law and reduction of salvation to that which is merely spiritual have left them unable to understand how sinning against nature destroys souls and bodies. There is a very real temptation to ignore Christian natural teaching in the interest of being mission-minded, but the presentation of a gospel that does not deal with the embodied effects of sin is no more helpful than a gospel that does not deal with sinful souls.

Q. How can Christians employ the Christian view of men and women as a witness in the midst of cultural opposition?

A: This question seems to drive at an important question: is male and female teaching a vital part of the gospel, or is it necessary for the maintenance of the temporal — instead of spiritual — civil and political orders, or is it both? If it is both, does this mean there is a necessary biblical component to government? If there is a necessary biblical component, who decides the biblical teaching, etc.? This may seem like pedantry but it is actually important to understand the mission of the church, the mission of the state, and where they interact. Whose job is it to educate the populace on the *social* aspects of biblical teaching on male and female? Or is the idea that that which is social is also spiritual, which leads to the question, What is properly sacred and what is secular? Is theocracy necessary? I do not think so, but this question is as important to

understand as what is rendered as biblical teaching on male and female. Yes, there is mass confusion about male and female in society; the question is however, whether it is the job of the church to rectify society’s confusion on that issue even as it is charged with saving souls. The church has some duty to address this teaching; it is in the Holy Scriptures after all. How the church is supposed to address this teaching *vis-a-vis* the state is as important a question to ask as *if* the church is supposed to do it. ✕

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ERIK THOENNES

On Natural and Complementary Differences: A Forum

Q. What is Scripture’s basic teaching on the natural differences between men and women?

A: A biblical worldview is grounded in God as Creator and understanding all he has made as part of his very good design. The fall and curse have marred his creation, but the goodness remains and is in the process of being restored and redeemed. This goodness is declared to be true of creation by God after he has created humanity as male and female. So, the created equality of and distinctions between men and women should be understood, valued, and expressed. Men and women are completely equal in the dignity and value qualities inherent to being made in God’s image. Both are equally necessary to image God and fulfill the creation mandate to rule over and subdue creation and be fruitful and multiply to the glory of God. Although men and women have far more commonalities than differences, our differences are wonderful and vital to who God has made us,

and key to how we are intended to glorify him. These differences are physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, neurological, spiritual, hormonal, and relational, and lead to a beautiful complementary display of the equality and distinction within God himself.

Q. What is the relation between the natural law and the natural differences of men and women?

A: Natural law is grounded in the way things are obviously designed by God when he created the world. There is no conflict between God’s design and the way we are to function and relate as human beings created by God for his glory. Male and female bodies are created to work together sexually, as are all the other created differences. For men and women to become one in marriage, and to relate in distinct yet harmonious ways in general, requires understanding, un-



selfishness, and a primary motivation to glorify God in the midst of the joys and challenges that come with fallen men and women living together in meaningful relationships.

Christian ethics flow out of the way God designed the world and are never in conflict with that design. Just one example of this is that those with greater physical strength should always use that strength to empower and protect those who are weaker. When a man uses his strength in an abusive or domineering way, it is a great evil and defies God's design. Of course there are exceptions, but generally men are considerably stronger than women and a man must use that strength to honor, protect, and provide for his wife and all those he may be called to serve in this way (1 Pet 3:7).

Q. How should natural differences between men and women inform their roles in the home, church, and society?

A: I believe our distinct roles as men and women naturally flow out of the masculinity and femininity with which God has created us. Masculinity is a God-given

role and instinct for men to provide, protect, and initiate in their relationships with women, and femininity is a God-given role and instinct for women to encourage and support this leadership role in men. This relational dynamic is most clearly seen in marriage and the local church, but also exists in less clear and defined ways in male-female relationships in general. These instincts and ways of relating to one another will include practical differences in how we function together, but they primarily are seen in the degree of responsibility men have and the relational dynamic between men and women.

Our roles are not mutually exclusive, and of course women can, should, and wonderfully do provide, protect, and initiate in all kinds of God-glorifying ways. But I believe there are transcultural ways men and women relate to one another that should endure even if a woman is a man's boss at work. I could provide a good argument, for example, that I should have the last open seat on a bus instead of a younger, more physically fit woman, but I would never take the seat instead of her.

Q. Where is the Christian teaching of male-female natural differences most at odds with the prevailing narrative regarding men and women in the Western world?

A: It is difficult to define what the "prevailing narrative" is in the West because the answer depends on what subculture within the West one is talking about. There does, however, seem to be a general and significant movement away from a clear definition of male and female and any roles that go with those definitions. Growing belief in radical autonomy and a hyper validation of personal subjective feelings as the arbiter of what is true and real has led to an incoherent rejection of even biological differences between men and women.

For many, the autonomous self decides reality, and submission to things as they are is rejected as oppressive. I believe that despite significant movements away from God's design for male and female, for most people there is still an inescapable common sense understanding of male and female differences and even some kind of roles that go along with those differences. This understanding is still true even if people are fearful of publicly admitting it. Even Hollywood culture, which seems to generally reject "gender binary," cannot get away from it. In *Titanic*, no one protests when it is women and children first in the lifeboats, or when Rose is on the door and Jack floats away into the frozen sea. When Eugene in *Tangled* gives his life so Rapunzel can go free, everyone knows that was the manly thing to do. And since the war in Israel began, people have been pleading for the hostages to be released, starting with the women and children. God made us male and female for our joy and his glory and even with all the efforts to obliterate those distinctions in our day, they endure nonetheless.

Q. What do you see is the greatest temptation or strongest challenge to Christian faithfulness with regard to male-female natural differences?

A: The challenge to faithful Christian living regarding sexuality and marriage is the same as the challenge in all areas of life in which we are called to faithful obedience — transformation through the Spirit and the Word. The Bible commands that we "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).

As biblical teaching on human sexuality moves further away from God's design, pressure to conform to the growing consensus in the way we think, talk, and live will increase. Biblical sexuality for a growing number of people is seen as not only wrong and antiquated, but immoral and oppressive. Christians will have to resolutely maintain positive, hopeful, joyful, God-glorifying belief in God's intention in creation for men and women. This must be true, not only in what we teach, but in how we live. There is something profoundly attractive to people made in God's image when God's design for his creation is on display. Even if people reject and hate God's design for them, his ways are the only path to abundant and meaningful lives. So, more than ever, Christians need to lean into Spirit-empowered, gospel-grounded relationships as God intends.

Q. How can Christians employ the Christian view of men and women as a witness in the midst of cultural opposition?

A: As important as Christian sexual morality is, the Christian's primary ministry is to know Christ and make him known through our gospel-grounded lives and Spirit-enabled preaching. We seek to glorify God through introducing

people to Jesus who alone can restore their relationships with their Creator and enable them to live lives that glorify him. This will have a transformative effect on every area of our lives because sin has affected every area of our lives.

We need to address sexual sin and dysfunction as fellow sinners who desperately need Jesus for forgiveness, no more or less than anyone else. Because of our shared depravity, we are all sexually messed up and need Jesus to save us from all the ways sin has damaged us. Even if the details of our depravity look different from others, we all should be able to relate to anyone we meet as needy people. We need to oppose lies and love people in word and deed so that people we know meet the Savior we all need. Any departure from God's design for us dishonors him and destroys us. So, our love for people who are caught in the confusion and distortions of our day will be a love that points them to Jesus as the one who loves to welcome lost people home. Sin of any kind promises freedom, but it imprisons us and only leads to emptiness and exhaustion. As we seek to help bring clarity and truth to sexuality issues, our primary message must remain that Jesus is tenderhearted and invites weary sinners to come to him to find everything they could ever want (Matt 11:28–30). ✕



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DAVID TALCOTT

The New “Conservative” Gender Egalitarianism:

A Critique of Abigail Favale’s *The Genesis of Gender* and Nancy Pearcey’s *The Toxic War on Masculinity*





As American culture continues to degrade, Christians increasingly find themselves needing to defend biblical ways of thinking. Two recent books aggressively defend the Christian view of man and woman by debunking important and influential misunderstandings present in the broader culture. Yet, as helpful as these books are, they inadvertently abandon the natural differences between the sexes and the practical, functional outworking of those differences.

Abigail Favale's *The Genesis of Gender* artfully deconstructs the idea that transgenderism is good for human beings, especially women.¹ Starting with its origins in feminism, she explains the emerging "gender paradigm," which "affirms a radically constructivist view of reality," according to which "there is no creator and so

we are free to create ourselves. The body is an object with no intrinsic meaning."² In contrast, the Christian view affirms God as Creator and sees both men and women as beings of high intrinsic worth. She writes, "once understood as created, selfhood, including one's sex, becomes a gift that can be accepted rather than something that must be constructed. This initiates a different orientation to all of reality, even one's own body: a shift from *control* to *receptivity*."³ We can receive our created natures as gifts that have a purpose. In the case of sexual difference, she argues this purpose is *symbolic*: representing love, unity, and wholeness from two different angles. The male/female difference is a difference in *being* that has a symbolic meaning; there is no difference of activity or function. She writes that we shift "from *doing* to *being*." This opens the possibilities of sex-lived-

out, freeing us from constricting stereotypes and compelled performance."⁴ Thus, Christian men and women are freed to live out their distinctive mode of being in an endless variety of ways, all of which testify to God's creative goodness.

Nancy Pearcey's *The Toxic War on Masculinity* debunks the idea that men and masculinity are inherently "toxic."⁵ She shows the value of men and manhood, contrasting the false narrative of "the real man" with the true narrative of "the good man." She traces how in the industrial revolution work shifted outside the home and so men became increasingly detached from children and the household. Looking at examples ranging from Victorian tracts to twentieth-century Westerns, Pearcey argues that the ideal of manhood detached

from the family and recentered on living in carefree independence. In response to this false picture, Pearcey defends devout Christian men as the most *attached* to their wife and children, the least likely to abuse those close to them, and the most likely to have happy marriages.

Pearcey's book was written in large part as a response to the widespread accusation that Christian men are abusers or that biblical Christianity, including the idea of male headship, is more likely to make men into abusers.⁶ Thus, what she includes and doesn't include is calculated to speak to that audience — an audience like herself in that they have been abused or know someone who has been abused and are skeptical of the claims of Jesus Christ as a result.⁷

¹ Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2022).

² Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 30.

³ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 224.

⁴ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 238.

⁵ Nancy Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 2023).

⁶ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 14-15.

⁷ In the Introduction and Chapter 14 she explains the heart-wrenching story of how her father abused her and her siblings, and



Each book is praiseworthy for what it accomplishes, yet each work has significant problems which render them unable to provide the intellectual foundations for manhood and womanhood in the twenty-first century. Rejecting transgender ideology and toxic caricatures of manhood is good, but it is not enough to serve as the basis for male and female discipleship for the problems of our day. A properly biblical approach recovers not merely symbolic contrasts, but functional and practical ones as well. Both books argue for a complementarity which, in practice, is a functional egalitarianism.

NO FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENCE

Despite offering a trenchant critique of transgender ideology, which rejects the sexed nature of the body, Favale's book fails to adequately reckon with the practical and functional differences between men and women.

I recognize this claim may seem surprising on the surface. Favale's stated purpose in writing the book is to recover "essentialism" about the differences between the sexes. She seeks to "respect material reality,"⁸ and thinks the Christian understanding treats "sexual difference is understood and experienced as *gift*, as a source of fruitfulness and love. There is a dynamic balance between sameness and difference."⁹ Favale believes there is an indelible biological difference between men and women that grounds their identities *as* men and women. Her view would initially seem like one tailor-made to reveal the natural complementarity of the sexes.

Yet, in actual practice, the material, biological differences between the sexes serve merely to provide a *symbolic* difference, not a *functional* one. There is a difference in the symbolic meaning of manhood and womanhood, but no difference in role or activity. Following Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, Favale argues that our bodies are signs of our persons and therefore sacramental: the body reveals the person.¹⁰ We are not mere mortals, but a unity of soul and body, and the sexed body in particular was created by God to reveal truths about himself and creation. After describing the creation of Eve, and Adam's spontaneous recognition of her person through her body, Favale writes:

Our bodies, then, serve a sacramental function, by revealing and communicating a spiritual reality. To use John Paul's words, "the body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hid-

den from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it."¹¹

This sacramental difference between men and women is a profound idea, for it points toward the loving relationship between Christ and his church. Yet if it is to have any real potency it must be based upon a difference of activity. If men and women don't really move differently in the world, engage actively in a way that is structurally distinct from one another, then the symbolism loses all its power. For Favale, why doesn't this symbolic difference lead to a difference of function, activity, or role? Because it is merely a difference of "being," not of "doing."¹² To make role or activity a part of being a man or a woman is to give into "our postmodern moment" and to approach these issues in the way that "feminism and its progeny, gender theory," do.¹³ Roles or activities are social constructions that are surface-level, change over time, and exclude some biological men and women. For Favale, making differences of role or function into essential parts of manhood and womanhood is making the same mistake as the modern transgender movement: substituting something social and variable for something fixed in the natural body. To guard the idea that the body has intrinsic meaning, Favale thinks she must lodge manhood and womanhood in metaphysics — in merely *being* a man, not acting like men or performing the social role of a man.

But, this, I submit, is itself a failure of metaphysics. There cannot be a difference of being without a difference of function. There cannot be a difference in *potentiality* without a difference in *actuality*. If there is no difference in function, then they are two of the *same thing*. If men and women don't function differently, then there is

"There cannot be a difference of being without a difference of function. There cannot be a difference in potentiality without a difference in actuality."

nothing different about them in any essential way — there would be no more difference between a man and woman than between an old woman and a young woman. There would be superficial differences of size, color, etc., but no *essential* difference because there is no difference of potentiality, actuality, or function. If two things have all the same powers, they are two of the same *kind* of thing.

Favale's own view points strongly in this direction, despite her denial of the conclusion. In an important part of her book, she is committed to thinking men and women are different, and that this difference includes an essential difference in function. In her chapter on "Sex" she defines male and female in terms of the potential for certain functions: "A woman is the kind of human being whose body is organized around the potential to gestate new life."¹⁴ This, of course, is the potential for a kind of *activity*, not merely a potential to signify or to exist. The potential for this kind of activity is what directs the *organization* for the body. That is, the way that the body

how she went through a decades-long recovery process.

⁸ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 162.

⁹ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 51.

¹⁰ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 40, 135.

¹¹ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 40–41.

¹² Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 233–234.

¹³ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 233.

¹⁴ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 120.



is set up is aimed at enabling that distinctive activity. And, not only the body is set up with that aim, but the soul, too, and the person as a whole is organized toward this end. Favale writes, “womanhood must include bodily sex, but must also extend beyond it to consider the whole person.”¹⁵ This entire framework from Favale begs to be extended into a further study of the physical and psychological differences between the sexes which systematically enable them to carry out their maternal and paternal functions with excellence. Yet, Favale steadfastly abstains from this endeavor. To talk about the differences as more than symbolic is to run into the dangerous waters of “stereotypes”¹⁶ and construct a “superficial box around maleness and femaleness.”¹⁷

Given the importance of the symbolic difference, and the revelatory nature of the

body, she says surprisingly little about how our bodies reveal distinctively male or female persons. How does the male body reveal male personhood? How does the female body reveal female personhood? In a brief comment that should be pregnant with meaning, but which receives very little elaboration for the woman and none at all for the man, she writes,

The man has the capacity to transmit life outside of himself, while the woman has the potential to gestate new life within. If we take these biological realities as a mirror for God and humankind, the male sex is analogous to God because God endows life from himself but stands apart from it; he transcends. The female sex is representative of humankind because its power lies in *receptivity*; the human being is created to receive the love of

God, be inwardly transformed, and let that love bear fruit.¹⁸

This is a profound observation and describes, of course, a difference in *doing*. Men and women *do* different things in the process of reproduction and this is the fundamental marker of the sexes themselves. Men and women have different modes of activity in the world. In other words, the body reveals the person.

Can you have a symbolic difference without an underlying bodily difference? I submit not. The symbolic loses its power, even becomes wholly arbitrary in its expression, if there is nothing in material reality that undergirds it. If there is something in reality, a sex difference within creation, that reality will make a functional difference.

ROLE DIFFERENCES FOR MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD?

Unlike Favale, Pearcey is willing to countenance the idea of gender roles, granting in-principle differences between the roles of father and mother, husband and wife. However, the way she articulates these roles has the effect of negating their differences, undermining their activities, and undercutting their foundations in nature.

Pearcey’s plan to refute the idea that masculinity is toxic is to argue that biblical and traditional masculinity avoids those toxic elements and ennobles masculinity itself. Men who regularly attend church are the most involved fathers and have the happiest wives and marriages.¹⁹ They are the furthest thing from toxic. To achieve this, though, they have to give up the secular

script of being a “real man,” which says that to be a man you have to be “tough, strong, never show weakness, win at all costs, suck it up, play through pain, be competitive, get rich, get laid.”²⁰ Instead, they are “good men,” which amounts to being an involved father and dutiful husband.

Pearcey’s praise for involved fatherhood, and the emotive richness that mirrors God’s deep love for us, is the most compelling part of her book. The importance of fathers’ emotional investment in their children can hardly be overstated. More than our money, our children need *us*. In describing the emotional investment of ancient Hebrew men in their children, Leon Podles writes that “Patriarchy is a system in which fathers care for their families and find their emotional centers in their offspring.”²¹ This emotional investment, even more than the authoritative governing, is the key feature of Christian fatherhood.

But what allows fathers to love in their uniquely paternal way, a way that is distinct from the feminine? Pearcey artificially contrasts the “real man” and “good man” ideas in a way that makes it nearly impossible for a man to achieve dignity *as a man*. To see this, consider how Pearcey articulates the traditional roles of the man: “protection and provision.”²² This starts as physical protection and provision, but leads to deeper, spiritual forms. This spiritual responsibility even involves a kind of “headship.” But, for Pearcey, this headship does not involve any *directive* leadership of the family, it merely amounts to men being “tasked with responsibility for the spiritual growth of every member of the family.”²³

¹⁸ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 237.

¹⁹ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 37.

²⁰ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 19.

²¹ Leon Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of American Christianity*, (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 67.

²² Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 61.

²³ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 57.

Men have a role of “taking the lead” in ensuring the growth of every member of the family, but headship does not mean ruling, it means the responsibility of serving. There is no unique *directive* capacity in being a husband or father, there is only the unique responsibility of being the initiator of service. She writes:

In other words, a godly husband takes the lead and says, like Jesus, ‘Follow me.’ If he wants a better marriage, he takes the lead in doing the emotional work and says, ‘Follow me.’ If he wants his wife to have a richer spiritual life, he deepens his own relationship with God and says, ‘Follow me.’...to lead means to be out in front living a life that is worthy of emulating.²⁴

That Christians should serve one another in diverse acts of kindness is uncontroversial. And, that husbands are not to “lord it over” their wives is also uncontroversial. But, the view that Pearcey articulates here is one where the husband has responsibility without authority.

Regarding the role of the wife, her discussion is a classic example of how some complementarians spend all their time saying what submission is *not* rather than what it *is*. Perhaps it is merely a limitation resulting from the sociological and apologetical nature of Pearcey’s book, but there is no clear articulation of what kind of “submission” she thinks is biblical, just a clear and extensive argument for what submission does *not* mean, with an eye toward avoiding anything that could be thought of as passive. She emphasizes that the wife who “submits” should speak her mind, wrestle with her husband as Jacob wrestled with God, pour out her sorrows, perhaps be depressed at times, not hold back in communicating her needs, thoughts, and ideas,

bring her strengths to the table, offer her best insights, and generally not remain quiet and go along.²⁵

The view which emerges from her arguments is a functional egalitarianism: there is no real difference of role. Men and women are identically called to improve their marriage, grow closer to God, be warm and close to their children, and be an example to one another. That they do this by engaging in different-but-complementary functions, activities, or non-figurehead roles is not part of the story.

But, the “real man” qualities Pearcey rejects are what provide the natural basis for the “good man” to succeed in the roles of protector and provider. To actually protect, either physically or spiritually, you must actually possess strength, toughness, and the ability to stand strong when you are tempted to be weak. Physical strength itself is one of the largest differences between the sexes, and psychologically men are more likely to be “disagreeable” than women, a kind of psychological intransigence.²⁶ Likewise, a husband who will protect and provide needs to be able to withstand pain, both physical and psychological, in order to persevere strongly in pursuit of what is good. Competitiveness, too, is one of the major psychological differences between the sexes, with men more strongly motivated to compete. Even the stronger male desire for sexual union (dismissively rendered as a desire to “get laid”) is crucially important in establishing marriages. In fact, the male sex drive is the most unifying force in all human societies — it drives men to work, to commit, to strive, to sacrifice, and to respect the woman whom they seek to woo. It can be abused, as every good thing can, but in its essence it is very good.

These qualities, at root, are simply cour-

age and its raw materials, a virtue possessed by both men and women but needed conspicuously by men in the carrying out of their distinct role as protector and provider. Thus, Pearcey calls for men to be “good men” while cutting them off from the qualities which enable them to do so effectively. As C.S. Lewis quips in *The Abolition of Man*, on a related point, “In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function...we castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”²⁷

At some level, Pearcey desires to have it both ways, wanting to acknowledge real differences while making sure they make no difference. Two side-by-side section headings in her first chapter tell the tale: “No Pink and Blue Boxes” and “What’s the Difference?”²⁸ In the former, she argues that there are no real divisions between men and women, but that all things are shared between them: the cultural mandate, beatitudes, the gifts of the Spirit (including teaching), and the fruits of the Spirit.²⁹ Empirically, she claims, “men and women are more alike than different. Most psychological characteristics can be described by bell curves that overlap closely.”³⁰ However, she then goes on to say, “This is not to deny the reality of differences between the sexes,” describing differences in involvement with children (beginning with pregnancy), hormone levels, career decisions, physical strength, competitiveness, and risk-taking.³¹ She concludes this section with a lovely image of complementarity: “Our goal should not be to deny those differences but to be grateful for the unique contribution of each of the sexes. Men

and women exercising their gifts are like a violin and a cello playing a duet, blending in harmony while retaining their unique, individual tones.”³² A lovely image, but what does it amount to? What are those different contributions? Are there any we can point to without having them shot down as stereotypes, preferences, or cultural irrelevancies? The rest of the book provides us with no solid direction.

RENEWING REAL COMPLEMENTARITY

Pearcey advocates a view that is traditional in many ways, but fails to recognize the centrality of male headship and sexual complementarity in the family, church, and civil society.³³ Pearcey admirably accomplishes her purpose of showing how churchgoing Christian men shatter the false cultural idea that religious men are more likely to be patriarchal abusers. But, in the end, Pearcey’s view ends up looking similar to Favale’s: There’s no difference of function, only a difference of symbolic meaning. Both authors want to embrace a real difference, but can’t find any practical work for that difference to do. At one level, they seem to know the differences are there, but at the level of commitment they instead constrain them to mere biological function or symbolic representation.

In the long term, it is not viable to have a difference of being without a difference of function (Favale’s position) or a difference of function without a difference in being (what is often considered the standard complementarian position). The similarities and differences between the sexes are a matter of *both* function and

²⁴ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 55.

²⁵ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 60–61.

²⁶ On disagreeableness, see chapter 5 in Roy Baumeister, *Is there Anything Good About Men? How Cultures Flourish by Exploiting Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 16.

²⁸ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 30–31.

²⁹ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 30.

³⁰ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 30.

³¹ Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 31.

³² Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 31.

³³ This theme is explored carefully and extensively by Zachary Garris in his review of *The Toxic War on Masculinity*. See “The Leaven of Egalitarianism,” *American Reformer*, October 10, 2023. <https://americanreformer.org/2023/10/the-leaven-of-egalitarianism/>.

being. We are the same in being human, therefore we share the same functions insofar as we are human — we are living animals, we have rational souls and human bodies, and we have the same kinds of emotions and perceptions. Compared with everything else in creation, man and woman are the same — we are human and in God's image.

Yet, we also differ in being from one another — what it is to be a man is different from what it is to be a woman. This difference of being involves a difference in function. In particular, men and women have different functions in procreation,

in the first case a biological difference in gamete production and pregnancy, but our whole organization as persons is built on this foundation. Our psychologies, social predilections, and ways of interacting with the world all reflect our glorious, sexually-distinct natures. The body has a purpose, and God has a purpose in creating us as men and women, wonderful gifts to one another, destined to live lives of service and love as we fulfill that divine intention. ✕

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ALEXANDER STRAUCH

Pastor/Elder/ Overseer: An Office Fitted for Men

The purpose of this brief essay is to identify some of the masculine qualities designed by God that fit a man for the arduous task of shepherding his flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1–2). This paper assumes that readers are biblical complementarians, and therefore does not seek to directly address egalitarian objections.

STRENGTH AND COURAGE

From the beginning, God designed men physically, mentally, and emotionally to be leaders, warriors, disciplinarians, builders, defenders of the faith, and protectors of the weak. For such crucial roles men were endowed by the Creator with physical bodily strength and inner courage.

For example, as a teenage boy, David knew

that he must protect his father's sheep from wild beasts. In his own words spoken to King Saul, he states that "when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him" (1 Sam 17:34–35). By killing the lion and bear, David demonstrated masculine, daring courage and physical strength. At risk to his life, he protected his father's helpless sheep from savage predators.

Our Lord Jesus Christ fearlessly entered the Temple court and with a whip of cords, single-handedly drove out the money-changers, and restored the temple to its original purpose — that it be a house of prayer, worship, and teaching (John 2:13–

17; Mark 11:17). Throughout his life, Jesus demonstrated masculine strength and bold courage in the face of grave danger.

GUARD GOD'S FLOCK: FIERCE WOLVES ARE COMING

On the shores of Miletus, the Apostle to the Gentiles summoned the Ephesian elders for a final farewell meeting. For nearly three years, these elders worked intimately with Paul in evangelism and pastoral care (Acts 20:17–38).

In his farewell address, Paul charged the elders to guard God's flock. He then solemnly warned them that "fierce wolves" will attack the flock from without. But even more frightening, these wolves will also attack from within as false teachers who will arise "speaking twisted things, to draw the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28–30). Fierce battles for the lives of God's people and the truths of the gospel lie ahead.

Note that these are "fierce wolves," a pack of hungry wolves working together to consume God's people. From personal experience, I can say that false teachers are frightening people to confront. They speak "twisted things" (Acts 20:30), that is, they distort and pervert apostolic, orthodox doctrine, the standard of truth. They are slippery creatures who cannot be easily pinned down; they are experts at double-talk and diversion. Masters of subtlety and novelty, false teachers mix truth with error and confuse people with half-truths and complex ideas. They have a way of wearing people down with their arguments so that most people capitulate, weary of trying to argue.

To protect the local church from fierce wolves, there need to be shepherds who are mentally and emotionally capable of engaging in highly stressful theological and philosophical debate with powerful and wearying opponents. That is why one of the biblical qualifications for a pastoral elder

(often overlooked) is that he must be able to "rebuke those who contradict" the truths of the gospel and to silence them because, as Paul says, they are "upsetting whole families" with their twisted doctrines (Titus 1:9, 11). Remember, too, that behind these fierce wolves are demonic powers: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12; see also 1 Tim 4:1).

To fight false teachers head-on takes strength and courage, and God has fitted men of strong character for the responsibility to chase off sheep-eating wolves and protect God's flock from being devoured as food. Strength and courage are necessary male qualities for effective pastoral leadership, exercising church discipline, facing angry opponents, and handling spiritual warfare. Just as God has given men the responsibility to physically protect those in their care, so he has given qualified men as pastors to spiritually care for those under their care.

HARD WORK

One of the first things that we learn about God's design for the man is that he was made "to work" the ground and to "keep it" (Gen 2:15; 3:17–19). A masculine quality needed to fit one for pastoral leadership is the ability to work long hours and bear the heavy burdens of people's complaints and problems.

In Acts 20, Paul reminded the elders of his own example of hard work and generous care for the weak: "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you *that by working hard* in this way *we must help the weak* and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:34–35; also 4:35–37; 6:3–6; Gal 2:10). Paul's ex-

ample of hard work is meant to encourage the elders to work hard (at both their employment and church responsibilities) and to use their earnings to support weak and needy members.

In the newly established church in Thessalonica, Paul identified some men who were laboring diligently for the welfare of the new congregation. Specifically, they were providing leadership and instruction. Paul wanted these laboring brothers to be acknowledged and loved for their work: "We ask you, brothers, to respect *those who labor among you* and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of *their work*" (1 Thess 5:12–13). The verb "labor" often describes manual labor. This term denotes toil and strenuous work that results in weariness and fatigue. The term reveals an important characteristic of a Christian leader: laboriousness. Part of the male constitution is a willingness and ability to work long, hard hours and to carry other people's heavy burdens on their shoulders.

Hard work and generous care for the needy are God-given masculine qualities that should be an example to the whole church body to emulate.

Paul's command that husband's "love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25) is thus fitting for men. Only through arduous, self-giving labor on behalf of his wife will a husband be able to fulfill this command. It is no surprise that the office of pastor likewise requires intense labor on behalf of Christ's bride.

THE LABOR OF TEACHING

The same word for "labor" in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 is also used of the elders in 1 Timothy 5:17–18: "Let the elders who rule well [lead well] be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who *labor in preaching and teaching*. For the

scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The *laborer* deserves his wages.'" Effective teachers put in long hours of concentrated study, lots of reading, sermon preparation, and demanding teaching situations. It is time-consuming work that requires a great deal of self-discipline. Teaching is labor-intensive work.

A teacher is also an authority figure. Thus, only men, precisely because they are men, are officially permitted to teach the full gathered congregation (1 Tim 2:8–3:3). Women are not "to teach or exercise authority over a man" in the gathered assembly (1 Tim 2:12).

As teachers of God's holy Word, men project a voice of authority (a literal deeper voice) and strength of presence. Furthermore, since God has fitted men for this role, they have a natural inclination towards technical doctrinal issues, a truth that evinced itself throughout civilizational history. It is not surprising that the vast majority of systematic theologies and philosophy books have been written by men and studied by men.

FATHERLY AND HUSBANDLY STATUS AND AUTHORITY

Fathers possess the authority to discipline and instruct their children: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4; also Prov 4:1–6; Col 3:21); "For what son is there whom his father does not discipline" (Heb 12:7; see too 1 Thess 2:10)? The Scripture further declares that the husband is "the head of the wife" (Eph 5:23; see too 1 Cor 11:3; 1 Pet 3:6). To be a "head" is to be the leader of the wife which emphasizes authority and direction. In biblical terms, the headship of the husband is to be uniquely a Christ-like, loving, uplifting, self-sacrificing headship — never abusive or demeaning, which is sin.

To be the leader to his wife and father to his children, God created the man with the necessary bodily, mental, and emotional qualities for the leadership role in the family. Having fatherly and husbandly authority naturally fits men for the larger responsibility of leading and teaching a local congregation made up of many families. In fact, being male is one of the assumed qualifications for being an elder-overseer (1 Tim 2:8–3:7), but being male alone does not qualify a man for eldership-leadership in the church. There are other specific God-given qualifications required of a man for the office of spiritual oversight (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

For official appointment to the eldership of a church, fatherly and husbandly status and authority must be found to be irreproachable and competent: “He must manage (lead) his own household well, with all dignity, keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage (lead) his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim 3:4–5). There is a clear parallel here between masculine leadership in the individual family and masculine leadership in the extended family, the local church.

Before a man is ever examined (1 Tim 3:10) and appointed to the pastoral leadership in a church, he will have had tried and tested experience in his own home as a husband and father (1 Tim 3:5; assuming he has a wife and children). An elder’s pastoral oversight of God’s church is more like the oversight of a caring shepherd or a loving father than a CEO executive over a large corporation or a military officer over those under his command. Elders are like fathers to the church, and churches desperately need mature, spiritual fathers to teach, rebuke, discipline, and protect.

MEN FIT TO SERVE

It is clear from Scripture that God created the man and the woman equal in worth and in bearing the divine image of God,

yet different in their unique roles. God assigned these roles that together they fill the earth with people who also bear the divine image. The differences between men and women are real and significant.

In the marriage partnership, God created the husband to lead, protect, and provide, and wives to submit, nurture, and maintain the home. In marriage, the man is the head of the wife (Eph 5:23) and leader of the family (1 Tim 3:4–5). God designed the man physically, mentally, and emotionally to be the family leader, protector, and provider, and it must be added, a leader of the larger community of God’s people, the church. The woman also was uniquely designed by God for her role as wife, mother, and godly influencer and supporter of the larger community of God’s people, the church (1 Tim 2:9–15).

In the household of God, the local church (1 Tim 3:15), men have been created by God to be defenders of the faith (guarding the church from fierce wolves, Acts 20:29–30), to be protectors of the weak (working hard and giving generously to the needy, Acts 20:35), teachers of sound biblical theology (laboring in preaching and teaching, 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:9), and shepherd-leaders of the people God (1 Pet 5:1–2). Let us, as Paul said to Timothy: “Command and teach these things” (1 Tim 4:11). ✕

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JAMES WOOD

Feminine Courage

As a father of five daughters, I think a lot about what it means to be a good woman.

This topic comes up somewhat often in our reading or choosing which films to watch, and discussions that emerge from these engagements. Many recent stories that seek to inspire young women fall into the popular stereotypes of the “girl-boss” and “strong female lead.” But too often these portrayals seem to present feminine strength in ways that mirror the masculine. A common message is that women can do anything a man can do, that they are just as strong as men in the same ways as men. This runs up against both Scripture and nature. Men and women are different. Thus, why do we need to encourage them to be strong *like men*? Is there not a uniquely feminine way to exhibit strength?

This is dangerous territory. Even many who embrace the label “complementari-

an” can be reticent to provide any definition for what “masculine” and “feminine” mean.

In this issue on the natural differences between men and women, I would like to offer my contribution by focusing on feminine courage. To begin, I need to explain that there are not particularly male or female virtues. Rather, all the virtues apply to both sexes. However, the ways these virtues are lived out are inflected differently according to the sexes. One’s sex colors the life of virtue. It conditions how the cardinal virtues, such as courage, are expressed.

Thus, with regard to courage, we shouldn’t assume that women should be courageous in the same way as men.

As Herman Bavinck explains in his wonderful little book *The Christian Family*:

The distinction between man and woman was always known among all people groups, and taken into account by all of them in terms of practice. Nature teaches this distinction, and no science or philosophy is needed to acquaint oneself with this. Man and woman differ in physical structure and physical strength, in psychological structure and psychological strength; thereby they . . . are called to different duties.¹

Many recent scholars have helped us retrieve sanity about our sexuality: men and women are not interchangeable. C.S. Lewis hit this message in various ways, especially in his famous essay against women priests,² but then also from a fictional direction in *That Hideous Strength*. In both texts, Lewis hammers his polemic against the modern, progressive conflation of equality with interchangeability. No, men and women, though equal in important respects, are profoundly different. Pay attention to their bodies — which is exactly what the anti-human forces in *That Hideous Strength* want to downplay and eventually eradicate. But our bodies provide clues for our unique vocations as men and women, including how the virtues are to be expressed.

The reactionary (or, “sex-realist”) feminists³ that have recently emerged recognize these realities. Due to these embodied dynamics, Abigail Favale defines “woman” thusly: the kind of human being whose body is organized according to the potential to gestate new life, i.e. motherhood. And “man” is the kind of human

being whose body is organized according to the potential for fatherhood.⁴ Erika Bachiochi explains that women and men are not interchangeable in their reproductive contributions, and because of their embodiment they bear asymmetrical duties toward children (though mothers and fathers are equally responsible for their children).⁵ A century earlier, Bavinck recognized similar facts: “Nature cannot be changed which places on the woman the burden of motherhood and obligates her to care for the child for some time after birth.”⁶ No matter what changes occur in society, the nature of the human species remains the same, and that due to the constitution of women, they have a unique vocation related to child-bearing.

Women bear children. This is not the only thing they do, of course. And there are many other callings they can pursue and good that they can contribute to this world. However, there is something fundamental about the constitution of a woman, about the form of the female, that foregrounds this vocation. My friend Alastair Roberts puts it this way:

Every woman, by virtue of her sex — irrespective of whether she is married or has children — is the bearer of a maternal form of identity. The very form and basic processes of her body declares this meaning and everything that she does and is . . . inflected and elevated by the fact that she represents this reality. . . . It is within her body that the child grows and upon her body that it feeds.⁷

Think back to the Garden of Eden. Many assume that the thing described in Genesis 2 as “not good” regarding Adam’s solitude was his lack of companionship. While that may be a part of it, he was also incapable on his own of fulfilling the cultural mandate given in Genesis 1 — to “fill” the earth. He probably observed the sexual complementarity essential to reproduction (in most creatures) while naming all of the animals. Yet none complemented him in this way. Until Eve — the mother of the living. And her punishment in Genesis 3 is not a general human punishment, but related to her constitution as a woman, as a mother and wife. As Bavinck interprets this, “that which was to have been a wife’s greatest delight would become her greatest pain. From this time forward, she cannot fulfill her calling apart from leading a life of continual physical and spiritual pain.” And yet, she cannot desert this calling nor liberate herself from it, for she remains a woman. And, in fact, there is a promise beneath the curses she receives: humanity will be saved through the seed of the woman. One of her eventual seeds, Mary, will bear the saving seed, Jesus.

The capacity to bear children is a great gift and task that is unique to women. They bear an asymmetrical burden in this essential human activity.

ENCOURAGING FEMININITY

How does this relate to courage?

A while back I texted my very pregnant wife a message that confused her: “I’m so proud of you for being brave with this baby.” She did not understand why I was calling her “brave.”

I think this reflects a serious problem in our society more broadly. We do not honor the sacrifices women make in child-bearing, the courage they exhibit in facing disproportionate dangers so that the human species continues. Why do we fail to see this as courage?

The classical Christian analysis of this cardinal virtue is found in Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*.⁸ There Thomas defines courage (or, “fortitude”) as the virtue that prevents reason from being overcome by bodily pain. It strengthens one in pursuit of the good in the face of dangers, especially those dangers that can lead to death. But Thomas focuses chiefly on the dangers of battle.⁹ He mentions other dangers that could lead to death like sickness, storms at sea, attacks from robbers, and so forth; but he says that these do not relate as directly to courage because they don’t seem to come upon a man in his pursuit of some good. It is in battle, chiefly, that such dangers come to man directly on account of a good to be defended. Thomas does concede that courage can apply to some forms of personal and civil business that, while not war, do incur the threat of death. But never does he mention the great ordeal that regularly brings women near death in giving birth.¹⁰ There is clearly a good pursued here (i.e., the life of a child), or even “defended” against pressures to abort in our day. I see no reason to neglect extending this virtue to apply to bearing children. The choice to seek pregnancy or keep the child no matter how it was conceived is a choice driven by self-sacrificing love. And Augustine, in *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, defines courage as “love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object.”¹¹ If this doesn’t apply to carrying and birthing a child, I

¹Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman (Christian’s Library Press, 2012), 25.

²This essay was originally published under the title “Notes on the Way” in *Time and Tide*, Vol. XXIX (August 14, 1948). It was subsequently reprinted under the title “Priestesses in the Church?” in the posthumous book *God in the Dock*, published by Eerdmans.

³See Mary Harrington, “Reactionary Feminism,” in *First Things* (June 2021); Erika Bachiochi, “Sex-Realist Feminism,” in *First Things* (April 2023).

⁴These ideas are worked out in Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender* (Ignatius Press, 2022).

⁵See Erika Bachiochi, “Women, Sexual Asymmetry, and Catholic Teaching,” *Christian Bioethics: Non-Ecumenical Studies in Medical Morality* 19.2 (August 2013): 150-171.

⁶Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 138.

⁷Alastair Roberts, “Why a Masculine Priesthood is Essential,” *Alastair’s Adversaria* (August 30, 2014), <https://alastairadversaria.com/2014/08/30/why-a-masculine-priesthood-is-essential/>.

⁸Thomas discusses the cardinal virtue of fortitude in II-II, Question 123.

⁹See II-II, Question 123, Article 5.

¹⁰In a later section (II-II, Question 139, Article 1) Thomas does expand his presentation of fortitude to cover other dangers, and any difficult work. However, this comes only in his discussion of the “gifts” of the Holy Spirit, and thus this does not refer to all persons, whereas cardinal virtues do. The argument in this essay is that courage applies to women broadly who bear children, not just Christian women.

¹¹Augustine, *On The Morals of the Catholic Church*, chapter 15. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1401.htm>.



don't know what does. To bear a child is to brave dangers out of love.

Think even of those women who not only face the pain and dangers of delivery, but also the worries, stigma, or shame associated with some pregnancies resulting from non-traditional conditions. For instance, consider women who bravely bring a baby into this world knowing the father will not be there to care. Maybe in some traditional circles a young woman has sex before marriage and conceives, and faces social disgrace. While the sexual act in this scenario is sinful, terminating the pregnancy is to add another sin — one that directly kills. It is courageous for a woman in such a scenario to carry this life — doubly so if the pregnancy resulted from a form of sexual attack. Our communities should encourage such women in their sacrifice and help however we can. These young women in such trying circumstances should find inspiration in another young woman who braved stigma as a result of a non-traditional pregnancy: Eve's antitype — Mary.

While Protestants refuse to refer to her as co-redemptrix, Mary's courage was certainly key in the birth of the saving seed.

As professor Angela Knobel (University of Dallas) remarks,¹² there are lots of feminists who present the disproportionate burdens placed by society on women with regard to childbearing as unjust. But it is clear that this asymmetrical burden is not just the product of society, but of nature. And, Knobel explains, we need not understand such burdens in a negative way. Life's greatest and most vital undertakings are burdensome. Almost anything worth something is costly. And "when only a select group of people are capable of bearing a vitally important burden, we do not see any injustice in asking them to bear it." For example, she mentions the expectations we place on young men to defend the nation in battle. We tend to see those who are asked to bear disproportionate burdens for others not as slaves or drudges, but as heroes. The problem, Knobel argues, is that today we don't tend to view childbearing as a heroic task.

Women are pressured in all sorts of ways to pursue anything other than being "just a mother." As if bringing life into the world and caring for children is not one of the highest possible vocations imaginable — one upon which the future of civilization and humanity itself fundamentally depends. Commercial spaces commonly treat large families as an annoyance, and companies tend to treat the pregnancies of their employees similarly. What if we developed a cultural ecosystem that was friendly to families¹³ and treated women who bear children as the heroes they are? Pregnant women take on a task that is vitally important to humanity, and one that is difficult, painful, and even dangerous. And yes, it is a type of sacrifice. Not

only does it take a toll on a woman's body, it also takes them out of other labor they could be pursuing. They likely have to pause other tasks for which they are qualified and passionate.

Pregnant women who carry their children to term and bring life into this world are heroes. We should treat them as such. This might go a long way in resisting the feminist forces that seek to elevate women by making them like men, and thereby ironically erasing feminine glory. Bearing

children is not all women are called to; but it is a fundamentally feminine task upon which the human race depends. It is costly. It is courageous. Thank you, all you strong women. ✕

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¹² These comments are from her lecture for the Thomistic Institute podcast, titled "Can a Feminist Be Pro-Life?" The recording can be found here: <https://podcast.thomisticinstitute.org/can-a-feminist-be-pro-life-prof-angela-knobel/>.

¹³ See Tim Carney, *Family Unfriendly: How Our Culture Made Raising Kids Much Harder Than It Needs to Be* (HarperCollins, 2024).

Innate Differences Between Men and Women, Sexuality, and Christian Ethics

Defining male and a female has become difficult for educated people. On March 23, 2022, the United States Senate was holding confirmation hearings for President Joe Biden's nominee to the Supreme Court, Judge Ketanji Jackson. Tennessee Senator Marsha Blackburn asked Judge Jackson, "Can you provide a definition for the word 'woman'?" To which Jackson said, "Can I provide a definition? No." She added, "I'm not a biologist."¹ Many have noted that a good follow-up question would have been, "Judge Jackson, are you a woman?" Jackson was confirmed by the Senate and is now a Supreme Court Justice. She has both her undergraduate and law degrees from Harvard, and yet she still does not know how to define "woman." Contrary to Justice Jackson, the gender binary is clearly defined by innate differenc-

es between males and females, and these differences point to the profound importance of Christian sexual ethics.

Males and females are identified by innate differences. Males have one X and one Y sex chromosome, while females have two X sex chromosomes. Males have genitalia and external reproductive organs consistent with males, while females have genitalia and internal reproductive organs consistent with females. During puberty, males and females develop separate secondary sex characteristics.²

These innate differences between males and females were created by God for the purpose of glorifying himself through all people. Genesis 1:27 declares, "God created man in his own image, in the image of

God he created him; male and female he created them." The threefold repetition of the verb "create" amplifies God's activity in designing the sexual binary. Some suggest Genesis 1:27 is possibly an embedded poem within the creation account, with lines one and two in chiasmic arrangement and the last line as an explication.³ Such an arrangement accentuates the importance of sexual differentiation and identity for God's image bearers. Oliver O'Donovan explains, "One can express the Christian perspective like this: the either-or of biological maleness and femaleness to which the human race is bound is not a meaningless or oppressive condition of nature; it is the good gift of God, because it gives rise to possibilities of relationship in which the polarities of masculine and feminine, more subtly nuanced than the biological differentiation, can play a decisive part."⁴

The binary of male and female is the essential starting point for understanding God's purposes for sex. Much modern confusion regarding sexual ethics flows from faulty notions of human origins. From a secular and naturalistic perspective, the binary of male and female is a direct product of evolution by natural selection; the struggle for reproductive success drives males and females down different evolutionary paths.⁵ From this perspective, if gender differences have no transcendent purpose, then the sexual choices we make have no ultimate purpose either. Helmut Thielicke saw the flaws of this view and said, "He who no longer knows what man is, also cannot know what it is on which his peculiarity as a sexual being is based."⁶ Indeed, our culture no longer knows what it means to be human in general, or male or female in particular. With human origins

left to random time and chance, one's sexual ethics become just as random.

Avant-garde sexual ethics are welded to the progressive bifurcation of sex and gender into separate ontological categories; sex is used in reference to biological differences, while gender refers to the continuum of complex psychosocial self-perceptions, attitudes, and expectations people have about members of both sexes, behavior, lifestyle, and life experience.⁷

A clever modernist will grant the Christian insistence on the biological binary between male and female, but then argue that one's subjective gender identity is a completely separate matter with no necessary connection to one's own body. And separating one's subjective identity from one's embodied reality results not only in psychological dissonance but profound confusion regarding sexual ethics. If gender identity is divorced from concrete reality, then sexual ethics become subjective and divorced from God's moral boundaries.

Scripture does not bifurcate sex and gender. The uniform witness of Scripture is that a person should conform his or her gender expression to the body. Specifically, Christian sexual ethics are grounded in the design God has for the body, a point central to Paul's critique of homosexuality in Romans 1:24–27. In this passage, Paul uses the words for male and female taken from the LXX of Genesis 1:27, a point certainly not lost on his original audience. Sexual ethics cannot be bifurcated from the design of the body; neither our own self-chosen gender identity nor our own autonomous sexual ethics are to be super-

¹ Myah Ward, "Blackburn to Jackson: Can You Define 'the Word Woman'?" *Politico*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/22/blackburn-jackson-define-the-word-woman-00019543>.

² It is not my purpose here to address disorders of sexual development.

³ Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1 – 11:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1a (Nashville: Broadman, 1996), 173.

⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, *Grove Booklet on Ethics*, no. 48 (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1982), 7.

⁵ Northern Arizona University, "Sexual Dimorphism," <https://www2.nau.edu/~gaud/bio300b/sexdi.htm>.

⁶ Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, John W. Doberstein, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 20. Thielicke used many of the same interpretations of Genesis 1–3 which egalitarians use today (and which I reject), but he is strong at this one specific point.

⁷ Chiara Reale, Federica Invernizzi, Celeste Panteghini, and Barbara Garavaglia, "Genetics, Sex, and Gender," *Journal of Neuroscience Research* 101.5 (2023): 553–562.

Denial of the gender binary encourages misogyny.

imposed on our bodies. Instead, we surrender to God's design for our bodies in both areas.

Secularists who reject the gender binary insist gender itself is merely a social construct. *Social construction* is an epistemological theory which claims that characteristics typically thought to be immutable and solely biological — such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality—are products of human definition and interpretation shaped by cultural and historical contexts.⁸ Social Constructionism rejects the biblical concept of innate differences between males and females and contends that the categories of “man and woman” are created, modified, and replicated through institutions like the church to advance male privilege. For instance, feminist Shulamith Firestone argued that overturning these social constructs was central to ending male privilege and insisted “the end goal of feminist revolution must be . . . not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.”⁹

But innate differences between males and females do exist, and these differences profoundly matter because God designed them. Denial of the gender binary en-

courages misogyny. Why? Because the same worldview that denies essential differences between men and women denies essential boundaries for sexual ethics. When the Creator is abandoned, sexual ethics becomes “red, tooth and claw,” and women become prey for predatory men. The innate differences between men and women matter because they are real and cannot be easily swept away by wishing that things were different. ✕

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⁸ Miliann Kang, Donovan Lessard, Laura Heston, and Sonny Nordmarken, *Introduction to Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Libraries, 2017), 35.

⁹ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003; 1970), 11.

JONATHON WOODYARD

Revisiting Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism

Several years ago, a debate surrounding the inner workings of the Trinity erupted. One theologian whose views were in the crosshairs was Wayne Grudem, recently retired distinguished research professor of theology and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary.¹ Through his voluminous writings and decades of lectures, Grudem has significantly influenced the evangelical theological landscape. His most popular work, *Systematic Theology*,² has gone through multiple editions and

sold more than 500,000 copies.³

In 2016, however, Grudem's explanation of the Trinity in reference to the eternal relationship of the divine persons, specifically the Father and the Son, came under fire from other Protestant theologians.⁴ Though filled with complexities, Grudem has consistently explained that he believes in ontological equality within the Trinity. That is, within the nature of the Trinity, all persons are equal in essence. Func-

¹ Dr. Grudem earned his PhD at Cambridge University and subsequently taught at several institutions during his career. This includes teaching posts at Bethel University in St. Paul, MN and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. In addition, he has served as the President of the Evangelical Theological Society (1999), as well as the General Editor for the *ESV Study Bible* from Crossway.

² Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020).

³ According to waynegrudem.com, “[*Systematic Theology*] has sold over 500,000 copies and has been translated into fifteen other languages, with at least four more foreign translations now in process.” (<https://www.waynegrudem.com/systematic-theology>).

⁴ The debate over “eternal functional subordination” (EFS) or “eternal subordination of the Son” (ESS) was at a fever pitch in 2016. Liam Golligher and Carl Trueman, two Presbyterian theologians, challenged both Bruce Ware (systematic theology professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) and Wayne Grudem. Both Ware and Grudem maintained that the Son was eternally subordinate to the Father, but only in terms of function. In terms of essence, the Father and Son were both equally divine. The controversy continues today, and it seems the views of Grudem and Ware have become the minority position. To read more on the debate, read this summary by Michael Ricardi from The Master's Seminary: “The Recent Trinitarian Debate” *The Master's Seminary Blog* (June 15, 2016), <https://blog.tms.edu/recent-trinitarian-debate>.



tionally, however, the Son submits to the Father and always has (thus, *eternal subordination*). For years, some theologians and pastors have found this to be a helpful explanation of the Trinitarian relationship and used such arguments to undergird their complementarian theology. That is, men and women are equally created in the image of God and are of equal value and worth (just like the Father and Son are equal in divinity). Yet, women are called to submit to the leadership of their (male) husbands and to their (male) elders (like the Son submits to the Father).

As critics have taken Grudem's trinitarian theology to task and offered a corrective that many have found convincing, some pastors and theologians have decided to cast Grudem aside altogether. But this is

a mistake. Grudem is not perfect, but his many writings are still helpful today. Pastors and professors alike would find his work on various subjects a real help to them in their ministries.

One of the areas of theology that Grudem has spent a lot of time addressing is that of manhood and womanhood.⁵ Specifically, he has written extensively on the topic of egalitarianism and complementarianism. For more than fifty years, Grudem has contributed journal articles, lectures, and book-length treatments on God's design for men and women in the church, home, and world. His books, despite some areas of warranted criticism, are still worth reading today as Christians aim to practice biblical manhood and womanhood.⁶

⁵ Grudem is one of the founders of The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) and helped coin the term "complementarianism" in the 1980s.

⁶ Other than the book under consideration in this article, there are a number of books written or edited by Grudem worth

One of the books he has written in this vein is *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism*. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says this book "represents one of the most insightful and courageous theological works of our time." Mohler is correct. This book was important in 2006 when originally published and remains important today as evangelical feminism continues to plague the church.

In *Evangelical Feminism*, Grudem shows how evangelical feminist arguments undermine the authority of Scripture. Indeed, this is Grudem's overarching concern. Nothing less than the trustworthiness and authority of the Bible is at stake. In Grudem's view, the tactics evangelical feminists employ to make their case for egalitarianism end up "undermining the authority of Scripture" (11). This will, in Grudem's estimation, lead churches and Christians down the path of liberalism. The stakes, then, are high. Given the weight of the debate, evangelical feminists and their approach to the Bible should not be ignored. For Grudem, what is true and, therefore, what is demanded of Christians hangs in the balance.

While addressing evangelical feminist arguments, Grudem does not imply that every evangelical feminist is a theological liberal. That is, not every egalitarian "denies the complete truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God and denies the unique and absolute authority of the Bi-

ble in our lives" (15).⁷ Some egalitarians have made feminist arguments and resisted the slide into liberalism. But Grudem tries to show "that the *arguments* used by egalitarians actually undermine the authority of Scripture again and again, and in so doing they are leading the church step by step toward liberalism" (262). So not every egalitarian has succumbed to liberalism, but only by the grace of God and in spite of their own arguments.

This refrain fills the pages of the book. Grudem shows chapter-by-chapter how evangelical feminist arguments weaken biblical authority and hurt the church. To make his case, Grudem divides the book into four parts. The first part of the book introduces the subject matter ahead, while the second chapter unpacks history. This second chapter is particularly important in our current cultural moment. The moment we are living in now (2024) connects with the feminist moment when Grudem wrote the book (2006). There is an egalitarian posture that pervades society in the West. Males and females are often seen as interchangeable.⁸ Whatever a man can do, a woman can do (and probably better!). A case in point: the US government is currently debating the idea that both men *and women* should register for selective service.⁹ The #MeToo movement, the portrayal of men as bumbling fools on television (think Ray in *Everybody Loves Raymond*), and the rise of the female superhero (e.g., Marvel, Black Widow)¹⁰ all reflect a feminist culture. In 2020, Pew Research reported that 61% of

reading on this subject. See John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006); Wayne A. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). In addition to these books, Grudem has written dozens of articles that address key questions and debates, some of which can be found at waynegrudem.com.

⁷ This is how Grudem defines a theological liberal in his book: a theological liberal "denies the complete truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God and denies the unique and absolute authority of the Bible in our lives" (15).

⁸ For a corrective, see Doug Ponder, "Egalitarians and the State of Christianity Today," *American Reformer* (April 5, 2024), <https://americanreformer.org/2024/04/different-from-and-different-for>.

⁹ Some have reported that congress had already passed this bill. It seems, however, that the bill is being debated. Ted Barrett, "Top GOP senator on Armed Services Committee opposes proposed changes to military draft registration and having women drafted," CNN (June 19, 2024), <https://www.cnn.com/2024/06/19/politics/roger-wicker-opposes-military-draft-changes/index.html>.

¹⁰ "We are really seeing the effect of women demanding characters who are more relatable," says Linda Mizejewski, Distinguished Professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State. "We're seeing the effect of feminism in the media, and

women identify as feminists, while the majority of the population in America believes feminism has resulted in positive outcomes.¹¹ Within the church, the rise of female pastors and women preaching in evangelical churches has been well documented and supports the assertion that we live in an egalitarian moment.¹²

Grudem stepped into his own egalitarian moment in 2006 and tried to show the historical connection between egalitarianism and theological liberalism. To show this pattern, he begins by noting what year certain liberal denominations began ordaining women. He lists the Methodist Church (1956), PCUSA (1956 [north] and 1964 [south]), the American Lutheran Church (1970), Lutheran Church in America (1970), and the Episcopal Church (1976). Today, the leadership in these denominations is “dominated by theological liberals” (24). Again, Grudem explicitly notes that not every egalitarian is a liberal. Yet, the historical connection is undeniable. Liberalism and egalitarianism are joined at the hip. As Grudem writes, “it is unquestionable that theological liberalism leads to the endorsement of women’s ordination. While not all egalitarians are liberals, all liberals are egalitarians. There is no theologically liberal denomination or seminary in the United States today that opposes women’s ordination” (29). This historical connection should serve as a warning to every evangelical. The slippery slope, while often derided as a logical fallacy, seems to be slippery.¹³

In sections two and three, Grudem begins to deal with the arguments of evangelical feminists. In section two, Grudem addresses fifteen arguments that either “deny the complete *truthfulness* of Scripture or deny the full *authority* of Scripture as the Word of God for us today” (33). For example, in chapter three Grudem takes on the view of Rebecca Groothuis. Groothuis, a popular egalitarian author, argues that the language of the Old Testament simply reflected a “patriarchal culture.” This, however, according to Groothuis, “says nothing about God’s view of gender” (36). Yet, as Grudem carefully shows, “to say that these *words of the Bible* have a ‘patriarchal meaning’ that God did not intend, and in fact to say that these *words of the Bible* tell us ‘nothing about God’s view of gender,’ is simply to deny the authority of this part of Scripture” (36). Grudem takes on such approaches to Scripture and consistently shows how the arguments are not supported by historical evidence, are not faithful to the Bible, and are riddled with logical inconsistencies.

In the third section of the book, Grudem moves away from dealing with arguments that directly deny the authority of the Bible to writing ten chapters that look at how evangelical feminists use arguments that introduce “untruthful or unsubstantiated claims about what certain words in the Bible ‘really mean,’ or about some historical facts that change our understanding of the situation to which a book of the Bible was written” (153). That is, if you simply understood the historical



situation or had a more thorough knowledge of the semantic range of words, the egalitarian reading would make sense. As Grudem will show, the problem with these arguments is that there is “*no proof*” to support them (157).

For example, some evangelical feminists assert that the reason Paul did not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Tim 2:12) is because the female residents of Ephesus were uneducated. Therefore, they lacked the qualifications needed to teach God’s people. Gilbert Bilezikian makes such an argument in his book, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says About a Woman’s Place in Church and Family*.¹⁴ Grudem, however, cites the work of S. M. Baugh to show that these arguments are not supported by the available historical evidence. In addition, Grudem convincingly demonstrates that

the available biblical evidence actually repudiates the egalitarian argument.¹⁵ For instance, according to Grudem, “the Bible never requires advanced degrees for people who teach God’s Word or have governing authority in the church” (174). Furthermore, “the New Testament shows several women who had a considerable level of understanding of Scripture” (175). Consider Priscilla and Aquila. These two went with Paul to Ephesus (Acts 18:18–19) and “explained [to Apollos] the way of God more accurately” (18:26). Grudem concludes, “So in A. D. 51 Priscilla knew Scripture well enough to help instruct Apollos...[yet] Not even well-educated Priscilla, nor any other well-educated women of Ephesus who followed her example and listened to Paul’s teaching for several years, were allowed to teach men in the public assembly of the church” (176). These ten

more opportunities for women in filmmaking, such as Patty Jenkins, who directed ‘Wonder Woman.’ All those things are happening together.” “The Rise of the Female Superhero,” Ohio State Impact (June 1, 2021) <https://www.osu.edu/impact/arts-and-creativity/mizejewski-female-superhero>. See Greg Morse, “Behold Your Queen: The Real Conflict in Captain Marvel,” *Desiring God* (March 11, 2019), <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/behold-your-queen>.

¹¹ Amanda Barroso, “61% of U.S. women say ‘feminist’ describes them well; many see feminism as empowering, polarizing,” Pew Research Center (July 7, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/07/61-of-u-s-women-say-feminist-describes-them-well-many-see-feminism-as-empowering-polarizing>.

¹² Kevin McClure, “How many female pastors are there in the SBC?” *American Reformer* (June 10, 2023), <https://americanreformer.org/2023/06/how-many-female-pastors-are-in-the-sbc>.

¹³ It is worth noting that a slippery slope argument does not seem to be an automatic fallacy. If the premises are more plausible than not, then the argument has merit. For a good explanation, see Patricia Engler, “Logical Fallacies: Slippery Slope Arguments,” *Answers in Genesis* (February 10, 2021), <https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/patricia-engler/2021/02/10/logical-fallacies-slippery-slope-arguments>.

¹⁴ Gilbert G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman’s Place in Church and Family*, 3rd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

¹⁵ See S. M. Baugh, “A Foreign World: Ephesus in the First Century,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995).

chapters, then, effectively challenge the idea that there is “a special background situation” or some obscure meaning of a word that ends up supporting an evangelical feminist reading of the Bible.

Sections two and three of the book comprise twenty five chapters that offer devastating rebuttals to evangelical feminists claims. These chapters are well researched, displaying an impressive grasp of the available literature on the topics at hand. Whether or not a person agrees with Grudem, if you pay attention to the footnotes you’ll have a better grasp of the corpus one could read in order to be acquainted with the larger conversation. These chapters are also filled with biblical exegesis, are historically astute, and rigorously logical. In short, what Grudem has produced in *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism* continues to offer Christians a valuable resource in understanding God’s design for manhood and womanhood while challenging the prevailing feminist winds.

Are there things to critique in the book? Of course. I think Grudem’s use of the Trinity is misguided. I do not believe the concept of the eternal submission of the Son to the Father is the correct way to talk about the Trinity. Yet, Grudem does not appeal to the Trinity to support every argument. His work, in other words, does not stand or fall on *EFS* — contrary to the claims of his egalitarian critics. For example, though his view of the Trinity is found at a few other points in the book, he devotes only one chapter to *eternal functional subordination*. Outside that specific chapter, Grudem does not often mention the Trinity. In his chapter dealing with education and Ephesus, for instance, the function of the Trinity is not mentioned at all.

Again, in my opinion, *EFS* is not the most faithful description of trinitarian relations. Yet, I do not think Grudem is a heretic. This important part of his work

may be off base, but it does not mean the whole of his work should be cast aside. In fact, if you take out every reference to *EFS* in this specific book, you will still find the book effectively challenges the arguments so often used by egalitarian authors.

Therefore, I believe we can read Grudem’s work with a discerning eye (as we should with any author), test what we read like good Bereans, take what is good, and discard the rest. And it is my belief that there is much good in Grudem’s *Evangelical Feminism*. It remains a relevant and helpful work of our own day and age where the feminist impulse and egalitarian moment is alive and well. ✕

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JENS BRUUN KOFOED

Sex, Gender, and Identity in Pastoral Counseling

INTRODUCTION

Why do we not put adulterers to death anymore as prescribed in, for example, Leviticus 20:10–16? And since we do not, why insist, then, on the enduring importance of the *prohibitions* on adultery, incest, homosexual practice, cross-dressing, bestiality, and other forms of promiscuity in Old Testament law? And has it any bearing on our pastoral guidance on sexual ethics, that ancient Israel’s land became unclean and caused the Lord to bring punishment for its iniquity upon it, so that the land vomited out its inhabitants (Lev 18:24–30)?

The short answer for Christians with a high view on the Bible is that these prohibitions are repeated in the New Testament (Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10), and that the land of ancient Israel prefigures the world in which a New Testament Christian lives.

At the same time, we know all too well



that such a view on gender and sexuality is like a red flag to a bull in the face of the cancel culture that pervades Western societies. For social constructivism in general and queer ideology in particular, it is common to consider what the Bible says about gender identity and sexual orientation as irrelevant, or, if given attention, as norms that should be canceled. And since many Christians, including Christian churches and entire denominations, give in to the pressure, pastors with a calling to preach, teach, and counsel on sexual ethics based on Scripture find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

Christians who cancel the binding application of passages on binary gender and sexual ethics for Christians generally follow one of two hermeneutical strategies. The first attempts to demonstrate that the biblical texts do not exclude multiple genders and do not address modern consensual same-sex relationships, but instead cultic prostitution, homosexual practice with one's social inferior, and pederasty. The second strategy involves acknowledging a binary, heterosexual perspective in certain biblical texts, but then setting them aside or subordinating them to other texts deemed more significant. In this latter view, it is not the rejection of non-binary gender identity and same-sex relationships in the biblical texts that are denied, but rather their *authority*. It is typically argued that, since Christ nailed all of these laws and ordinances to the cross, canceling their debt, they are not binding for Christians (Col 2:14–16); and that, since Christians are no longer under the law, there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female — for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

The purpose of this paper is not to go through the biblical arguments against these hermeneutical strategies, but to demonstrate that, though there are relatively few passages that address gender identity and sexual ethics, they are found

tionally embedded in creation theology, and that the force of these admittedly few passages comes not from Moses' and Paul's time-bound prohibitions against Canaanite and Greek practices, but from the created order itself. The ethical principles behind the Mosaic laws are embedded in the same creation theology on which the New Testament's sexual ethics is based, thus demonstrating that there is an organic connection between Old Testament creation theology, the ethical guidance of Mosaic law, and the New Testament's approach to gender and sexual ethics.

THE CREATED ORDER

Before we delve into the *embeddedness* of these passages in creation theology, an outline of the *creation theology* in which they are embedded is in order. Much more could be said about this, of course, but since the primary purpose is to focus on the *embeddedness*, a brief sketch must suffice.

Genesis 1 and 2 teach us that humanity must be appreciated and received as a relational, embodied, and binary gift. This formulation is deliberate. The adjectives “relational,” “embodied,” and “binary” qualify the most important term, “gift,” emphasizing that life is a gift or, put slightly differently, a *given*. This description underscores both the fundamental value of human beings as positively willed by God and the necessity for humans to understand themselves as a *given*, specifically given to reflect the relationship within God, i.e., the image of God, through their embodied binarity. “God is Spirit” (John 4:24), as John reminds us, and Paul, in a similar manner, describes him as “invisible” (Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17). Nevertheless, God decided to create man as his *physical* representation in creation.

Man as a physical representation of God
When in Genesis 1:26 it says, “Let us make man in our image (צלמ), after our likeness (דמות),” both “visibility” and “corporeality” are part of the semantic fields of צלמ,

“image,” and דמות, “likeness.” The former denotes a physical, carved, or sculpted statue or copy of something metaphysical and is used in biblical Hebrew to describe various idols (e.g., 2 Kgs 11:18). When applied to God and humanity in Genesis 1:26–27, it should be understood, as Marc Cortez formulates it, as “a declaration that God intended to create human persons to be the physical means through which he would manifest his own divine presence in the world.”¹ Our bodies are, in other words, tangible symbols or indicators of a divine mystery: As John Paul II phrases it: “The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.”² The body simply testifies to who I am, and without my body, Carl Trueman argues, it would be impossible to demonstrate that I am me:

[My body] is perhaps the foundational piece of evidence that, were I to claim that I am, for example, Attila the Hun or Nancy Pelosi, I would be talking nonsense, with my body as Exhibit A in the case for the prosecution. It is not simply instrumental to my identity; my identity is inseparable from it. To downgrade it to a mere incidental, or to set the real me in opposition to it, is a recipe for chaos.³

Man and woman as a physical representation of the Godhead

Another principle behind the biblical understanding of the relationship between gender, body, and sexuality is related to the boundary-drawing or limits in creation. The creation account in Genesis 1 describes the first act of creation as well-organized, well-structured, and well-ordered. This is

achieved through the quantitative use of the number seven to separate the six days of creation from the seventh day of rest and the qualitative use of the same number to symbolize the perfect result. Furthermore, the narrative repeatedly describes creation in binary terms, where an original whole is separated and given names, and both separation and naming serve to delineate and identify the new, independent parts. This applies to light and darkness (vv. 3–4), heaven and sea (vv. 6–7), sea and dry land (vv. 9–10), the creation of animals in different “kinds” (v. 21), the distinction between humans and animals, and thus also the binary creation of humans as male and female (vv. 26–27).

Masculinity and femininity are, as it were, two different “incarnations,” that is, two ways in which the same human being, created “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27), is a body. And this *combined* body of masculinity and femininity is designed by God to participate in and reflect the divine plan for human love and communion, particularly within the context of marriage. It underscores the idea that the body is meant for self-giving love and free mutual fulfillment in interpersonal relationships, echoing the biblical imagery of marriage as a union of one flesh. As John Paul II puts it,

The human body, with its sex – its masculinity and femininity – seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and of procreation, as in the whole natural order, but contains ‘from the beginning’ the ‘spousal’ attribute, that is, the *power to express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift* and – through this gift – fulfills the very meaning of his being.⁴

Seen as a mutual gift, the union of sexu-

¹ Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 109.

² John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 19:4.

³ Trueman, ‘The Triumph of the Social Scientific Method,’ *First Things* 6:15.20. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/06/the-triumph-of-the-social-scientific-method>.

⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 15:1.

ally differentiated human bodies in marriage is a profound expression of the image of God as the perfect giver and life as the ultimate gift. For the same reason, marriage is teleological in the sense that it refers back to the original *telos* of God's gift of life in original creation but also, due to the fall, forward to the gift of new and everlasting life through incarnation and consummation. Christopher West, in a most helpful presentation of John Paul II's theology of the body, writes that the "giving" is both eternally *internal* to God and relationally external in creation: "Within the Trinity, the Father eternally 'begets' the Son by *giving himself* to and for the Son. In turn, the Son (the 'beloved of the Father') eternally receives the love of the Father and eternally gives himself back to the Father. The love they share *is* the Holy Spirit, who 'proceeds from the Father and the Son' (Nicene Creed)."⁵

Creation of man in *this* image means, specifically, that man in marriage is called to reflect God's internal "giving" and "creating." By complementing each other, "in the normal course of events, their reciprocal 'giving' enables sperm and ovum to meet, and a 'third' comes into existence."⁶

OLD TESTAMENT LAW AS A NORMATIVE UNIVERSE

To illustrate the significance of creation theology for a biblical sexual ethic, we will briefly examine a paradigm shift that occurred a few decades ago within legal theory.⁷ In his influential essay "Nomos and Narrative" from 1983, the late legal scholar Robert Cover of Yale University contended that, instead of regarding law solely as a system of rules imposed by a sovereign, it

is more apt to conceptualize law as a normative universe, a "*nomos*," wherein "we constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong, of lawful and unlawful, of valid and void"⁸ This understanding of law represents a significant departure from traditional perspectives on law — not as a collection of institutional rules and principles, not as a series of policies and mechanisms for social control, but rather as a narrative prism through which we perceive and filter the realms of right and wrong, valid and void, good and bad. From this standpoint, law is most accurately characterized not as a rigid system but rather as an exceptionally rich and adaptable set of resources for all aspects of the normative life of individuals and communities. It contends that neither law nor legal institutions can be comprehended in isolation from the narrative in which they are immersed:

For every constitution there is an epic, for each decalogue a scripture. Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live. In this normative world, law and narrative are inseparably related. Every prescription is insistent in its demand to be located in discourse — to be supplied with history and destiny, beginning and end, explanation and purpose. And every narrative is insistent in its demand for its prescriptive point, its moral. History and literature cannot escape their location in a normative universe, nor can prescription, even when embodied in a legal text, escape its origin and its end in experience, in the narratives that are the trajectories

plotted upon material reality by our imaginations.⁹

Cover's essay was of landmark importance as it pioneered a new field of research, offering a fresh perspective on the interplay between law and narrative. In Old Testament research it is represented by Richard Averbeck, who has demonstrated that the law given at Sinai begins and ends with the native Hebrew indentured servant and the release law in light of the Lord's liberation from slavery in Egypt. The liberation from slavery in Egypt is mentioned as the entire premise for the Law in the first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2). And the non-cultic regulations in the Book of the Covenant commence with provisions on debt slavery and release: "Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing" (Exod 21:2–11). Similarly, the Law given at Sinai concludes with the same subject (Lev 25:39–43, 47–55), again emphasizing the liberation from slavery in Egypt as the entire premise for the Law (Lev 25:38, 42–43, 55):

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God. If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. For they are my servants, whom I brought out

of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God (Lev 25:38–44).

For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (Lev 25:55).

This is the fundamental historical fact and theological rationale underlying the entire covenant and the law embedded therein. God had set his people free, so he is their God, and they are his people (Lev 25:55–26:1).¹⁰

God's free and unforced creation of Israel through liberation from slavery is itself embedded, however, in the larger narrative of God's universal creation and recreation.

In Deuteronomy 4, God's leading Israel "out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt" (4:20) is described as God's greatest act "since the day God created (ברא) man on the earth" (4:32), and there are several reasons also to view the Holiness Code in Leviticus in light of the creation in Genesis 1 and 2.

The prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 appear as a specific elaboration of the prohibition of adultery in the Decalogue in Exodus 20, and references to the creation account in the introduction to the covenant-making narrative in Exodus 19–24 abound. The fruitfulness (פורה) and multiplication (רבה) of the Israelites in Exodus 1:7 clearly echoes the functional explanation of the image of God in Genesis 1:28, the plagues narrative is full of polemics against Egyptian belief in creation, and there are several echoes of creation in the

⁵ Christopher West and Eric Metaxas, *Our Bodies Tell God's Story: Discovering the Divine Plan for Love, Sex, and Gender* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 34–35.

⁶ West and Metaxas, *Our Bodies*, 39.

⁷ The following is to a large extent a paraphrase of different sections from the essay "Encoding and Decoding Culture," in Daniel I. Block, David C. Deuel, John Collins, and Paul J. N. Lawrence (eds.), *Write That They May Read: Studies in Literacy and Textualization in the Ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Scriptures: Essays in Honour of Professor Alan R. Millard* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 243–244.

⁸ Robert Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term - Foreword: Nomos and Narrative," *Harvard Law Review* 97:4 (1983): 4.

⁹ Robert Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term - Foreword: Nomos and Narrative," *Harvard Law Review* 97:4 (1983): 4–5.

¹⁰ Richard E. Averbeck, "The Egyptian Sojourn and Deliverance from Slavery in the Framing and Shaping of Mosaic Law," in Richard E. Averbeck, James K. Hoffmeier, Alan R. Millard, and Gary A. Rendsburg (eds.), *"Did I not Bring Israel Out of Egypt?" Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016): 169–170.

account of the parting of the waters of the Red Sea in Exodus 14. Also, the reason for observing the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8–11 is provided with a reference to God’s rest on the seventh day in the creation account (Gen 2:1–3), and the parallel between the rest after the creation of heaven and earth and the creation of Israel is evident from the rationale for observing the Sabbath day in Deuteronomy 5:15, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. *Therefore* [italics added] the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” And though different words — פסל (“idol, image”) and תמונה (“likeness, form”) — are used in Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 5:8 to ban the production (לא תעשה) of carved images, the reason behind the prohibitions must be seen in the light of God’s creation of *man* in God’s צלם (“image”) and דמות (“likeness”). What God had already created should not, in other words, be re-created by those who were the created images themselves.

Furthermore, there are several more subtle links between the creation account in Genesis 1 and the creation of Israel in Exodus 19–24. In rabbinic tradition, it is noted in *Pirke Avot* that the world was created with ten words (5:1), that Israel’s ancestor Abraham was the tenth generation after Noah (5:2), and that God performed ten wonders in connection with the Exodus from Egypt (5:4). Likewise, both Jewish and Christian interpreters have observed a parallel between God’s Ten Words in creation and God’s Ten Words at Sinai. Martin Buber, for example, states that “Israel’s appropriation of the land is the encounter and association of Creation and Revelation.”¹¹ Or in the words of Joseph Ratzinger: “[t]he creation narrative anticipates the Ten Commandments. This makes us realize that these Ten

Commandments are, as it were, an echo of the creation; for they are not arbitrary inventions for the purpose of erecting barriers to human freedom but signs pointing to the spirit, the language, and the meaning of creation; they are a translation of the language of the universe, a translation of God’s logic, which constructed the universe.”¹²

As an interpretation and elaboration of the commandment on adultery, the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are thus anchored in the created order.

This understanding also explains why Leviticus 18:22 is grouped with child sacrifice (v. 21) and bestiality (v. 23). Milgrom, in his commentary on Leviticus, argues that the common denominator for all prohibitions is procreation. They all involve the emission of semen for the purpose of copulation resulting either in incest or illicit progeny (vv. 6–20), the destruction of progeny (v. 21), or no progeny (vv. 22–23). The result of child sacrifice, homosexual intercourse, and bestiality respectively, is profanation of God’s name (תחלל את־שם אלהיך), abomination (תועבה), and perversion (תבל). They are singled out from the other offenses as transgressions directly against God because these acts are contrary to creation order. They involve copulating with someone who could not procreate or copulating in order to destroy the procreated result. Such an understanding only adds to the conclusion above, namely that the rationale is not only cultic prostitution, a distinction between penetrator and penetrated, or pederasty, but a total ban against homosexuality.

This is especially true in relation to Genesis 1 but also in relation to the subsequent description in Genesis 2 of the relationship between man and woman as “one flesh.”

Professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary Jay Sklar argues

that the parallels between Genesis 1–2 and Leviticus show that “the Israelites are not only to be a signpost back to Eden, they are to become a manifestation of it and a people who extend Eden’s borders to every corner of the earth.” Two conclusions, he writes, can be drawn from this idea:

First, because these chapters are a backdrop to Leviticus, it is natural to understand that the moral logic behind the Levitical prohibitions against homosexual sex is rooted in the fact that there is a pattern laid down in creation that helps us to understand what sex and marriage are to look like ... Second, because the pattern is creational, it has ongoing relevance for today. Such an understanding is rooted in Jesus’s own approach to these chapters.¹³

It is also worth mentioning G. Geoffrey Harper’s study on *The Rhetorical Function of Allusion to Genesis 1–3 in the Book of Leviticus*, in which he demonstrates that Leviticus displays a deliberate use and recontextualization of Genesis 1–3. The presence of key lexical terms and central concepts such as זרע (“seed”), ארץ (“earth, land”), and מות (“to die”) in both Genesis 1–3 and Leviticus 18 and 20 demonstrates Harper’s argument about the connection between these texts as part of a wider strategy. This suggests that the statements regarding homosexual practices in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 should be understood within the framework of the creation theology presented in Genesis 1–2.

The shared vocabulary and concepts between these passages indicate a deliberate intertextual connection that reinforces the idea that these prohibitions are rooted in the theological and narrative context of creation. This connection implies that the prohibitions are not arbitrary but meant to be understood within the broader theo-

logical framework of the created order as described in Genesis.

It is in the same creation-theological context that we should understand a group of texts that address cross-dressing (Deut 22:5; 2 Kgs 23:7; 1 Cor 11:4–5:14). When it says in Deuteronomy 22:5, “A woman shall not wear a man’s garment, nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak,” it must be understood as a prohibition against obscuring the created binary between man and woman. The prohibition appears in the immediate context with other prohibitions that mark boundaries between seemingly arbitrary categories: “You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. You shall not wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together” (Deut 22:10–11). However, the seemingly arbitrariness in these distinctions dissolve when viewed as symbolic acts meant to mark respect for boundaries between the created “kinds,” which, according to Genesis 1–2, are fundamental to God’s intentions in creation. This includes the created and thus given “boundary” between male and female. The same underlying concept can be found in Paul’s words to the Corinthian church, where he discusses head coverings and long hair in 1 Corinthians 11:4–5 and 14.

THE NEW TESTAMENT’S NORMATIVE UNIVERSE

Turning to the New Testament, Paul clearly bases his argumentation in Romans 1 on Genesis 1–2:

- The “creation of the world” is explicitly mentioned in verse 20.
- The replacement of “the immortal God’s glory . . . with images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” in verse 23 clearly refers to an overthrow of the divine image in Genesis 1:26–27.

¹¹ Martin Buber, *On Zion: The History of an Idea* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 102.

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning . . . A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 26.

¹³ Jay Sklar, “The Prohibitions against Homosexual Sex in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: Are They Relevant Today?,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 28:2 (2018): 189–90.

- Worship of “the creature rather than the Creator” in verse 25 expresses the *raison d’être* of Genesis 1, namely, that God is the Creator and humanity is his creation.
- The wisdom and folly mentioned resemble man’s foolish grasp for wisdom in eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2, and there is an unmistakable allusion to Genesis 2:17 in verse 32 when it says about the “men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (verse 18) that “[t]hey know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die.”
- Paul’s use of the relatively unusual Greek words *θηλυς* for female and *αρσεν* for males suggests that he draws on the Septuagint version of Genesis and Leviticus 18, where the same two words are used.
- In other words, the same-sex sexual acts forbidden in Leviticus 18:22 are, therefore, not just תועבה (“an abomination”) because the Canaanites practiced them (18:3) or because they caused ritual impurity (18:24–27), but because they conflict with the created order, namely, what the “seed” was created to accomplish. By describing these acts as “contrary to nature,” Paul clearly means “contrary to the intention of the Creator.”

The same is true for 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, where Paul also uses a form of the same unusual word for practicing homosexuals, namely *αρσενοκοιτης*. As for the catalog of vices in 1 Timothy 1:8, Paul most likely groups them by reference to the Mosaic law. The list begins with “patricide” and “matricide” referring to extreme violations against the fifth commandment to honor one’s parents. The next vice, “murder,” applies to the sixth commandment, whereas the third, “fornicators” and “sodomites,” refers to

the seventh commandment concerning adultery; “kidnappers” refers to the eighth commandment concerning stealing, and “liars” and “perjurers” refers to the ninth commandment concerning bearing false witness. Therefore, instead of interpreting the terms as referring to prostitution or pederasty, it is better to understand *πόρνοις* in its *general* and comprehensive meaning of “sexual immorality” and as referring to a violation of the commandment “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod 20:14).

The relatively few texts about sex and gender identity cannot be isolated from their biblical context. Both their meaning and force must be defined against the backdrop of the redemptive-historical and creation-theological context in which they are embedded. This implies that although both Moses and Paul address time-specific challenges regarding sex and gender, namely Canaanite and Greek practices respectively, they apply an underlying principle that is not limited to random, time-specific, or isolated violations of this principle. Instead, it reflects the fundamental intention in God’s binary creation of humanity as male and female with the purpose of becoming one flesh.

PASTORAL TEACHING AND COUNSELING ON SEXUAL ETHICS

Genesis 1 and 2 teaches us, as already mentioned, that humanity must be appreciated and received as a relational, embodied, and binary gift. And the embeddedness of later biblical guidance on sex and gender shows us that the same deliberation in choosing “gift” as the key term and “relational,” “embodied,” and “binary” as *given* modifiers apply in the post-fall reality of the world in which we, as pastors and teachers, are called to teach, preach, guide, and counsel on sexual ethics.

The model for our ministry should be to follow the same hermeneutical strategy as laid out in the Bible itself. In other words, to work our way backwards from the particular biblical guidance in, e.g., the Mo-



saic laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, Jesus’ words in Matthew 19, and Paul’s admonitions in Corinthians and Timothy to redemption and creation.

If we do no more than repeat the prohibitions of Moses, Jesus, and Paul verbatim, we end up with a legalistic preaching, guidance, and counseling that does not set people free to choose the blessed life but binds them to a life of which they do not understand the blessing. And the strongest argument for not doing this is Jesus Christ himself. Jesus Christ is the expressed image of God, the one who, more clearly than anything or anyone else, shows us that human life is a relational, embodied, and binary gift. He does this by showing us how the body is meant for self-giving love and free mutual fulfillment in interpersonal relationships, by giving the ultimate gift, namely his own body, to and for humanity. He does this primarily as Redeemer, demonstrating that the way back to the order of creation is through redemption. It is the redeemed human who also receives his perfect righteousness and experiences that it is through faith we, as Paul has it, have “been clothed with the new man that is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it” (Col 3:10). And since Christ is the expressed image of God, being “clothed with the new man” clearly means being restored to the created order.

The fact that there is no “Leviticus” in the

New Testament is both obvious and challenging! It is obvious because ethical guidance and legislation in the church and society exists in their respective domains, but it is also challenging — or perhaps even frustrating — because there is no *direct* reuse of the guidance given to ancient Israel.

Post-fall texts in the Old and New Testaments should be appreciated — not as an answer key or check-list — but as examples on how the *given* created order should or could be fleshed out in various cultural and temporal settings. And the wording “should or could” is deliberate, since we need to distinguish between applications that are uniform and timeless on the one hand, and advice that is varied and timebound on the other. Homosexual practice will always, regardless of the circumstances, be a violation of the intended creation of binary humanity for one-flesh union between man and wife. Both Jesus and Paul repeat the prohibitions of Leviticus with reference to the created order. Dresses and long hair, on the other hand, are culturally and temporally conditioned signifiers of masculinity and femininity.

As for the domains of church and society, we need to distinguish between violation and transgression on the one hand and sentencing and punishment on the other in applying the texts from Leviticus.

Suffice it to say, I believe pastoral counseling is on firm exegetical and biblical-theo-

logical ground in insisting that, while the transgression should still be seen as a violation of God's law, the New Testament maintains a division between church and state, leaving it to the state to "wield the sword." Sentencing and punishment in the maintenance of order and justice *coram hominibus*, i.e., in human society, is a matter for the state. The church, on the other hand, is entrusted with God's Word as the only means of defining right and wrong and declaring a person guilty *coram Deo*, i.e., in the presence of God, leaving the ultimate and eternal judgment of the unrepentant to God, but with a clear mandate to proclaim forgiveness in Christ to the penitent.

One challenge remains, however, in transposing the Mosaic laws to life under the New Covenant. What about the casuistic guidance that confronts reality with the aim of directing toward the ideal but where the guidance reflects the ideal to a lesser or weakened extent? This applies, for example, to texts that either narratively or legally address polygamy without idealizing it (e.g., narrative texts about Abraham's, Jacob's, David's, and Solomon's polygamy, or the levirate law in Deut 25:5–6). Or when there are New Testament texts that regulate slavery without idealizing it, such as 1 Corinthians 7:20–24; Colossians 3:22–25; 4:1; Ephesians 6:5–9; and Titus 2:9–10. In these texts, there is no outright rejection of polygamy or slavery. However, when the guidance is understood in light of the foundational narrative of creation, it becomes clear that it is intended to move the culture toward the ideal, especially within a context where polygamy and slavery were common. Man was not created to be a slave, and a man was not created to have multiple wives. But do such casuistic considerations also apply to sex and gender? Should we allow, not only in society, but also in the church, for homosexual practice, gender transitioning, and gender fluidity? The case of slavery is a tricky one, since Paul obviously allows for some degree of slavery in his advice to the church in Ephesus.

A key passage for settling the question,

however, is Jesus' comment in Matthew 19, where he acknowledges that, in ancient Israel, divorce was permitted "because of your hard hearts," but adds, that "from the beginning it was not this way," and "now I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery" (19:8–9). Since Jesus is addressing his disciples, not the "authorities," I take it as a sign that, while in society, where regulation in the New Testament is left to "the authorities," it should be accepted that legislation does not necessarily reflect the ideal but points toward the ideal. It is nevertheless the church's responsibility to always base its teaching, preaching, counseling, guidance, and church discipline on the ideal. Jesus insists, through his words about marriage, that polygamy is not compatible with the Christian life, and a Christian cannot be married to multiple wives or husbands, even if it is permitted in society. Paul's reference to creation in his discussion of homosexual practice similarly means that, even if it is permitted in society, practicing homosexuality is incompatible with the Christian life. Paul's application of the distinction between man and woman in the passage about long hair also shows that, even if it is permitted in society, it is incompatible with the Christian life within the congregation to dress in a way that blurs the boundaries between the genders.

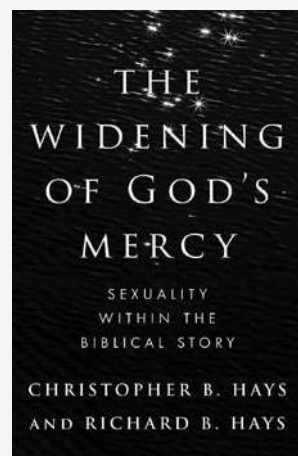
Since Christ shows us the way back to the beginning and forward toward the new creation, let us be "buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may live a new life" (Rom 6:4). And let us teach, preach, guide, and counsel people entrusted us to do the same! ✕

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BOOK

REVIEWS

The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story



Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays. *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes when people change their mind it is occasion for joy and celebration, for there is no virtue in adhering to past opinions for the sake of tradition or fear of criticism. In this case, however, Richard Hays's change of mind is a cause of grief and sadness instead of joy, especially for those like me who have learned so much from his outstanding scholarship over the years.¹ The father (Richard — a New Testament professor for many years at Duke) and son (Chris — an Old Testament professor at Fuller) rightly emphasize God's mercy as a central theme of the biblical storyline, and many observations (especially in the New Testament portion of the book) are helpful

¹ In his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (HarperOne: San Francisco, 1996), Hays argued that same-sex relations were contrary to the will of God.

and true, but their understanding of mercy when it comes to same-sex relationships deviates radically from Scripture.

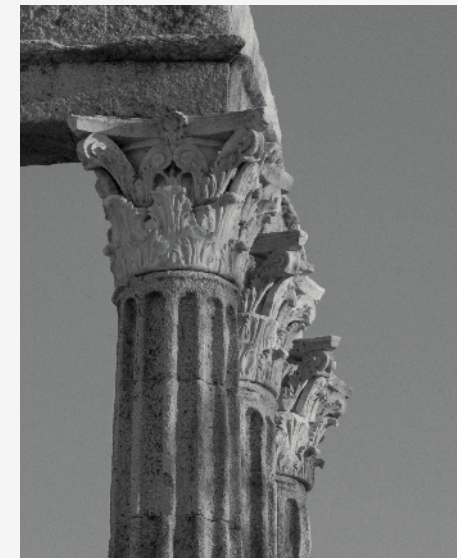
We might say, Why does their view of same-sex relationships matter? Christians, after all, have different opinions on a variety of issues and we also dispute what is the right thing to do in a number of instances. For example, evangelicals are divided on what the biblical text says about divorce. Still, same-sex relations are not in the same category as some other disputes. In the matter of divorce, a long exegetical and ethical debate exists on what the text teaches. When it comes to same-sex relations, no such debate exists. Both the Old Testament and New Testament teach unreservedly and clearly that same-sex relations are contrary to God's will. Nor is there even the tiniest crack in the window in Second Temple Jewish literature and in the orthodox Christian tradition. Divergent voices only began to emerge in the twentieth century.

IGNORING THE TEXTS ON SAME-SEX SIN

Remarkably, none of the texts about same-sex behavior are discussed in the book. The authors believe the issue can be resolved without even considering what these verses say. These half-dozen texts, they aver, can scarcely be the basis for determining the issue, for that is like establishing our view of slavery on Exodus 21:2 and 1 Peter 2:18. Chris says the Bible remains central for ethical discernment (12), but it is difficult to see how that claim is true, since the entire issue is adjudicated without examining the biblical texts that speak to the question.² And it is misleading for them to dismiss the texts against same-sex relations for at least two reasons. First, since these texts are the Word of God, they should not and

² For the best and amazingly thorough treatment, see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001).

³ See the excellent book by Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).



cannot be shoved aside in such a cavalier manner. They can't be jettisoned so easily or quickly. Second, the biblical view of marriage (more on this below) is rooted in the created order, in God's intention when he created men and women. The theological grounding against same-sex behavior is thus profound, reaching back to God's purposes in creating men and women. Thus, it is illegitimate to draw a parallel to what Scripture says about slavery. Slavery is an evil human institution regulated but never endorsed or commended as an institution. Marriage is rooted in the created order — slavery isn't! Indeed, in the case of slavery we have canonical (!) grounds for seeing the end of the institution since Paul directs slaves to become free if possible (1 Cor 7:21).³

The grievousness of what is argued by Hays and Hays is evident when we read 1 Corinthians 6:9–11: "Don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit God's kingdom? Do not be deceived: No sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, or males who have sex with males, no thieves, greedy peo-

ple, drunkards, verbally abusive people, or swindlers will inherit God's kingdom. And some of you used to be like this. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (CSB). Hays and Hays explicitly argue that gays and lesbians who profess Christ are Christians, and the church should not be defined by opposition to such practices (8). Apparently, they promise eternal life for some who are heading for eschatological destruction. Notice the text carefully. We must begin by emphasizing that there is forgiveness and cleansing for all who repent of sexual sin, adultery, homosexuality, stealing, greed, drunkenness, and verbal abuse. As James says, we all fall short in many ways (Jas 3:2). When we repent and turn afresh to God, we find open arms of mercy. But that is not what Hays and Hays are teaching. They affirm that there is no need to repent of same-sex behavior, that God smiles on those in same-sex relationships. This is the same as saying that unrepentant adulterers, thieves, greedy people, drunkards, and those who abuse others will enter the kingdom, even if they never repent, even if they continue to pursue their sin until the end. Their claim to be merciful, then, is actually mistaken. Their advice, not intentionally of course, is cruel since it promises final salvation for those headed for everlasting destruction. Such words may seem unduly harsh, but mercy only makes sense in a world where there is judgment, yes final judgment.⁴ And the witness of Scripture is clear: God doesn't have mercy on all. Universalism is clearly outside the circle of God's self-revelation as Michael McClymond has shown in his astoundingly excellent and massive study on the question.⁵



Hays and Hays, of course, know the texts that speak to same-sex relationships, and Richard himself once argued, as noted earlier, that all homosexual behavior is wrong. But now the father and son claim that the trajectory of the Bible moves us beyond the biblical prescription of homosexuality. God's ever widening mercy, they aver, takes us outside what the scriptural word actually says. The idea that we can appropriate a trajectory that goes beyond the Bible was advanced among evangelicals by William Webb.⁶ Webb argued that the trajectory doesn't include approval of same-sex relationships, but I predicted in my review that subsequent authors would knock down the fence Webb constructed and include same-sex relations within the trajectory.⁷ The

father and son pair aren't the first to make such an argument, but they are probably the most famous.

Hays and Hays give many examples in Scripture of God's ever-expanding mercy and of a trajectory that leads to more mercy (more on this below). But we should notice at the outset a crucial point. They don't point to any biblical evidence that sexual norms relative to homosexuality are relaxed. Where is the trajectory that eases the requirements on sexuality? Jesus' words on divorce don't point to an easing of Old Testament regulations regarding divorce but a tightening (Matt 5:31–32; 19:3–12). If the proscriptions against homosexuality were being relaxed, we should see evidence for such leniency in the New Testament itself. Instead, the New Testament repeats and reinforces what we find in the Old Testament. Indeed, Paul grounds his words about same-sex behavior in the created order (Rom 1:26–27),

reminding the readers of God's intention for men and women before sin entered the world. Same-sex behavior is wrong because it strays from God's intention from creation that one man marries one woman for life (Gen 1:26–27; 2:18–25), and Jesus cites these very texts in arguing for his own view of marriage (Matt 19:4–5). Hays and Hays claim there is mercy where the scriptural word says there is none, and where Scripture threatens final judgment on those who engage in such behavior. Personally, I think of what it would be like at the final judgment to meet God in Christ face-to-face after controverting the biblical word. That terrifies me, but the authors have their reasons as we shall see.

ADVOCATING A GOD WHO CHANGES

One of the major planks of their argument is that God often changes his mind, and thus he and we can change our mind on same-sex relations too. The first thing to be said — again!! — is that there is no scriptural evidence on the matter of same-sex relations that God changed his mind. The authors claim it is so, but they have no textual evidence for a change on this specific issue, even if they allegedly spy changes on other matters. We look in vain in the scriptural record for any indication that sexual norms have been relaxed.

It is also astonishing, however, that they embrace completely and happily the notion that God changes his mind. Evangelicals debated this matter some years ago, and open theism was shown to be sub-biblical, and now it is a minor backwater in some fringe circles. I will not revisit the debate here since it has been refuted decisively elsewhere.⁸ Still, the perspective of Hays and Hays shows the radical separation in some circles between orthodox systematic theology and biblical studies. The tradition of the church about God's unchanging

⁴ See Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Justice and Goodness of God: A Biblical Case for the Final Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024).

⁵ Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018).

⁶ William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, "William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*: A Review Article," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6.1 (2002): 46–64.

⁸ See Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001).

“Perhaps we should not be surprised that authors who reject orthodox theology also reject orthodox behavior. The Pastoral Epistles teach us that orthodoxy and orthopraxy are intertwined, and this book testifies to that truth.”

nature is waved away as if it is mere prejudice. They mention Calvin and double predestination, and Jonathan Edwards is also criticized. But they fail to emphasize that Calvin's view on the doctrine of God's immutability was hardly innovative. It represented the historic church's teaching, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox. The tradition on God's changelessness represents exegetical and theological reflection for two millennia, and yet it is dismissed in a cavalier fashion. A few texts are adduced to call it into question, and unsophisticated readers may not realize that the church reflected on all the texts in the scriptural witness to formulate the doctrine of God. The church's tradition, of course, is not sacrosanct. Still, the theological and exegetical legacy is impressive, for those espousing God's immutability were not exegetical and theological lightweights, nor can they be waved aside as if they were simply doing theology out of prejudice. Thus, the ready and casual acceptance of God's mutability is quite astounding, a witness to the theological poverty that informs some in biblical studies.

Hays and Hays propound their case for mutability in an environment where evangelicals are rightly emphasizing the

retrieval of the theology of the fathers and the Reformers. Again, this is not to say that everything said or taught in the past is correct, but we are realizing afresh in our days that the interpreters who have gone before us were wise, patient, and humble interpreters of Scripture. Perhaps we should not be surprised that authors who reject orthodox theology also reject orthodox behavior. The Pastoral Epistles teach us that orthodoxy and orthopraxy are intertwined, and this book testifies to that truth. Also, if God changes his mind, how do we know he won't change his mind back to a stricter view? How do we know it only goes one way? And if he changes his mind, perhaps he will change his mind about us, perhaps he will revoke his covenant promises. Once we have a God who changes, we don't have any certainty about what comes next. Fortunately, as Malachi 3:6 affirms, God doesn't change and thus his covenant promises will be fulfilled.

When it comes to God changing his mind, they point to the flood narrative. But they do not answer explicitly a question about that narrative that is most pressing. God wipes out everyone but eight people in the world. Was that a mistake, overly severe? Very few are shown mercy, indicating that

mercy is truly mercy, that judgment is deserved. And there is no trajectory on this matter, for the New Testament is not at all embarrassed about the flood narrative since Jesus (Matt 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–27) and the other NT witnesses; (Heb 11:7; 1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 2:5, 9; 3:6) appealed to the flood as a pattern and type of the future judgment. Yes, God is amazingly merciful, but the biblical witness also attests to the truth of a final judgment, and that judgment is not a minor theme but pervades the biblical (yes the New Testament too!) witness. Hays and Hays over-emphasize God's mercy, which is surely present since he won't destroy the earth by flood again, but they seem to have forgotten judgment, and God is presented as a “good-natured” person (47), as if he is “learning on the job” (48), as if he is learning not to be as strict, but the picture given is skewed since they don't reflect on the fact that virtually the whole world is destroyed in the flood, and the flood is picked up in the New Testament as a type of the judgment to come. Yes, mercy is available, but judgment isn't withdrawn, as anyone reading Jesus' words on the danger of hell realizes (Matt 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 18:9; Mark 9:43–49; Luke 12:5; cf. John 3:36).

Some of the examples of God reputedly changing his mind are rather surprising and unconvincing. The inheritance given to the daughters of Zelophehad doesn't seem like a good example of God changing his mind. Isn't this merely an adjustment, a codicil to the inheritance laws? It scarcely seems like a radical revision of the Torah. Other examples are mentioned, such as some differences between Exodus and Deuteronomy. Many of these can be accounted for by the fact that some con-

template life in the wilderness and others life in the land. But there is not space to adjudicate all these matters, and the authors don't spend much time on them. At the end of the day, we have a different evaluation of the truthfulness of Scripture, which fits with what this book is finally about as we shall see.

In the Old Testament section, the authors claim that the Lord commanded child sacrifice (Exod 22:29–30), but later God admits in Ezekiel that he gave some commands that were not good (Ezek 20:25). The authors claim that Ezekiel had in mind God's previous command endorsing child sacrifice. Here we have an example where two difficult texts are cited to justify the notion that God changes his mind, and the authors conclude from this that we can go beyond Scripture. In a relatively brief review there is not space to delve into these matters in detail, but many commentators would dissent from the interpretation offered for these two texts. The instruction in Exodus 22:29–30 is succinct and should be read in light of Exodus 13:13 and 34:20 where firstborn sons were redeemed with a payment. Along the same lines, Hannah promises to give Samuel to the Lord but she isn't contemplating sacrificing him.⁹ I suggest the following interpretation of Ezekiel 20:25.¹⁰ In context Ezekiel is saying that statutes in the law aren't good because they don't give life. He is not speaking objectively about the commands of the law. He is not contradicting what we read about the law in Psalm 19 and 119. If we go by the trajectory of Scripture Paul also argues for the goodness and holiness of God's law (Rom 7:12). Yes, some laws were given because of the hardness of people's hearts (Matt 19:8), but there is canonical clarification in this instance,

⁹ For both of these observations on Exod. 22:29–30, see Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 508.

¹⁰ For other possible interpretations that contravene the reading offered by Hays and Hays, see Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 337–338; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 636–641. In my reading Ezekiel uses hyperbole to underscore the truth that Israel cannot keep God's law. But dogmatism should be avoided on such a difficult verse, nor should a theological position be established on the basis of it.

and again Jesus' view is stricter than the Old Testament on this matter, not more lenient. Furthermore, what evidence do we have, even if we accepted the paradigm of the authors, that the commands about same-sex relationships aren't good? There is nothing in the scriptural testimony anywhere about relaxing sexual norms. It is quite arbitrary to appeal to experience to make their case.

FAILING TO UNDERSTAND REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

Often the authors seem to ignore the redemptive historical cast of the biblical text. A fundamental feature of biblical and systematic theology is progress of revelation. God's plan in history develops through the covenants made with his people.¹¹ When the new covenant comes in Jesus, the old covenant made with Israel is annulled. The Old Testament remains the Word of God, but the Scriptures must be read covenantally, which is to say that the Old Testament should be interpreted in light of the final fulfillment in Christ. Israel as God's people was a theocratic entity, where, so to speak, the church and state were one. God's people were situated in a particular land, and they were generally speaking of the same ethnicity. In the New Testament, however, the people of God can't be isolated to a single nation or a single locale. Believers are in every nation and every people group, and no nation on earth is God's special nation. All of this has to be taken into consideration in reading the Old Testament, and Hays and Hays don't clearly recognize the covenantal and progressive nature of revelation. Instead, they claim that God changes his mind, but such a judgment doesn't accord with the New Testament reception of the Old Testament. Rather, New Testament revelation *fulfills* God's plan that began in Genesis 3:15, and with the fulfillment there is both continuity and discontinuity.

If we read the Scriptures canonically, the shape of that continuity and discontinuity is constrained by the biblical witness. Unfortunately, the authors appeal to experience instead of the canon, and thus they end up relying on their experience instead of the scriptural boundaries.

Let's consider some specific examples from their book. Yes, God commanded Israel to wipe out the Canaanites, and no we should not do the same today. Israel had a special role as a theocracy to be a holy people in a holy land. The church doesn't have the same mandate since it is not a nation. Of course, the command to wipe out the Canaanites in the land of promise raises questions, but we need to remember that God is the Lord over the life and death of every person, and the judge of all the earth always does what is right (Gen 18:25). Actually, the text is sensitive to the issue of justice. The Lord informs Abraham that Israel will not inherit the land of Canaan for 400 years since the iniquity of the Amorite wasn't complete (Gen 15:16). God delays his judgment and patiently gives the Canaanites time to repent (Rom 2:4). In some respects, what happens to the Canaanites is similar to the fate of the entire earth during the flood. God deemed that the wickedness of those in Canaan was so great that they no longer deserved to live, and he commanded Israel to carry out his command. No nation today is God's holy people, and so the command given to Israel has lapsed, not because the command was evil, but because the church should not be equated with Israel. A new covenant has dawned in which the church is in every nation. The gospel going to all nations was God's intention from the beginning (Gen 12:3), but Israel was uniquely God's chosen people in the Old Testament era.

It bears repeating that redemptive historical readings, the recognition of covenant

structures, recognition of the progress of salvation history is a common feature of biblical theology, and in terms of the history of interpretation goes back very early to writings of Irenaeus. The authors think such readings are special pleading, but it accords with the way the church has read the Scriptures throughout history, and Hays and Hays are the innovators. Early in redemptive history eunuchs were forbidden to enter the Lord's assembly (Deut 23:1), but Isaiah, anticipating gentile inclusion (Isa 56) looks forward to a day when eunuchs will be included, and this is fulfilled in the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). Such instances should not be read as a change of mind on God's part, but as salvation historical progression, as we move from the old covenant to the new. The same could be said about sabbath regulations. Yes, the sabbath was required for the Jews under the covenant made with Moses, but that covenant came to an end with the coming of Jesus Christ (Gal 3:15–4:7). Believers in Christ are not required to be circumcised (Gal 5:2–4) or to keep the sabbath (Rom 14:5–6; Col 2:17) now that Christ has come and the new covenant has been inaugurated. Jesus anticipates such covenantal changes in his ministry, for the sabbath points to rest in Christ (Matt 11:28–12:8), to the eschatological rest we will enjoy in the new creation (Heb. 4:1–11).¹² Hays and Hays are right to say that as the doors opened wide to the gentiles, it was difficult for some Jews to accept the mercy being extended to gentiles. And the authors rightly warn us against unwarranted harshness and rigidity. At the same time, the gentile mission doesn't represent a change of God's mind but a fulfillment of God's plan that was intended from the beginning in the promise to Abraham.

Redemptive history also accounts for the decisions made at the Jerusalem Council.

It is clear that the apostles, elders, and the church decided at the Council that circumcision was no longer required to belong to the people of God. Hays and Hays think the change here justifies relaxing the strictures on same-sex relationships. What they fail to see is the redemptive historical particularity of the event. In Jesus Christ the fulfillment of all of God's promises is realized. Because of his ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension the Holy Spirit is poured out on his people and the last days have arrived (Heb 1:2). The promises of universal blessing first made to Abraham, which continue to be voiced throughout the rest of the Old Testament, are now being fulfilled. Now the people of God are not limited to Israel but include all people in all nations that believe in Jesus. With the fulfillment of the ancient promises the covenant made with Israel under Moses came to an end. The stipulations of that covenant, such as circumcision, purity laws, and sabbath, have ceased. Those matters that separated Jews from gentiles, such as food laws, no longer apply now that Christ has come.

It is crucial to observe, however, that the next great event in redemptive history is the return of Christ. There is no scriptural warrant for further revelation or changes to revelation before the return of Christ (Jude 3). The covenantal changes occurred when and because the Christ came in fulfillment of Old Testament promises. For Hays and Hays to posit further changes, when there have been no further redemptive historical changes since Jesus' first coming, minimizes the distinctive work of Christ and the epochal significance of what he accomplished. Furthermore, the New Testament makes it clear that no moral norms are altered even at the Jerusalem Council. The laws that no longer apply are purity regulations, sabbath, circumcision, etc. Prohibitions against idol-

¹¹ See here Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

¹² Thomas R. Schreiner, "Goodbye and Hello: The Sabbath," in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies*, edited by Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 159–188.

atry, murder, stealing, lying, adultery, etc. remain in place. We see no evidence in the New Testament that moral norms are relaxed, and this includes, of course, what is said about homosexuality.

The authors make the same mistake when discussing the weak and strong in Romans 14. They claim that the weak are uptight fundamentalists who say that homosexual behavior is a sin, while the strong are those who affirm same-sex unions. Some claims in the book, like this one, are breathtaking in their boldness. But when we actually examine Romans 14, the dispute is over foods and the observance of days. There is no basis for drawing the conclusion that a new sexual ethic is being advanced. Paul is among the strong because he doesn't think food laws and sabbath laws are binding any longer for the people of God. There is no indication whatsoever that moral norms are abandoned. Indeed, I could use the same argument propounded by Hays and Hays to say that those who think adultery is wrong are the weak but those who are favor polyamorous relationships are strong! A very convenient argument to be sure, but one

“Love apart from commands is a wax-nose twisted to rationalize all kinds of behaviors”

that is far from Paul's intention.

APPEALING TO EXPERIENCE INSTEAD OF SCRIPTURE

A similar thing can be said about their appeal to Augustine and the rule of love. Augustine, as we all know, would never countenance their view of same-sex relations, and for Augustine love can't be separated from God's commands. After all, people often appeal to love to justify adultery. Paul could not be clearer in Romans 13:8–10 when he says that love fulfills the law. Indeed, he tells us that the commands prohibiting adultery, murder, stealing, coveting, and other moral norms sum up what

love is. Love apart from commands is a wax-nose twisted to rationalize all kinds of behaviors. Love is more than keeping such commands, but it is never less. The commands protect us from sentimentality and false views of love.

At the end of the day, the real criterion for their understanding of homosexuality isn't Scripture but experience. They can't bear to tell their friends that they are wrong and in sin, and we all feel that tension. But like Luther our consciences must be constrained not by friendship but by the Word of God. Hays and Hays assert that the biblical commands regarding the role of women can't be accepted, and so the commands regarding homosexuality should be thrown overboard as well. But as many of us have been saying for years, countermending what Scripture says about the role of women (1 Tim 2:12–13) opens up the door for justifying same-sex behavior because in both cases Paul appealed to the created order. Of course, there are some scholars who are egalitarians who have nobly held the line against endorsing same-sex behavior, but the pattern so far is that institutions that have embraced the ordination of women eventually endorse the rightness of homosexuality. Once the creation order is jettisoned in one case (the role of women), the next obstacle (homosexuality) can come down. Hays and Hays really have no reason, apart from preferences and their own intuitions, to limit marriage to one man and one woman since Jesus appealed to creation to support his understanding of marriage in Matthew 19. The authors may resist such a move with passion, but we all know that those who follow their hermeneutic will not necessarily have the same inhibitions. Once experience is the norm the gate is thrown open wide. It is actually interesting to reflect on what has happened in mainline churches. There has been a trajectory from accepting women's ordination to homosexuality. Such churches have become increasingly liberal and increasingly empty.

Hays and Hays argue that the church is not

in decline because of its “impurity” but because of its “hardness of heart” (17). Again, those of us who are evangelicals must not harden our hearts. We want to emphasize that forgiveness is open to all, no matter what lifestyle one lived in the past. As evangelicals we are called to live ongoing lives of repentance. We have many faults and weaknesses and sins. We must be open to the Word and the Spirit and be ready to admit where we are too harsh and rigid, or too lenient and lax. Still, the mainline churches are dying. As Richard John Neuhaus often said, the mainline churches are now sideline. And the reason why is not hard to see. Scripture is no longer the authority for them. As this book attests and the authors admit, their experience is now the criterion by which ethical norms are judged (10). But if the Scripture is not the final norm and our experience is, then why attend church? Clearly, many young people feel this way. They don't need the church or the Bible when experience tells them what is right, when we are free to go beyond the scriptural word. The Scriptures for many are interesting in terms of the history of religion, but they are not vital for one's ethical life. On the other hand, many evangelical churches are flourishing where the scriptural word is authoritative both in terms of faith and practice. There is a reason to go to church because one hears a word that differs from the culture in which we live, a transcendent word, a word from above, a word from God. It is the word that gives life, the gospel that is God's power, and that power includes the ability by the Spirit of God to live a life pleasing to him, even as we regularly pray for the forgiveness of sins. Thanks be to God! ✕

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Don't Tell Anyone *You're Reading This*



WHAT IF IT IS ABOUT THE NAIL?

I love “It’s Not About the Nail,” a short comedy sketch about the eccentricities of men and women that has made the rounds online for years.¹ In it, a woman with a nail embedded in her forehead persistently rebuffs the efforts of a well-meaning husband or boyfriend to remove it. “It is not about the nail!” she insists. “Are you sure?” he asks. “Because I bet if we got that out of there...” “Stop trying to fix it!” she snaps. Eventually, he learns that what she really wants is for him to empathize with her pain, even if that means pushing the nail deeper.

I was reminded of this sketch while reading Lina Abujamra’s *Don’t Tell Anyone You’re Reading This: A Christian Doctor’s Thoughts on Sex, Shame, and Other Troublesome Topics*. The book is largely a confession of lifelong struggles with



Lina Abujamra. *Don't Tell Anyone You're Reading This: A Christian Doctor's Thoughts on Sex, Shame, and Other Troublesome Issues*. Forefront Books, 2023.

¹Jason Headley, 2013. “It’s Not About the Nail,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4EDhdAHR0g>.



sexual temptation, and an elaboration on how painful unfulfilled desires can be. Abujamra, a self-proclaimed “50-year-old virgin,” has seen and treated a lot of physical trauma in her career as an ER doctor. She knows how to fix bodies. Yet when it comes to spiritual and emotional wounds, self-inflicted or otherwise, she seems strangely reluctant to prescribe practical treatments. Instead, she urges readers to open up as she has, to confess their failures and temptations, and to prioritize the process of falling in love with Jesus over moral change. The result is a book containing much honesty and insight, an evident affection for God and a desire to please him, but little in the way of prescriptions for sexual flourishing, much less holiness.

Like most “real talk” evangelical or ex-evangelical books on sex, this one is deeply critical of the church and so-called “purity culture,” and how both have treated topics like lust, dating, masturbation, premarital sex, and even marriage. Abujamra correctly identifies the numerous and highly public ways in which Christian leaders and pastors have failed sexually in recent years, pointing specifically to the sins of men like Ravi Zaharias, sex

abuse cover ups in the Southern Baptist Convention, and the apostasy of authors like Joshua Harris (*I Kissed Dating Goodbye*) as evidence that something is deeply wrong. And not just with our leaders. She also points to statistics showing that the average evangelical congregation is filled with porn addicts, adulterers, same-sex attracted persons, and masturbators.

Two things set her book apart from others and make it a refreshing read. First, Abujamra does not use these failures as evidence that churches should abandon historical Christian teaching on sex. Quite the opposite. She clearly holds a high view of Scripture and has no illusions about the depths of human depravity. As her argument develops, it is apparent that she thinks of sexual morality not as an arbitrary list of dos and don'ts, but as commands for our good, grounded in God's original purpose for man and woman in creation.

Second, she doesn't seek to let anyone off the hook, not even herself. Despite never having engaged in extramarital sex, Abujamra views herself as the chief of sinners, due mostly to her lifelong struggle with erotica and masturbation, which she airs out at length.

Clearly, there is a deep longing for connection and intimacy, here. Not only does Abujamra confess her struggle with physical and mental temptation (107), she also offers glimpses of a hurt and confused inner woman who was never asked out in school (51), who suffered the disappointment of two broken engagements as an adult, and who eventually gave up on finding the “big love” she has always dreamed of and prayed God would send her (52):

I had dreamed that one day I would find the big love, that one day, I would look across the room and just know — here was the one I had waited for. I know it sounds idealistic and a little bit naïve, but I truly believed that if I honored God with my life, He would fulfill my wildest expectations, and I expected to fall in love in a big way. I wanted it all — a man who still loved me on my bad days, a son who looked like my husband, and a daughter with my attitude in life. I dreamed of laughter at Christmas and staying up late making s'mores in the summer (79-80).

Eventually, she writes, she “became too cynical to dream about love,” and began dreaming instead of dramatic, exciting service to God on the mission field (that dream, too, largely failed to materialize). With remarkable self-awareness, Abujamra admits that this romantic predisposition and the lofty standards that went with it are probably why she remained single and continues to fight unfulfilled desires (142).

Reading this, even as a married man of a younger generation, I felt her disappointment. Yet surely, I thought, as a doctor, she would get around to offering practical solutions for the problem of unwanted single-ness, which has reached epidemic proportions² both inside and outside the church, and is contributing to historic delays in marriage³ and a drop in fertility.⁴ Surely, she would suggest ways to remove this nail. Yet the book ends with barely a word of actionable advice about the most obvious (and biblical) help for people like her beset with sexual passion and desiring connection and family: *marriage* (1 Cor 7:9).

Before I'm buried in objections (however valid) that married people can still struggle and sin sexually, let's reckon with how seriously our fathers in the faith took the idea that the marriage bed is a refuge against temptation. Martin Luther wrote about it extensively.⁵ Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer⁶ famously cites this as the second purpose of the institution, teaching that “It [marriage] was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.” And let's not forget that God himself declared that “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Logically, and assuming no polygamous mischief, that means an equal number of women who lack the gift of continence should not be alone, either.

So, why haven't Abujamra and countless readers who will resonate with her experience gotten married? Am I simple for ask-

²Lisa Bonos and Emily Guskin, “It's not just you: New data shows more than half of young people in America don't have a romantic partner,” *The Washington Post* (March 21, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/03/21/its-not-just-you-new-data-shows-more-than-half-young-people-america-dont-have-romantic-partner/>.

³Erica Pandey, “America the single,” *Axios* (February 25, 2023), <https://www.axios.com/2023/02/25/marriage-declining-single-dating-taxes-relationships>.

⁴Alex Leeds Matthews, “Fertility rates dip, people are having babies later: The state of birth rates in the US,” *CNN* (June 1, 2023), <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/31/health/fertility-rates-still-down-after-pandemic-rebound-dg/index.html>.

⁵Trevor O'Reggio “Martin Luther: Marriage and the Family as a Remedy For Sin,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 51:1: 39-67.

⁶“The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony,” *The Church of England*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/form-solemnization-matrimony>.

ing that question? If there is some reason other than her disappointed romantic ideals and resulting cynicism, she does not let on. Obviously, not everyone will or should get married. But when even reporters at *The Washington Post* are hand-wringing over the fact that singleness has become the *norm* for young people in America, it seems safe to assume that there is a problem, and important to diagnose it.⁷ Yet I, like Abujamra, was left waiting.

Of all the criticisms against evangelical “purity culture,” the one that hits closest to the mark has to be the criticism of “princess theology” — the idea that if you just obey God’s rules for sex, he will reward you with that perfect someone who will show up one day and sweep you off your feet. In other words, a “big love.” Yet this romantic (and quite passive) notion was hardly unique to evangelicals or Christians. Watch any Disney movie from the last 100 years and the idea is inescapable: “someday my prince will come,” sings (the original) Snow White.⁸ “No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing, the dream that you wish will come true,” promises Cinderella. Rapunzel awaits her true love locked in a tower. Sleeping Beauty is literally unconscious when he arrives!

Could our problem with low marriage rates and exhausting battles with lust have at least something to do with the persistent belief — including among Christians — that love magically happens to worthy and idealistic recipients, and that it can only be legitimized by an overpowering tide of attraction to a “soulmate” that occurs virtually by accident, and that you never have to seek or work for it? What other worthy goal in life do we approach this way? And what would we say to someone who stopped pursuing the legitimate,

God-ordained outlet for their desire and fell instead into a self-confessed cycle of illegitimate release? What if this went on for decades? And what if this resulted in a book that promised solutions and tips on “how to change” on the dust jacket, only for the author to admit that nothing has fundamentally changed for her and might never change until she dies, but that therapy is helpful (24, 55, 107, 113)?

That, I’m sorry to say, is the gist of *Don’t Tell Anyone You’re Reading This*.

None of this is to suggest that marriage is some kind of panacea for sexual temptation, that singles are solely to blame for their own struggles, or that we should not find our ultimate fulfillment in Christ (we should!). Abujamra gets much right about sexual morality, about the hypocrisy within the church, and even recognizes that a lot of the brokenness she identifies comes from our rebellious culture, not evangelical “purity culture.” She admirably resists the temptation to “define deviance down” on issues where the Bible is silent, instead clearly defining sin as anything at variance with God’s design for one man and one woman in marriage (33, 35). She deserves praise for her obvious and heartfelt longing to hear “well done, good and faithful servant” from her Savior, even if it takes a lifetime of disappointment.

But I cannot help wondering if it could have been easier for her, and if it could be easier for countless readers who share her experience. God’s grace can overcome our weaknesses, but it was never meant to supplant our created desires — desires whose earthly fulfillment he has, in his goodness, also created.

Like nearly all Christians, I battle sexual temptation. But I would not want to fight

without my wife by my side. God’s grace to me is, in part, given through my marriage to her — an arrangement that is not meant to be a rare exception, but the overwhelming norm for Christians. Books like *Don’t Tell Anyone You’re Reading This* treat a near-universal feature of human life — sexual desire — as a thorn in the flesh God refuses to remove. But what if it is actually more like a nail, and what if sometimes it is us, not God, refusing to pull it out? ✕

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⁷Bonos and Guskin, “It’s not just you.”

⁸Taneal Lockstadt, “Rachel Zegler said her Snow White won’t be ‘saved by a prince.’ Some Disney fans didn’t want to hear it,” *CBC* (August 24, 2023), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/disney-princess-remakes-1.6945540#:~:text=%22We%20absolutely%20wrote%20a%20Snow,she%27s%20always%20meant%20to%20be.>

Faithful Reason: Natural Law Ethics for God's Glory and Our Good

A MORALLY ORDERED OUGHTNESS TO THE WORLD

There is a moral oughtness to the world. That is, the universe evidences moral design, and humanity should operate in accordance with this design. To deny moral order is to live irrationally and to plunge individually and societally into ruin.

This moral order is divinely imposed and not a social construct. A transcendent being has created this world to operate in ways that are consistent with his being and result in human flourishing. Furthermore, this divinely imposed order is knowable via reason, even to human persons whose reason is marred by the noetic effects of sin. Rational, fallen men and women can truly know what is right and wrong, though those same beings “can err by way of judg-

ment and application” (10).

Given that God has ordered the universe and implanted in humanity “the ability to know right from wrong [i.e. moral order]” (2), human beings should live in light of that moral order for society’s good and God’s glory. As Andrew Walker defines natural law, there is a “God-ordained, God-upheld system of moral order engraved upon an image-bearer’s conscience...” that we can know through reason and that “directs rational creatures to know what actions to do and what goods to fulfill [and] ... what actions to avoid and vices to shun” (28).

For Walker, the existence of natural law “gives us rational, coherent ways of understanding the structure of God’s creation order” (42). Thus, our biblically informed

and held convictions “can be rationally articulated in ways that better benefit human flourishing and the common good” (42). This sense of oughtness (or transcendent moral order) that is engraved on the heart of every person gives a “common moral grammar” (175) to believer and unbeliever alike. In terms of ethics, Christians can and should “couch their arguments” (175) for right and wrong in ways that rational, though supposedly non-religious, persons can grasp.

DEVELOPMENT/STRUCTURE/FLOW

Walker patiently introduces, defines, describes, and clarifies the subject of natural law for the reader. He moves from worldview discussions to definitions and philosophical, biblical, and theological foundations for natural law. His formal philosophical definition of natural law and natural law theory is as follows:

The moral theory that a divinely ordered and self-evident universal moral order exists that human reason can, in principle, grasp as intellectually knowable, which serves to direct our behavior toward morally choiceworthy goods and away from moral evils. This comprehension of the moral order and its basic, non-instrumental goods defines and identifies which actions are reasonable and worth pursuing — even apart from an immediate appeal to divine revelation — by achieving the purposes or goals necessary to human nature’s fulfillment and society’s proper coordination. Natural law is thus action-guiding and action-explaining. It explains what we ought to do and why we ought to do it by providing reasons for action and reasons for restraint (75–76).

As noted, natural law refers to a divine order that is universal and knowable via human reason. As we grasp natural law, we discern how to live and how to offer intelligible reasons for action and restraint.

FOREWORD BY CARL R. TRUEMAN

Faithful Reason



NATURAL LAW ETHICS FOR GOD'S GLORY AND OUR GOOD

Andrew T. Walker

Andrew Walker. *Faithful Reason: Natural Law Ethics for God's Glory and Our Good*. B&H Academic, 2024.

The foundations for this perspective are laid in four chapters. Two introduce philosophical foundations for natural law. In terms of origin, the natural law exists because there is “an eternal being ordering it into existence” (133). Though the unbeliever may not know the source of natural law, natural law *is* because “God decrees” it (135). And natural law is knowable or *per se nota* (self-evident) and has both content and utility. There are rules, norms, and principles for moral action that are useful, not merely for apologetics but also because the natural law gives “explanation of the world’s affairs and our place as rational creatures within it” (175).

Walker then moves to biblical and theological foundations of natural law, showing that Scripture assumes it and makes good theological sense. Scripture’s “account of creation” is “orderly and intelligible” (181), as when Psalm 19 declares the heavens declare the glory of God and the skies his handiwork. Romans 1, the “natural theology lodestar,” tells the reader that there are “plain” realities that demand a right response (Rom 1:19). And Paul’s stress that even pagans would not tolerate what the Corinthians are tolerating assumes “some knowledge of universal moral laws governing proper sexual rela-



tions” (195). Walker writes, “To invoke the natural law, then, is not to impose an alien and external morality on an interlocutor but to draw out a morality that Scripture considers present from within a person’s knowledge of the world” (190).

Next, Walker supplies ten theological axioms in reference to the natural law, considering it from two horizons. From above, the natural order simply *is* because God has imposed it (so Rom 1). From below, humans recognize this order through reason and conscience. While sin warps the ability to grasp *rightly* the moral design of God’s universe, depravity does not entirely remove the ability to grasp the moral design all around us. “That we can name our sin and injustices evidences how glimmers of the natural law still break through the darkness of the human heart” (216) — what John Calvin in the sixteenth century called the *sensus divinitatis*. The mission of the church to preach the gospel of salvation ever remains central; nevertheless, Christians in all times and places must also call the world to live in light of “the creation order it is hellbent to reject” (238).

Having laid the necessary foundations (philosophical, biblical, and theological) for the natural law, Walker now applies this framework “to a host of issues where the natural law offers definitive clarity” (245). Building off Thomas Aquinas, Walker leans into the taxonomy of (1) Life, (2) Relations, and (3) Order to show how the natural law is brought to bear on volatile issues of our day (e.g. abortion, same-sex marriage, politics).

IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTIONS

There are several important contributions this study makes to the field of ethics and natural law. First, Walker’s definition and descriptions are clear, careful, consistent, and faithful. Within the first six pages, he describes natural law and how it works in plain language. By page

twenty-eight, he offers a careful and detailed definition, which he then repeatedly unpacks in his book.

Second, Walker keeps Jesus Christ central in the place of ethics, so that he speaks even of a “Christotelic natural law” (82). While many limit discussions of Jesus to the way he redeems humanity *for a future existence* in the new heavens and new earth, Walker rightly stresses how Christ is vital for how we live in the present evil age, too: “The reason we understand morally intelligible propositions such as ‘it is evil to torture babies,’ is because Jesus Christ has structured the universe and our awareness of this moral reality to be what it is” (86). Even further, “It is in Jesus Christ where we see the embodiment of just action mediated by love. It is through our obedience to Christ that we understand what ‘good’ in both the natural and heavenly domains means” (364). Though this moral order may be grasped through human reason, Walker in no way severs the need for Jesus in our ethical thinking.

Specifically, natural law theorists like Walker have not forgotten the doctrine of depravity. He states, “No natural law proponent that [he is] aware of discounts the impact of sin on human reason” (374). Sin mars reason but does not eradicate it: “While humanity may be unable to account for its own moral intuitions, the fact that longings for justice and meaning persist testifies to the natural law” (376). Humans can err in their judgements, and we can be ever grateful that God has given us a more sure word (i.e. the Bible) that clarifies and heightens what we find in the natural law.

I used to consider natural law arguments only to benefit apologetics, defending Christian ethical claims within the public square and answering objections and questions. Yet Walker showed me that, before moral apologetics is outward-facing, it must be “inward-facing as a method of ethical catechesis” (34) so as to allow us

“to be apologists for the moral superiority and eminent humaneness of Christian ethics” (35). Walker, therefore, strengthens the Christian church by showing us that we are “not eccentric cultists or crazed fideists” for believing culturally taboo realities (e.g. men are men and women are women) (35). Indeed, “the burden of [his] argument in this book is to demonstrate the need for Christians to better grasp the natural law as a corollary to their discipleship. Christians need more rigorous instruction on the integrity of Christian ethics if there is to be any possibility of a future public witness” (36).

In the end, we should recognize that the order of this world is stunning and should result in praising the one who established the order. When through reason I perceive an *oughtness* to the world, I know from whence that *oughtness* comes. God has imposed a moral order to the universe. As Christians, we not merely call people to be saved from sin and death through the cross of Jesus Christ, but must also call people to live in accord with the order that God and his Christ have imposed on this world for their good and God’s glory. ✕

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How God Sees Women:

The End of Patriarchy



Terran Williams. *How God Sees Women: The End of Patriarchy*. Cape Town, South Africa: The Spiritual Bakery, 2022.

INTRODUCTION

A recent, lengthy entry into the never-ending egalitarian vs. complementarian debate among evangelicals, *How God Sees Women* is penned by Terran Williams, a former mega-church pastor in Cape Town, South Africa. Williams now writes and ministers through his personal ministry website where his stated objective is, “Building bridges from God’s Word to your world.” A self-professed former “soft complementarian,” Williams frames his “theology of women” as a repentant memoir of sorts. His biblically informed thesis is that God sees men and women in a mutualist framework, that is, distinct yet equal ministry partners in all spheres of life with shared authority, gifting, and expertise.

SUMMARY

Williams attempts to demonstrate his thesis in four parts with several appendices. In part one, he interprets both church history

and Genesis 1–3, arguing that “for most of its history, the church believed in the inherent inferiority of females,” and that “Genesis 2...does not teach that inherent to maleness is leadership, and inherent to femaleness is submission. What it affirms instead is the unity, mutuality, and equality between men and women — not hierarchy.”

In part two, he offers egalitarian interpretations of New Testament texts that typically serve as the exegetical foundation for the complementarian position, namely 1 Corinthians 11:3–16 and 14:33–35, 1 Timothy 2:11–15, and Ephesians 5:22–33. The hermeneutical basis for his conclusions is “accommodation.” God inspired the biblical authors to give “hat-tips” to the patriarchy to guard the credibility and evangelistic attractiveness of the gospel and the “fledgling” local churches in the eyes of the watching ancient world.

In part three, Williams surveys “power-

ful” women in the Bible, concluding that self-actualized spiritual gifting should be primary in the church’s assessment of leadership potential rather than gender. Once again, the predominance of the male judges and kings in the Old Testament and instances in the New Testament where it is rather clear that men are to hold positions of leadership are examples of “accommodation.”

In part four, he attacks traditional gender stereotypes, including the emphasis on domestic life in Titus 2, and concludes with practical applications for Christians convinced by his argumentation. The appendices include arguments for accommodation as the basis for the predominant use of male language in the Bible when describing or referring to God, further arguments for male and female mutuality in Genesis 2, an extended excursus on the meaning of “head” (*kephalē*) in the New Testament, additional arguments regarding the teach-

ing function and elder office in churches, an explanation of confirmation bias as the reason why so many Christians, throughout history and now, are complementarian, and a reference to several installments of his and Andrew Bartlett's extended YouTube complementarianism-egalitarianism debate with Mike Winger.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

At one point early in his overly long, repetitive, and unnecessary entry into this debate, Williams asks, "But is that really what God is saying?" The irony here is glaring. In his attempt to undermine the clear meaning of "rule over" (Hebrew *mashal*) in Genesis 3:16, whether intentionally or not, he has placed the words of the deceiving serpent from Genesis 3:1 in his own mouth. This is precisely how faithful, Bible-believing Christians should approach this book. While it is tempting to dismantle Williams's consistently fallacious interpretations one by one, I will focus my critique on three main issues, two of which are presuppositional, and all of which are pervasive.

First, to put it bluntly, Williams is an eisegete, which means he reads into the text of Scripture what he wants it to say instead of engaging in disciplined exegesis with a view to authorial intent and a shared worldview with the inspired authors. To Williams, these men and their audiences were often misogynists for whom God necessarily accommodated his Word for two thousand years until modern feminism unlocked the true meaning of Scripture. For example, he writes, "It is possible for discoveries and advances in society to challenge a long-held interpretation of Scripture...As the industrial revolution and the first waves of what would become the Woman's Liberation Movement swept through the West, for the first time ever women were given a chance to show their comparable intelligence and capacity to men. Instead of seeing this as a threat, this is in fact an opportunity for us to revis-

"To Williams, these men and their audiences were often misogynists for whom God necessarily accommodated his Word for two thousand years until modern feminism unlocked the true meaning of Scripture."

it Scripture itself with the question: what have we been missing all along?"

He engages in eisegesis in two complementary ways. Implicitly, his hermeneutic is driven by clear commitments to both the categories of critical theory and to expressive individualism. A quick survey of predominant vocabulary throughout the book includes "power," "liberation," "inferiority," "superiority," "gender discrimination," "misogyny," "sexism," "hierarchy," "oppression," "toxic masculinity," and "glass ceiling." This language, in conjunction with several clear statements that hierarchy necessitates inferiority, reveals what frames Williams's worldview and theology: power dynamics, which is the basis for the swath of critical theories. It is not possible for there to be a hierarchical authority between the first two humans who are equal in essence as the only

divine image-bearers in creation, so he reads it out of the text of Genesis 2 with shocking exegetical fallacy and dishonesty. That authority affects ontology, however, is not a biblical teaching. Furthermore, Williams would be well-served by reading Carl Truman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, which convincingly undermines his entire argument for female eldership based on "being seen" and manifesting self-oriented and self-actualized "calling" or "gifting." The biblical teaching and controls regarding eldership are clear in 1 Timothy 3 — the *desire* for, not calling to, eldership must be tempered by qualifications and communal affirmation. Williams would be a much more credible author if he had the courage to state his presuppositions explicitly.

The second way that Williams eisegetes throughout this book is explicit. He clearly states another presupposition — what he calls the "Women's Liberation Movement" — as the cultural lens through which he reads and interprets the Bible. The irony here is that he routinely accuses complementarians of cultural appropriation. It is difficult to believe that such hypocrisy is not intentional, as he writes, "It is possible for discoveries and advances in society to challenge a long-held interpretation of Scripture," and "Now that our culture has discovered otherwise, and the Scripture's original meaning and intent has been recovered, we can and should run with both of our legs." Cultural discovery here shapes biblical interpretation, and that of "cloudy texts," which happen to be every text that clearly teaches male headship and female submission. How convenient! Throughout the book, Williams engages in precisely what he accuses complementarians of doing, and readers should trust him because these texts are too difficult to understand without his guidance.

Finally, Williams's intended audience is unclear. On the one hand, his style is conversational at best and condescending at worst, but altogether tonally inconsistent

with the many scholarly exegetical arguments he attempts to make. If his intended audience is popular, why the italicized references to the original languages? And if he is speaking to scholars, why frame your argument as a repentant memoir? Furthermore, when he does foray into the Hebrew text (of Genesis 2–3, especially), his incompetence shines. One example will suffice. He argues that the first man's "calling" his wife "woman" (Gen 2:23) is a different Hebrew word than his "calling" her "Eve" after their sin (Gen 3:20). They are not different words; they are the same verbal root in two different stems. The first is direct speech while the second is a narration, which explains the variation in stem. The intent of the text is clear — just as the Lord God "brought" the animals to the man so he would "call" them (Gen 2:19–20), he brought the woman to him so that he would "call" her (Gen 2:22–23). Such fallacies will be undetected by popular readers, which is perhaps Williams's greatest blunder as he seeks to serve the church but, intentionally or not, abuses her instead.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as a quick perusal of the endnotes makes clear, this book was unnecessary. Every argument Williams makes he lifted from an egalitarian work already in circulation. One thing remains abundantly clear and unchanged — Genesis must frame our worldview commitments, including our anthropology. Because Williams builds his worldview on the sand of critical theory and expressive individualism, his thesis and supporting argumentation crumble under the weight of the cohesive worldview of the inspired biblical authors and faithful, attentive exegesis.]

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Embracing Complementarianism: Turning Biblical Convictions into Positive Church Culture

INTRO

If there was ever a time a book needed to be written on building a positive culture of complementarianism in the church, it is now. With a plethora of resources addressing the alleged harms of complementarianism (or the harms of its distortions), I have been longing for a book that paints a positive picture of its beauty in church life. Even more, I have been longing for a book that teaches church leaders how to cultivate a culture in the church that happily and whole-heartedly embraces and lives out complementarian convictions. In short, a book like *Embracing Complementarianism: Turning Biblical Convictions into Positive Church Culture* is needed. Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher sought to fill this gap within complementarian lit-

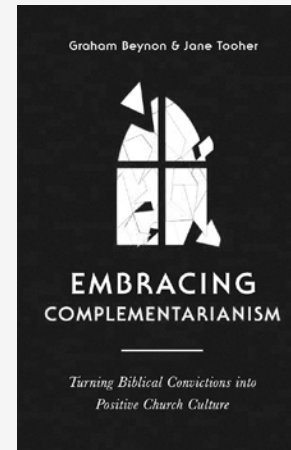
erature. I believe they accomplished this task in some ways, but I found the book wanting in other ways.

SUMMARY

The thesis of their book is straightforward: “Our conviction is that teaching and practicing a more robust complementarianism leads people from a reluctant acceptance to a joyful embracing of God’s word in this area” (12). Their goal is not to defend complementarianism *per se*; they assume a complementarian framework. Their goal is to take the conversation “wider,” “deeper,” and to make it “positive” (13).

POSITIVES

Many praises may be given to this book,



Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher.
*Embracing Complementarianism:
Turning Biblical Convictions into
Positive Church Culture*. The Good
Book Company, 2022.

but I will limit myself to four. First, the authors provide a helpful balance of commendation and warning of differing views among complementarians. They recognize the two primary camps (with a range in between): broad and narrow (32–34, 42–43, 54–55). They helpfully show some of the strengths and potential weaknesses of each. In their words, “A lot of writing on gender leans in one of those two directions [overplaying the differences or denying the similarities in gender], but we must hold together similarity and difference as the basis of our relationship and unity” (43). It is always good to be aware of which way one might lean so that extremes beyond Scripture might be avoided.

Second, the authors draw out the tension between knowing *that* there are real differences between men and women beyond biology versus being overly precise in exactly what those differences are. They write, “One writer likened the difference between men and women to different perfumes: you know the difference when you smell them, but it’s very difficult to describe” (54). I feel this tension. Are men leaders, protectors, and providers *ontologically*, and women are not? Or perhaps

women are these things to a lesser degree? Are women followers, helpers, and nurturers *ontologically*, and men are not? Or perhaps men are these things to a lesser degree? Maybe there are no distinct ontological characteristics of men and women, there are only role distinctions? Still, does that mean women *in no sense* are leaders, protectors, and providers, and men *in no sense* are followers, helpers, or nurturers? I appreciate the authors helping us feel this tension, while at the same time affirming that there are real differences beyond mere biology.

Third, the authors provide good reminders of how the church might unknowingly stifle the voices and gifts of female members: “Our concern is that among complementarian churches, there can be a tendency to assume or give the impression that we don’t really need the ministry of women — which is to regulate half of the body as being unnecessary” (101). This truth is important for churches (especially church leaders) to keep in mind. Since the preaching of the Word is central to the health of the church, and since only men are called to preach the Word (a point the authors agree with), the leaders might unintentionally build a culture in the church that devalues the ministry of women because they do not preach. Leaders need to work hard to teach and affirm the value of female ministry in the church.

Finally, the call for church leaders to lead clearly according to their convictions is a very important reminder. I couldn’t agree more: “leaders of the church need to take responsibility and decide where they will land on this issue” (127). It does not serve church members well to be unclear on matters of manhood and womanhood and how such convictions are implemented into church practice.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

While there is much to be commended,



there are at least three areas that could be improved. First, the authors' claim that God's primary concern for Christians is godliness, not living out manhood or womanhood, is confusing. They write, "Scripture's main priority for the believer is not manliness or womanliness but godliness. Or we might say, God's concern is not with being a man or a woman but being Christ-like" (57). Of course, there is truth to these statements. But it left me wondering whether the authors believe that distinct qualities of "manliness" or "womanliness" must be *pursued* by men and women, or do such qualities naturally exude as each gender pursues Christlikeness? They argue "that we are never *not* a man or a woman — which means that we only ever express our godliness through our gender — it is part of who we are" (57; see also. 63–64). True, but surely they would agree there are times in our sinfulness that we are not living out who we are according to our distinctly God-designed genders. Their book would be more useful

if it helped men and women go beyond the generic pursuit of "Christlikeness" to understand what it looks like to pursue godliness according to God's design for our natural differences and gender roles.

Second, there is an overall lack of precision on what complementarianism is. For example, they use the language of "female pastoral staff" as a way of illustrating inequality that can occur between men and women who serve on staff at a church. Moreover, they argue that women cannot serve as elders because "there is no indication in the New Testament that women were appointed elders of churches" even though women "are *capable* of what is required of elders" (73). This argument makes obedience to God's commands sound arbitrary, as though Scripture asserts that a church must not have female elders because God mysteriously said so. A more robust understanding of complementarianism is to acknowledge that God intentionally and beautifully made men

and women different, and therefore their distinct roles arise out of their God-intended creational design.

Finally, perhaps the strongest critique I have is that I am not convinced their book accomplishes what the authors intend for it to accomplish; namely, to paint a *positive* picture of complementarianism in the church and show how to cultivate that kind of culture. Rather than painting a picture of complementarianism's beauty in the life of a church, the authors emphasize ways complementarian churches have fallen short. For example, I found the following rhetoric sprinkled throughout the book: "If you are a man, and especially if you are a church leader of any kind, have you seriously contemplated what it might feel like for a woman to think that God prefers men — or at least to suspect that he might?" (62) This is not a bad question. I am simply having a hard time understanding how raising these kinds of questions fulfills their expressed goal to paint

a positive picture of complementarianism in the church.

CONCLUSION

This book is worth reading. It contains a helpful reminder to those committed to complementarian convictions not to neglect the vital role women play in the church. Despite the concerns stated above, I pray that the Lord uses it to help churches turn their complementarian convictions into a *positive* church culture. ✕

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*Know that the LORD
Himself is God;
It is He who has made
us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the
sheep of His pasture.*

PSALM 100:3, NASB



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