

**BODY, SOUL AND GENDER
IDENTITY: THINKING
THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT HUMAN
CONSTITUTION** *Robert S. Smith*

**THE SPIRITUAL CARE
OF SISTERS IN THE
TRANSGENDER AGE**
Megan Basham

**THE COUNTERFEIT, ANTI-
BIBLICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES OF
POSTMODERNISM AND CRITICAL
THEORY** *Mark T. Coppenger*

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The Counsel of History

A central feature of the “long” eighteenth century — a marker of time used by historians to denote the period in Anglo-American history running from roughly the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the English Reform Act of 1832 — was a passion for freedom. This is obvious with regard to the political scene with key turning points like the French, American, and Haitian Revolutions, as well as the attempted revolution in Ireland in 1798. But this deep interest in freedom also dominated the theological scene. Think, for instance, of Jonathan Edwards’s vital study, *An Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame* (1754), which is usually known simply as *The Freedom of the Will*. This concern about freedom also dominated elements of the ecclesiological scene. Consider, for example, Andrew Fuller’s marvellous defense of the free offer of the gospel in his *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1785). Nor did this concern

for liberty leave the relationships of the genders untouched. Thus, we have the landmark work of feminism in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she argued for the freedom of women from the misogynist view that women are inferior to men. Both men and women, she argued in accord with her era’s fascination with human reason, are rational beings and this needs to be foundational to the way the two sexes interact with one another in society.

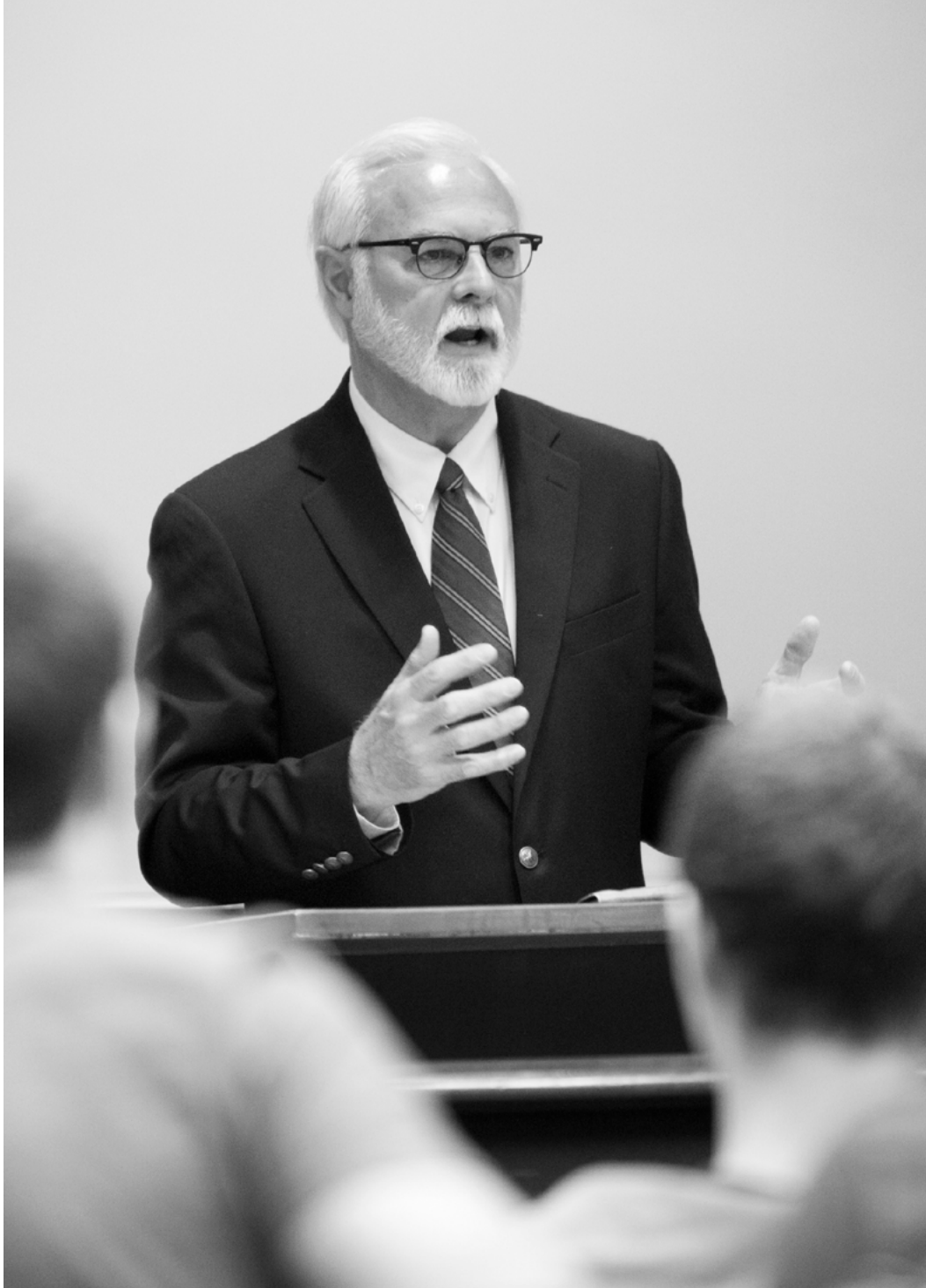
Now, this eighteenth-century passion for liberty did not run its course with the close of that remarkable period of time. It set the agenda for the modern world so that modernity — and if, you wish, post-modernity — have been dominated by what can now only be called a rage for liberty. So, for instance, we have had the various Marxist revolutions of the twentieth century that sought to free the proletariat from the hegemony of the bourgeoisie — but actually brought about some of the worst tyrannies this

globe has ever seen. And we have had the sexual revolution of the 1960s, which might well be called the Second Sexual Revolution, since the eighteenth century saw the first revolution regarding sexual mores, at least with regard to the moral conduct of men.

In more recent days, this revolution regarding sexuality has burst the bounds of what was envisaged in the Sixties and now seeks to break free from the constraints of gender. If a key word of the sixties was “plastic” — a negative term denoting the rigidity and falsity of mainstream society — a key word of the present day is “fluid.” Gender and identity are fluid: we can make ourselves whatever we wish to be and so break free from the constraints of creaturehood.

One of the most memorable courses that I took in high school was a study in grade 12 of the various revolutions that the western world has experienced since the long eighteenth century. One of the key lessons of that course that

has stayed with me is that revolutions have constraints imposed by geography and time, economics and human personalities. Freedom is always subject to constraints that are often beyond human control and planning. And this is a good thing. Anarchy, when everyone does what is good in their own sight, is possibly the worst state of human affairs conceivable. The prophets and pundits of this revolutionary who call for gender fluidity will thus find that constraints built into the fabric of nature and time will ultimately challenge their “brave new world.” This does not mean, however, that these prophets and proponents will not bring about significant human suffering. And for this cause, our voices — shaped by Scripture and reason and historical reflection — need to be raised in defence of the creator’s ordering of humanity. ✕



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*Source: Association of Theological Schools, January, 2021



MEGAN BASHAM

The Spiritual Care of Sisters in the Transgender Age

“Does Bluey being blue ruin gender stereotypes?”

This was the question a reader asked after I recommended the Australian preschool cartoon “Bluey,” a show about a six-year-old puppy and the make-believe games she enjoys with her younger sister and parents. As I said in my *WORLD Magazine* review of the show, the Heeler household at the center of the stories, being modern city dwellers, are quite a bit removed from the *Leave it To Beaver* model of yesteryear. Yet, whether intentionally or not, their interactions mirror biblical

gender paradigms within the framework of how nuclear families live today.

Dad, the primary breadwinner, is an archaeologist who often works from home, thus providing childcare for his two daughters whenever his wife is away at her part-time job. Yet his parenting style is distinctly fatherly—teasing, tough, and a little more rambunctious than Mom’s more careful, nurturing approach. Based on the models they’ve seen at home, when the neighborhood children play “mums and dads” the girls select “husbands” who demonstrate a masculine protective streak.



In short, in an era of transgender indoctrination where Muppet Baby Gonzo demonstrates his genderfluidity by wearing a dress and *Blues Clues* tutors three- to five-year-olds in the meaning of “non-binary,” *Bluey* is a rare gem that closely represents the family as instituted in Genesis 2.

That said, the title character strongly resembles her father rather than her mother. Further, being a dog, she doesn’t wear dresses, bows, or other overtly feminine trappings. Like all the other canine characters, she has an androgynously doggy name (just as her parents—Bandit and Chilli—and her sister, Bingo, do).

The only thing to identify Bluey as a girl, then, is the fact that, well, she simply *is* one. And so, this young dad told me he was having a debate with another Christian father over whether *Bluey*’s creators were sending a poor message to little audiences by not being more obvious about her sex.

How are viewers to feel confident in *Bluey*’s gender identity if she doesn’t, like Gonzo, make a show of donning dresses?

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard the concern. Some months before, when discussing the show with a twenty-something mom of toddlers, she, too, wondered if I thought it a problem that the creators didn’t take greater care to outwardly demonstrate Bluey’s girlishness. Given all the other laudable, wholesome qualities of the series, the worry struck me as paranoia born of our cultural moment.

After all, I doubt parents of the 1950s had the same unease over scruffy Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Or that those in the 80s worried overmuch about how motorcycle mechanic Jo on *The Facts of Life* might confuse female viewers. In those decades, *girl* was understood to mean something more than a role you performed or a persona you assumed.

But then again, we are Christian parents raising children in an age when it is no longer taken for granted that the body settles the question of gender — when “male and female He created them” will have to be conscientiously taught.

THE ABOLITION OF WOMAN

The transgender revolution that is disconnecting biology from personhood has pummeled the definition of “woman” far more than that of “man.” The lack of accommodation or even acknowledgement of the female sex and its unique, God-given capabilities is proceeding at a break-neck pace.

The span of a few months in 2021 saw the White House issue a budget that replaces the word “mothers” with “birthing people” and a congresswoman refer to women as “menstruating people.” Meanwhile, in September, the ACLU altered a quote about abortion from the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (who, ironically enough, founded the group’s Women’s Rights Project) to remove both references to “women” and female pronouns.

Politicians and political non-profits being what they are, their motivation to shape their rhetoric to keep up leftist social agendas can, on some cynical level, be understood. Yet the medical establishment, too, has taken up the cause of removing women from the lexicon.

One of the oldest and most-respected medical journals in the Western world, *The Lancet*, described women as “bodies with vaginas,” while the American Cancer Society issued new screening recommendations for “people with a cervix.” Not to be outdone, the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine now refers to breast-feeding as “chest-feeding,” an act accomplished, they tell us, by “people who lactate.”

While I have yet to hear of any significant mainstream examples of men referred to as “people with prostates or penises,” women are the gender that dare not speak its name.

Yet beyond the narrow focus of protecting girls’ and women’s sports from the incursion of biological males, very little pastoral discussion of transgenderism focuses on the dehumanizing harm this movement is specifically causing to women.

Today, a person is a girl by virtue of whether one feels attracted to and fulfilled by girlish things, instead of on the infinitely deeper basis that God created women physically and spiritually to accomplish what men cannot. The soul-deep destruction this is doing to the dignity of women as a class is incalculable.

¹Scottie Andrew, “Nonbinary characters like ‘Gonzo-rella’ are lighting up children’s TV and encouraging self-acceptance,” *CNN*, Sept. 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/25/entertainment/gonzorella-nonbinary-childrens-tv-cec/index.html>.

²Blues Clues & You, “The Blue’s Clues Pride Parade, Sing-Along Ft. Nina West,” May 28, 2021, Children’s video, 3:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4vHegf3WPU>.

³Benjamin Fearnow, “Biden Admin Replaces ‘Mothers’ With ‘Birthing People’ in Maternal Health Guidance,” *Newsweek*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/biden-admin-replaces-mothers-birthing-people-maternal-health-guidance-1598343>.

⁴Matthew Miller, “AOC Explains Trans Men and Nonbinary People Can Menstruate After Referring to ‘Menstruating People,’” *Yahoo News*, Sept. 8, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/aoc-explains-trans-men-nonbinary-231600146.html>.

⁵American Civil Liberties Union (@ACLU), Twitter post, Sept. 18, 2021, 12:07 p.m., <https://twitter.com/ACLU/status/1439259891064004610>.

⁶Yaron Steinbuch, “Leading British Medical Journal Ripped for Calling Women ‘Bodies with Vaginas,’” *New York Post*, Sept. 28, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/09/28/the-lancet-ripped-for-calling-women-bodies-with-vaginas/>.

⁷Sandy McDowell, “ACS Updates Cervical Cancer Screening Guidelines to Start Screening at Age 25,” *American Cancer Society*, July 30 2020, <https://www.cancer.org/latest-news/acs-updates-cervical-cancer-screening-guidelines-to-start-screening-at-age-25.html>.

⁸Caroline Downey, “Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine Encourages Use of ‘Chestfeeding,’ ‘Gender-Inclusive Language,’” *National Review*, Aug. 14, 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/academy-of-breastfeeding-medicine-encourages-use-of-chestfeeding-gender-inclusive-language/>.

"A generation of girls is taking note."

Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling put it well when she said, "If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased."

This speaks not just to concrete questions of fairness in athletics or safety in restrooms but the worth of women in society. How much value can be afforded us if women cannot even be identified, if a woman is reduced to a clinical summation of her body parts?

Just as that erasure is taking place, the role models of beauty and allure that Madison Avenue is increasingly holding out to girls are, in fact, boys. While it's not a trend I would expect many pastors to keep up with, the fact remains that young women in their congregations are being pummeled with images of famous males tricked out as the feminine ideal.

Flip through a teen girl's Instagram feed and you'll see Hunter Schafer, cover model for upscale cosmetics manufacturer Shiseido, and Andreja Pejic, brand ambassador for the equally high-end Makeup For Ever. A bit lower down the price ladder, you'll find Hari Nef, newest face of the mid-range beauty company L'Oreal. Victoria's Secret, long the market arbiter of sexualized pop-culture iconography, hired a man going by the name of Valentina Sampaio as the latest model for its PINK spinoff, a line specifically targeted at girls ages 13 to 22. And the Louis Vuitton and Chanel logos

that have danced through the dreams of brand-conscious teen girls for decades? They're now both being peddled by a lithe, willowy 27-year-old male named Teddy Quinlivan.

The list of men now walking runways, posing in ad campaigns, and staring out of the cover of fashion magazines dressed up as seductive sirens could go on and on, but suffice it to say this onslaught of displacement is one that is being felt almost entirely by women, and very young women at that. There simply is not an equivalent blitz of celebrated messaging-filling spheres that were once reserved for boys and men.

What psychological burden does it place on girls to see such images and absorb the subtext that one must prove one is feminine enough to qualify for the title "girl" and "woman"? As Students for Life President Kristen Hawkins recently pointed out, viewed from within the transgender framework, there is "nothing special or unique about being a woman other than a dress code."

If being a woman is something you feel and present to the world rather than something you innately are, it creates works-based gender requirements that grotesquely narrow the infinite, unique manifestations of individual womanhood. We are flattened to caricature.

A generation of girls is taking note.

THE OPT-OUT REVOLUTION

In 2017, the U.K.'s *Guardian* reported that 70 percent of sex change referrals for British patients under age 18 are now female, an almost total inverse of the ratio from ten years previous. Studies in the U.S. have found the same astonishing shift: A disorder that once almost solely affected males, has, among adolescents, come to be overwhelmingly dominated by girls.

As one doctor who works with gender nonconforming children told *Slate Magazine* anecdotally, "At our clinic, the balance was about 50/50 when I started [7-8 years ago], and it's shifted to be maybe 65-to-70 percent transmasculine [girls who want to become boys] today."

In her book *Irreversible Damage*, journalist Abigail Shrier deftly traces the social contagion of female self-rejection at the root of this trend.

"Until just a few years ago," she writes, "gender dysphoria — severe discomfort in one's biological sex — was vanishingly rare. It was typically found in less than .01 percent of the population, emerged in early childhood, and **afflicted males almost exclusively**" [emphasis mine].

Until, that is, around 2016, a time when trans rights became a hot national topic and the question of how churches should show love and hospitality to those who believe they are transgender began to be widely debated in Christian circles.

That year, the number of gender transition surgeries for females in the U.S. quadrupled. Meanwhile in Great Britain, the rate of tween and teen girls casting off their natal sex increased 4,400 percent over ten years.

Working from a study conducted by ob-gyn turned public health researcher Lisa Litton, Shrier says two patterns in this sudden explosion stand out: "First, the clear majority (65 percent) of the adolescent girls who had discovered transgender identity in adolescence — 'out of the blue' — had done so after a period of prolonged social media immersion. Second, the prevalence of transgender identification within some of the girls' friend groups was more than seventy times the expected rate."

In other words, what appears to be influencing these girls to throw away their most fundamental identity is the natural feeling of awkwardness and discomfort that so often attends adolescence (particularly when one feels one doesn't fit a neat mold) combined with the influence of the culture.

⁹J.K. Rowling (@jk_rowling), Twitter post, June 6, 2020, 6:02 p.m., https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269389298664701952.

¹⁰Mary Jackson, "Erasing Womanhood: Transgender-inclusive language seeks to dismiss the realities of biology," *WORLD Magazine*, Aug. 7, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2021/09/28/the-lancet-ripped-for-calling-women-bodies-with-vaginas/>.

¹¹Jamie Doward, "'Take These Children Seriously': NHS clinic in the eye of trans rights storm," *The Guardian*, Nov. 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/nov/19/nhs-clinic-trans-rights-storm-gender-identity-specialist-centre-transgender>.

¹²Madison Aitken, et al., "Evidence for an Altered Sex Ratio in Clinic-Referred Adolescents with Gender Dysphoria," *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, Jan. 22, 2015, 12:756–63.

¹³Evan Urquhart, "Why Are Trans Youth Clinics Seeing an Uptick in Trans Boys?" *Slate*, Sept. 13, 2017, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/09/trans-youth-clinics-are-seeing-more-trans-boys-than-before-why.html>.

¹⁴Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2021).



The irony, of course, is that while we view the past as more repressive and regressive when it comes to gender roles, the bounds of womanhood were elastic enough then to include such outliers as Calamity Jane and Annie Oakley who didn't conform to stereotypical femininity.

Today, more and more of those little Blueys, who pay scant attention to frills and perhaps look and behave more like their fathers, seem to feel in some fundamental sense that they're failing to qualify under womanhood's new performative requirements. And so, they are opting out of their sex.

Rowling has said, for example, that were she growing up today, she, too, might have seized on the relief trans identity offers from the pressures of femininity. "The allure of escaping womanhood would have been huge," she wrote in a much-maligned blog post. "If I'd found community and sympathy online that I couldn't find in my immediate environment, I believe I could have been persuaded to turn myself into the son my father had openly said he'd have preferred."

Given how unquestionably our culture is devaluing women *as women*, the key question for Christian men is whether they see the missiles being fired at women and what they are prepared to do to shield them.

TRANSGENDER PAGAN OR FEMALE SHEEP—WHOSE NEEDS COME FIRST?

With the above foundation laid, the matter of how the church should respond to the questions the transgender movement is putting before us must include the specific harm being done to women. If brothers, husbands, and pastors join the culture in erasing women or minimizing what women are, even with the aim of showing hospitality to the lost, they are failing to fulfill their God-given role of protectors and leaders.

For example, in addressing what pronouns Christians should use when speaking to a transgender person, pastor and former Southern Baptist Convention president J.D. Greear framed the question as one of erring on the side of truth or kindness as it applies to the transgender individual.

"Some people on one side are going to say, 'Hey, we got to tell the truth. And the truth is this person is male or female. So I would be lying if I called somebody who is female and identified as male,'" he said on his podcast, *Ask Me Anything*. He contrasted that with another view: "There are others who would say, 'Look, as a courtesy, you should refer to a transgender person by their preferred pronoun as sort of a 'generosity of spirit' kind of approach. You see evidence in the Bible of that."

Greear concluded by saying he tends more to the "generosity of spirit" side. "If a transgender person came into our church, came into my life, I think my disposition would be to refer to them by their preferred pronoun," he said, summing it up with, "The question is: Is that the battlefield that you want to choose?"

In outlining the battlefield this way, Greear, as a pastor and an influential leader in the largest protestant denomination in the U.S., considered *only* the impact such an exchange would have on the transgender individual and the degree to which his choice of words might draw this person to the church. What he *did not* consider is the impact his pronoun use might have on a girl or young woman (whose feminine identity might very well already be in a fragile state) should she overhear it, or hear of it from a third party, or who certainly might hear his podcast answer.

If ever the clarion call of Acts 20:28 applied to a moment — *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseer* — it is this one. And the degree to which pastors and elders in the church fail to see the danger may simply be because they are men and not as vulnerable to it.

¹⁵J.K. Rowling, "J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues," *JKRowling.com*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/j-k-rowling-writes-about-her-reasons-for-speaking-out-on-sex-and-gender-issues/>.

¹⁶Samuel Smith, "SBC Pres. JD Greear Says He'll Refer to Trans Individuals by Their Preferred Pronouns," *Christian Post*, Nov. 26, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/sbc-president-jd-greear-says-he-will-refer-to-transgender-individuals-by-their-preferred-pronouns.html>.

¹⁷Greear's comments go to a wider divide beyond the purview of this essay over whether the first and primary responsibility of the shepherd is to attract new sheep into the fold (the seeker-sensitive/winsome witness model) or to feed the sheep already in the pasture. For this conversation, I would argue that the assumption that the sheep already in the pasture are secure from the ravaging wolves of our culture's sexual identity confusion is a misguided one, as demonstrated by the preceding sections.

When I later asked Greear for clarification of his “pronoun hospitality” position on the podcast *The World and Everything In It*, I believe he had the wrong interpretation of the issue then, as well.

I brought up the relevance of the Apostle Paul’s writings on meat sacrificed to idols, specifically 1 Corinthians 10:27-29:

If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. I am referring to the other person’s conscience, not yours.

Greear’s response [lightly edited for clarity]:

Paul puts himself definitely on the side that thinks that you should be able to eat meat that’s offered to an idol. He basically says all things are clean for the Christian. And he calls those who don’t agree with him there weak spiritually. So, it’s clear that he has an opinion on this and he feels free eating meat and he’s even free enough in a public letter like Romans to say I think people who don’t see this are wrong.

But what’s amazing is what he does after that. He then says unity in the body is more important than how I feel about this issue. I actually think that’s a marvelously relevant topic for this because I do think, Megan, there’s somebody like you that’s just convinced that in no situation — even if I’ve been clear on the truth

and even if it’s clear that [in using the transgender pronouns] I’m kind of quoting what [the transgender individual] is saying — I just feel like I can’t do that. I think that’s a conviction that we can take in good conscience.

In this case, Greear only addressed the portion of Paul’s writing that asserts eating meat sacrificed to idols isn’t sin. So in our analogy, simply using the words “he” or “she” may also not be sin. But he did not address Paul’s care for the conscience of the weaker believer.

If a Christian does not know a transgender person is transgender on sight, or if he suspects but isn’t certain, and uses a pronoun that doesn’t correspond to the individual’s biological sex, of course the Christian is not in sin. He is only “eating what is put before him” without “raising questions,” so to speak.

But if this individual announces their transgender identity with the expectation that the Christian will now use corresponding pronouns — if the unbeliever draws attention to the sacrificed meat — and the Christian still uses them, particularly if he uses them in a way that others may hear or eventually hear of, then he is not caring for the consciences of weaker believers.

Paul makes it clear that the Christian’s priority in matters of conscience must be to show care for the weaker brother (or sister) who may experience raw emotions over the customs of a pagan society. This both helps protect the weaker believer and provides a witness for any observing *unbeliever* of the sensitive care Christ-followers take of one another.

In this case, the pronoun question is put into a completely different paradigm than one of truthful combativeness versus relation-based acquiescence as far as it involves transgender individuals. Instead, it is one of seeing to the needs of a part of the Church that is being pummeled daily, in various ways, with the message that our sexual identity as ordered by God is not worthy of protection.

This is not to single out Greear, as he is hardly alone among evangelical leaders in not considering this issue’s impact on the women. For this essay I searched the archives of *Christianity Today*, *The Gospel Coalition*, and several other prominent Protestant publications and failed to find *any* that specifically addressed the question of how the church should respond to the transgender movement’s destruction of womanhood.

I also reached out to several female Bible teachers and professors of theology. They, too, told me they knew of no significant discussion being had among pastors on this topic.

To gently chastise my brothers, this must change.

Shrier’s book and others like it documenting the transgender craze’s destructive power over girls have topped the bestseller lists and made headlines for over a year now. We are late to a conversation in which we Christ followers, above all groups of people in our society, are best equipped to shed the light of truth.

I do not want my tender seven- and twelve-year-old daughters to hear anything from their pastors, elders, or ministry leaders that might bolster our pagan culture’s message that their precious womanhood, given to them by God, can be sacrificed for the sake of some “greater” good. They are already daily hearing that what makes them uniquely feminine can be trampled and bartered away on a social engineering whim.

They are young girls. They are the weaker vessels who demand careful, sensitive consideration both by virtue of their age and by virtue of their sexual identity, as highlighted in 1 Peter 3:7.

If the men of the church join in contributing to this plague on their womanhood, they will have failed in their protector roles as both men and stronger brothers. ✕

Megan Basham is a reporter for *The Daily Wire* and the author of *Beside Every Successful Man: A Woman’s Guide to Having It All*.

¹⁸Megan Basham and Nick Eicher, interview with J.D. Greear, *The World and Everything In It*, podcast audio, Jan. 17, 2020, <https://wng.org/podcasts/culture-friday-j-j-d-greear-and-pronoun-hospitality-1617918243>.

A Lutheran View of Transgenderism

In recent months, a certain church body made headlines after electing and installing Meghan Rohrer as bishop of their Sierra Pacific Synod. “Evangelical Lutheran Church elects first transgender bishop,” declared *NBC News*’s headline.¹ Not to be outdone in the vaguery department, *CNN* declared, “The Lutheran Church elected its first transgender bishop.”²

These headlines paint with far too broad an ecclesiastical brush. It is true that a church body calling itself “the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (ELCA) recently installed Rohrer as a bishop, the first election for someone identifying as transgender in that particular church body. But it is misleading to refer to the ELCA as either *the Evangelical Lutheran Church* or, simply, *the Lutheran Church*, as neither of these terms is associated with a specific church body.

While there may be only one ecclesial organization that can properly be called the Roman Catholic Church, the same cannot be said of the Lutheran Church, which has never had a pope or a unified governing body. What makes Lutherans *Lutheran* is not holding membership in one specific church body, but belonging to a congregation

that holds to a certain confession of faith rooted in a series of writings known as the Lutheran Confessions. To be Lutheran, in a historical and theological sense, is to confess these Confessions.

Likewise, referring to the ELCA as either *the Evangelical Lutheran Church* or *the Lutheran Church* is misleading because the ELCA’s positions on numerous issues, including transgenderism, are irreconcilable with the doctrine espoused by the Lutheran Confessions. While citizens of the United States certainly have the right to form a church body and call it whatever they desire, merely calling oneself Lutheran does not actually make one Lutheran. And while new stories lauding the LGB trailblazing of the ELCA may successfully warm the hearts of progressive readers, they do a poor job of informing those readers as to what a genuine Lutheran view on transgenderism is.

What, then, is the Lutheran position? What do the Lutheran Confessions say about the issue that has so deeply absorbed our culture in such a short period of time? The best place to look is in the words of Martin Luther’s Small Catechism.

LUTHER’S SMALL CATECHISM

Written in 1529, Luther viewed his Small Catechism as a work condensing the essential doctrines of the Christian faith into an easily memorized series of statements. In Luther’s view, the Catechism was aimed primarily at children, but was also beneficial for adults. The Catechism covers the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar. It also features a section on prayer and a series of Bible verses aiding Christians in leading God-pleasing lives according to their vocations known as the Table of Duties.

While Luther’s Small Catechism was written long before the concept of human gender, let alone transgenderism, was invented, he makes numerous assertions throughout the document that apply to the issue, and thus are binding upon those who can properly be called Lutherans.

First, let’s consider Luther’s take on the Apostles’ Creed, in particular the first two articles. What does it mean for us to say “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth?” Luther writes:

I believe that God has made me and all creatures. He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my

senses, and still preserves them. In addition, He has given me clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods. He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life. He protects me from all danger and guards me and preserves me from all evil. He does all this out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this I ought to thank Him, praise Him, serve Him, and obey Him. This is most certainly true.³

Likewise, what do we mean when we confess faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God? Luther writes:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. He did this not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, so that I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.⁴

¹Dan Avery, “Evangelical Lutheran Church Elects First Transgender Bishop,” *NBC News* (May 12, 2021), accessed September 26, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/evangelical-lutheran-church-elects-first-transgender-bishop-rcna902>

²Scott Andrew, “The Lutheran Church Elected Its First Transgender Bishop, Who Will Lead 200 Congregations,” *CNN*, May 12, 2021, accessed September 26, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/12/us/first-transgender-lutheran-bishop-megan-rohrer-trnd/index.html>.

³Paul McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 328.

⁴McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 329.

Second, let's consider what Luther writes about the Commandments, namely the first, fifth, sixth, and eighth commandments.⁵

What does it mean to have no other gods? Luther writes, "we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."⁶

What is God telling us when he commands us not to murder? "We should fear and love God so that we may not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need."⁷

What is God requiring of us when he tells us not to commit adultery? "We should fear and love God so that we may lead a pure and decent life in words and deeds, and each love and honor his spouse."⁸

What is God demanding when he tells us not to bear false witness against our neighbor? "We should fear and love God so that we may not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything."⁹

Having considered the words of the Small Catechism, let us then consider what, precisely, transgenderism is.

WHAT EXACTLY IS TRANSGENDERISM?

First, at its core, transgenderism is a kind of gnosticism. Consider these glossary-style definitions from Laurel Wamsley's "A Guide to Gender Identity Terms":

Sex refers to a person's biological status and is typically assigned at birth, usually on the basis of external anatomy. Sex is typically categorized as male, female or intersex.

Gender is often defined as a social construct of norms, behaviors and roles that varies between societies and over time. Gender is often categorized as male, female or nonbinary.

Gender identity is one's own internal sense of self and their gender, whether that is man, woman, neither or both. Unlike gender expression, gender identity is not outwardly visible to others. For most people, gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth, the American Psychological Association notes. For transgender people, gender identity differs in varying degrees from the sex assigned at birth.

Gender expression is how a person presents gender outwardly, through behavior, clothing, voice or other perceived characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine or feminine, although what is considered masculine or feminine changes over time and varies by culture.

Cisgender, or simply **cis**, is an adjective that describes a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgender, or simply **trans**, is an adjective used to describe someone whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth. A transgender man, for example, is someone who was listed as female at birth but whose gender identity is male.¹⁰

In other words, the essence of maleness and femaleness is not found in one's sex,

but one's gender identity. Chromosomes don't matter in determining what is truly male and female. DNA doesn't define us as either man or woman. Rather, being male, female, or any other gender expression is determined by looking within and accessing a kind of inner knowledge, a *gnosis*, that informs us of our gender identity. For "non-cis" people, our flesh is essentially a prison that forces us to be perceived as something other than what we are. In such cases, the flesh must be transcended to find truth and peace.

Second, transgenderism is *creative* in a literal sense. When a biological female declares that she is male, she creates a new identity, a new sense of being. When a biological male declares that he is female, he speaks this new reality into existence.

That new reality can even scrub a previous one from existence, as we see in the example of actress Ellen Page. In 2020, Page declared herself a transgender male named Elliot. Shortly afterward, Saturday Night Live edited a YouTube description of an old skit featuring Page to reflect this new moniker. It doesn't matter if the person who hosted SNL in 2008 was a woman named Ellen. There is no more woman. There is no more Ellen. Elliot Page's words declaring "his" new identity reached back through time and created a new reality.

Third, transgenderism is *conscriptive*. It requires that others speak in accordance with its philosophical principles, even if they do not share those philosophical principles. Refusing to use a trans person's preferred pronouns is a de facto act of hatred and bigotry. The practice of deadnaming, using a trans person's discarded name, is considered an act of violence. You must preserve the reality a trans person has spoken into reality by affirming it with your speech, lest you drive that person to suicide.

This is not merely the case in private conversation, but in official documents. The American Medical Association, for example, recently suggested that biological sex should be removed as a legal designation on birth certificates.¹¹ Likewise, many states allow people to change the designation on their birth certificates to "X" if they no longer identify as either male or female.¹²

The rationalization for these decisions is straightforward, as Willie Underwood III of the AMA explained. As Marcia Frellick of *Web MD* reports:

"Assigning sex using binary variables in the public portion of the birth certificate fails to recognize the medical spectrum of gender identity," Underwood said, and can be used to discriminate.

⁵The Lutheran Confessions use the Augustinian numbering of the Commandments.

⁶McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 317

⁷McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 321

⁸McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 322

⁹McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 324

¹⁰Laurel Wamsley, "A Guide to Gender Identity Terms," *NPR*, June 2, 2021, accessed September 29, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq>.

¹¹Marcia Frellick, "Remove Sex from Public Birth Certificates, AMA Says," *Web MD*, June 16, 2021, accessed September 27, 2021, <https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/news/20210616/remove-sex-from-public-birth-certificates-ama-says>.

¹²Reuters Staff, "Nonbinary? Intersex? 11 U.S. States Issuing Third Gender IDs," *Reuters*, January 31, 2019, accessed September 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-us-lgbt-lawmaking/nonbinary-intersex-11-u-s-states-issuing-third-gender-ids-idUSKCN1PP2N7>.

Jeremy Toler, MD, a delegate from GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality said transgender, gender nonbinary, and individuals with differences in sex development can be placed at a disadvantage by the sex label on the birth certificate.

“We unfortunately still live in a world where it is unsafe in many cases for one’s gender to vary from the sex assigned at birth,” Toler said.

Here, we see that many in the medical community are casting aside biological definitions of male and female and embracing the metaphysical claims of transgenderism in order to build a safer world for those who identify as trans.

Fourth, transgenderism is *mutilative*. In a strange rejection of its first gnostic principle, transgenderism asserts that altering one’s body in order to conform it to one’s gender identity is often a necessary step to achieving a sense of fullness and truth. Sure, sometimes the prison that is our body needs to be transcended in order for a trans person to find his true self. This is why we must, for example, assert that some men menstruate and get pregnant. But other times, in order for a trans person to find truth, his body must be chopped up and altered in order to imitate the biological understanding of male and female. Men who want their genitals removed in order to be more fully female must be able to do so. Prepubescent children must have access to hormone blockers, lest they begin developing the “wrong” physical features.

Fifth, transgenderism is *soteriological*. It offers a kind of salvation promise to all who embrace it, something we see in the broader category of critical theory.

While critical theory is often referred to as a social philosophy, it could better be described as a religious system that divides the world, sheep and goat style, into oppressors and the oppressed. Oppressors are threatened with condemnation if they do not dismantle the power structures that hinder marginalized people from achieving economic, social, and cultural equality. Righteousness is promised to anyone who defends the cause of the marginalized. Those who belong to one or more marginalized classes also have the promise of righteousness, but get a bonus reward thrown in for good measure: social invulnerability. No one is allowed to mock or criticize you for fear of being labeled a bigot or oppressor.

This is most certainly true of transgenderism which, post-Obergefell, became the favored marginalized group of critical-theory-embracing progressives. Those who come out as trans are showered in praise. They are lauded for their bravery and declared to be good people for being true to themselves. It would have been unrighteous to live a lie. But having mustered the courage to speak their new gender into existence, they have now found righteousness. God, however one conceives of him, will surely be pleased with such a person and would never cast him out. By embracing your trans identity, you have made yourself worthy of salvation.

This becomes clear when one considers the drastic rise in teen girls identifying as some form of gender non-conforming in recent years. As Abigail Shrier noted for



the *New York Post*, “between 2016 and 2017, the number of gender surgeries for natal females in the US quadrupled; in the UK, the rates of gender dysphoria for teenage girls are up 4,400 percent over the previous decade.”¹³

Watch a few viral videos of young women “coming out” as trans and it becomes quite clear what is happening: Awkward young women with low social credit cannot resist the promise of adoration, reinvention, and protection that comes from identifying as a member of the non-binary class, a protected species. Free-agent “weirdos” can be mocked and ridiculed by their fellow students. They can be dismissed by their teachers and parents. Mock a transgender student, however, and you might find yourself expelled. Teachers who refuse to acknowledge a student’s self-chosen identity could find themselves out of a job. Parents who do likewise might find themselves staring down a visit from

the department of child services. Just as other religions promise their faithful some form of divine honor and protection from evil, so the transgender religion assures its followers that they can find relief from the evil foes of judgment and rejection by embracing its tenants.

Likewise, transgenderism offers that same salvation promise to their allies in the “cis” community. By using their pronouns, by embracing their definition of male and female, by praising them for living their truth, one has succeeded at defending the marginalized and thus acquired the righteousness necessary to withstand the judgment of whomever that divine judge might be.

When we compare these five pillars of transgenderism with Luther’s assertions in the Small Catechism, it’s easy to see how incompatible transgenderism is with a Lutheran view of male and female.

¹³Abigail Shrier, “How ‘Peer Contagion’ May Play a Role Into the Rise of Teen Girls Transition,” *New York Post*, June 27, 2020, accessed September 30, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2020/06/27/how-peer-contagion-plays-into-the-rise-of-teens-transitioning>.

THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF TRANSGENDERISM AND LUTHERANISM

With regard to its gnostic assumptions, transgenderism cannot be reconciled with Luther's explanation of the first article of the Creed. When Lutherans confess that God has made us and all creatures, that he's made our bodies and souls, and that it is our duty to thank and praise him for this, we are not merely confessing God as our creator. We're also confessing him as our Lord, the one who is both responsible for making the universe and who has divine ownership over every atom of his creation, including our flesh.

Our bodies do not really belong to us. They belong to God and are to be used according to their maker's will. Our bodies, likewise, are gifts from God to cherish, not prisons to transcend. Our bodies do not hinder us from being what we want to be. They tell us who God has made us to be.

When confronted by the Pharisees concerning divorce, Jesus returns them to the words of Genesis 1 and 2, "have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female," (Matt. 19:4). This is the doctrine of male and female that Lutherans confess when we acknowledge God as our creator. Humans do not have a gender. We have a sex, which is determined by the chromosomes God gave us and used to knit our flesh together. The real you is found in the body God gave you, not in the identity created by a mind that can easily be deceived by the devil whose lies dragged the first man and woman into sin.

With regard to transgenderism's *creative* aspects, these are incompatible with Luther's explanation of the first article of the Creed. To have no other gods above the one true God is to fear, love, and trust in him above all things. We cannot do this while coveting the creative power of his speech. The God who created light by declaring light to exist can speak reality into existence. We cannot. To claim that we have the power to declare maleness or femaleness into existence is an act of idolatry, no matter the motivation.

When people embrace transgenderism because they see it as offering them an escape from a lonely, upside-down world that has made no place for them, they have made an idol of this world by fearing it more than the God who can "destroy both body and soul in hell" (Matt. 10:28). When people embrace transgenderism because they feel trapped by the identity God gave them and wish to discard it for a new identity of their own creation, this too is an act of idolatry. It is loving oneself more than God and trusting that one knows better than God how to cure one's sense of disjointedness.

As to transgenderism's *conscriptive* aspects, these run afoul of a Lutheran understanding concerning the eighth commandment. When God tells us not to give false testimony against our neighbor, Luther asserts, he is telling us that we have a duty to protect the reputation of our neighbor, especially when our neighbor is being unfairly maligned. This duty is not abrogated when our neighbor is the one maligning his own reputation.

If a friend stumbles into the pit of despair and tells us, "I am worthless, irredeemable,

and someone God could never possibly love," we have a responsibility to reject that man's self-perception and to replace it with the truth. He is not what he imagines himself to be. He is someone made in the image of God, someone declared worthy of God's love by the dying words of Jesus upon Calvary. We would not surrender such a despairing man to the lies that he has directed at himself.

So it is with transgenderism. When a man stumbles into this form of deception and essentially tells us, "I cannot be what God has made me to be," we have an obligation to speak truthfully to him as well. When those who embrace transgenderism assert that they are essentially defective, and in need of surgery or social affirmation of a falsehood in order to be "fixed," we cannot participate in their self-slander. Acknowledging the legitimacy of a transgender identity by embracing a person's self-selected pronouns or by referring to biological males and females and vice versa is not in keeping with a Lutheran understanding of the eighth commandment. We cannot love our neighbor by repeating back to him the lies he has told himself, lies that pull him away from the God who loves him.

This is also true concerning the fifth commandment and transgenderism's *mutilative* aspects. When God commands us not to murder, Lutherans believe, he is commanding us to preserve our neighbor's body and health to the best of our ability. In the same way that Lutherans see physical abuse as a sin against this commandment, we see medically unnecessary surgical and hormonal treatments as a violation of God's will.

Certainly, when a surgeon removes a woman's breasts in order to save her from cancer, Lutherans can support such life-saving body carving. But when a surgeon removes a woman's breasts in order to aid in her delusion that she is truly a man, we cannot support such barbarism. When a surgeon removes a man's genitals in service of a godless view of what it means to be male and female, we must call that what it is — an act of violence and hatred, even if the one on the receiving end of that violence and hatred consents to it. The same goes for children who cannot rightly consent to hormone blocking treatments.

We cannot faithfully serve the God who made us male and female while also telling our neighbors that the path to true maleness, femaleness, or nonbinariness must be carved with a scalpel or injected with a needle. We cannot help and support our neighbor in every physical need by assenting to the lie that his physical body must be sliced and diced for him to find his true self.

Finally, the *soteriological* claims of transgenderism cannot coexist with the understanding of salvation expressed by Luther in his explanation of the second article of the Creed.

How does man acquire righteousness? Man does not become righteous by keeping the commandments of God (Rom. 3:28). And man certainly does not become righteous by keeping his own commandments, by dismantling self-imagined power structures or by inventing forms of oppression against supposedly marginalized people or by claiming for himself the status of a victim. Rather, man becomes righteous by trusting in the one who became a victim for us upon the cross.

"For those who feel out of place in their own bodies, transgenderism challenges them to discover righteousness."

As Luther says in the Catechism of Christ's salvific work, "[Jesus] has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. He did this not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, so that I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."

These beautiful words most certainly highlight how irreconcilable Lutheranism is with transgenderism. But perhaps more importantly, these words highlight how much greater the gospel is than the empty promises of transgenderism.

For those who feel out of place in their own bodies, transgenderism challenges them to discover righteousness. It says to those who trust in it, "see if you can find your true self. See if you can find the right gender expression to cure your loneliness. Look, search, and try to

discover the righteousness and divine protection you can't seem to find. See if you can locate it by tearing off bits of your flesh or by injecting yourself with foreign hormones." Likewise, transgenderism makes salvation contingent on the consent of others. It insists to its adherents that they cannot possess the peace they desire until they convert the world and acquire the affirmation of all.

The gospel does no such things. It does not send its believers on a wild metaphysical goose chase. It does not make salvation contingent upon anyone but the God who willed it. The gospel does not challenge you to find salvation.

The gospel gives you salvation. It gives those who believe the eternal life Christ won for them through his death and resurrection. It does not demand that believers invent a new identity that will save them. It bestows upon them a new nature that has been coated in the saving

blood of Christ. The gospel does not tell its adherents that they cannot escape their loneliness, sorrow, and confusion until they have conquered the enemies who oppress and dehumanize them. The gospel gives its adherents Christ's victory over their loneliness, sorrow, and confusion when it tells them, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

"This is most certainly true" is a phrase that Martin Luther repeatedly uses in his Small Catechism. In keeping with that language, let us conclude thusly:

It is most certainly true that the metaphysical, spiritual, and moral assumptions of transgenderism are irreconcilable with the doctrine espoused by the Holy Scriptures, by the Small Catechism, and thus the Lutheran Church. It is also most certainly true that the church body known as the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has rejected Lutheranism by embracing transgenderism, just as it has already done by embracing other tenants of the overarching critical theory religion. But more importantly, it is most certainly true that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has failed to love people like Meghan Rohrer by surrendering them to a godless understanding of human identity and salvation. May the God of mercy bless those who have been bewitched by this false gospel to hear the true gospel and to know true peace. ✕

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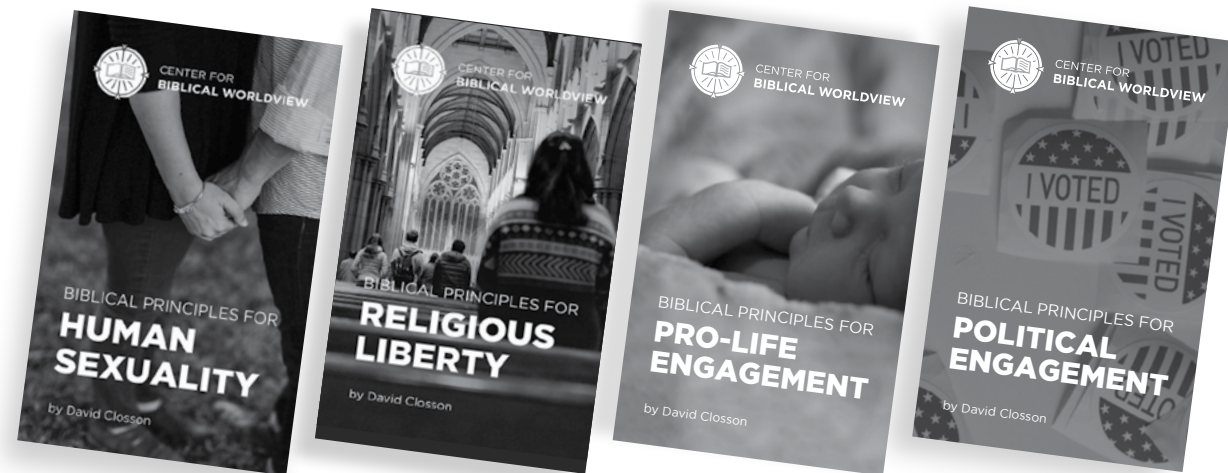


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ROBERT S. SMITH

Body, Soul and Gender Identity: Thinking Theologically About Human Constitution

1. UNDERSTANDING HUMAN CONSTITUTION

In his recent book, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church & What the Bible Has to Say*,¹ Preston Sprinkle helpfully maps out the four main views of human constitution — i.e., the relationship between the material and immaterial aspects of the human person. The first is *physicalism*, which denies the existence of an immaterial soul or spirit. The second is *non-reductive physicalism*, which affirms that we are more than our bodies but denies a body/soul distinction. The third is *soft dualism*, which acknowledges a body/soul distinction but insists that both are necessary for human personhood. The fourth is *strong dualism*, which sees body and soul as fundamentally distinct substances and equates the human person with the soul, not the body.²

¹Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church & What the Bible Has to Say* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2021).

²*Ibid.*, 146–47.

Sprinkle, quite rightly, deems views one and four to be sub-Christian. His own view (I think) seems to hover somewhere between two and three. However, in my judgment, *non-reductive physicalism* falls somewhat short of the biblical presentation of humanity. While its proponents are quite right to point out that both the Hebrew term *nepesh* and Greek term *psychē* often refer to the whole person rather than just the inner person (e.g., Gen. 2:7; 1 Pet. 3:20), the question is whether the Bible draws a distinction between the inner and outer person. The unequivocal answer of both testaments is that it does (e.g., Eccl. 12:6; 2 Cor. 4:16). And, what's more, it sometimes uses both *nepesh* and *psychē* to refer to the inner person specifically (e.g., Gen. 35:18; Matt. 10:28).³

So that leaves us with *soft dualism* or, what I think is a better term, *dualistic holism*, the view that human beings are “integral personal-spiritual-physical wholes—single beings consisting of different parts, aspects, dimensions, and abilities that are not naturally independent or separable.”⁴ It also brings us to the question I want to pursue in the remainder of this article: How does such an understanding of human constitution help us assess (what might be called) *spiritual gender identity theory* — i.e., the claim that a person can have the spirit or soul of one sex in the body of another?

Before proceeding, I want to stress that this is not a pastoral article; it is an exercise in theological thinking. It will certainly have important pastoral implications. But it's not my purpose here to tease these out. Helping and supporting those who are navigating gender identity conflicts requires considerable wisdom and deep compassion. But unless our care is grounded in and guided by anthropological reality (as revealed in Scripture), it will neither be truly wise nor genuinely compassionate. The theological task, therefore, is paramount and necessarily comes first.

2. ASSESSING SPIRITUAL GENDER IDENTITY THEORY

a) *The implausibility of a body-soul mismatch*

The holism of the scriptural presentation of anthropological constitution leaves no room for a conception of human beings as “composed of two separate entities joined together in an uneasy alliance.”⁵ Accordingly, John Cooper regards it as “anti-scriptural” to think of the soul as being “in tension with the body.”⁶ The reason for this is that body and soul, although distinct, interpenetrate one another — we are just as much ensouled bodies as we are embodied souls. As a consequence, “[b]iological processes are not just functions of the body as distinct from the soul or spirit, and mental and spiritual capacities are not seated exclusively in the soul or spirit. All capacities and functions belong to the human being as a whole, a fleshly-spiritual totality.”⁷



³So it is not entirely surprising, and certainly not illegitimate, that in the domain of theological anthropology, the material and immaterial aspects of human persons have typically been discussed in terms of body and soul. I will retain that practice in this article.

⁴John W. Cooper, “The Current Body-Soul Debate: A Case for Dualistic Holism,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2 (2009), 35.

⁵Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 209.

⁶John W. Cooper, “Dualism and the Biblical View of Human Beings” *The Reformed Journal* (October 1982), 18.

⁷John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 78.

My thesis, then, is this: such synthetic integration necessarily rules out the possibility of an ontological mismatch between the (visible) body and the (invisible) soul. Consequently, if a person's body is unambiguously sexed as male, it is simply not conceivable that their soul could be female (and vice versa). Indeed, a radical elemental disjunction of this kind would effectively “destroy the unity of the human person which is at the heart of a biblical anthropology.”⁸

b) Terrance Tiessen's counter-proposal

Nevertheless, it is precisely this kind of disconnection that has been proposed (albeit tentatively) by theologian Terrance Tiessen.⁹ To make his case, Tiessen relies on a particular version of Thomistic dualism drawn from the work of J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae.¹⁰ According to Moreland and Rae, “the human person is identical to its soul, and the soul comes into existence at the point of conception.”¹¹ From that moment on, the soul “begins to direct the development of a body” guided by “the various teleological functions latent within the soul.”¹² Therefore, not only is the soul “ontologically prior to the body,” but “the various biological operations of the body have their roots in the internal structure of the soul, which forms a body to facilitate those operations.”¹³ On the basis of such an understanding, Tiessen draws the conclusion that the “maleness or femaleness of human beings is an aspect of the soul.”¹⁴

He then considers the reality of the Fall in order to hypothesise “the possibility of soul/body disjunction.”¹⁵ He begins by drawing attention to the phenomenon of DSD/intersex. His argument is that while each person's soul is either male or female, in some cases “abnormalities occur in the development of the person's body so that doctors find it extremely difficult to say whether the person who has just been born is female or male.”¹⁶ Then, by extension, he suggests that perhaps others (he cites Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner as an example), whose bodies are unambiguously male or female, might experience a total “incongruence between the sex of their soul and the sex of their body.”¹⁷ So, while

Tiessen rejects the idea that “sexual identity is a social construct” and affirms that our goal should be “to live as God has created us,” his contention is that the truth of our created sex is not ultimately found in the body but in the soul.¹⁸

c) Responding to Tiessen's hypothesis

In response to Tiessen's proposal, four points can be made.

First, Tiessen appears to have overlooked a vital aspect of Moreland and Rae's position. While their view is avowedly Thomistic and dualistic, they not only regard *the body as being in the soul* (“in that the body is a spatially extended set of internally related heterogeneous parts that is an external expression of the soul's ‘exigency’ for a body”), but *the soul as being in the body* (“as the individuated essence that stands under, informs, animates, develops and unifies all the body's parts and functions”).¹⁹ This means that as a body develops and matures, “the soul's internal structure for a body is progressively realized in a lawlike way,” with the result that “the soul is fully present in every body part.”²⁰ So assuming, for the moment, that the body's sex is derived from the soul, the implication of this is that the sex of the body *reveals* the sex of the soul.

⁸Anderson, *On Being Human*, 209.

⁹Terrance Tiessen, “A Female Soul in a Male Body? A Theological Proposal,” *Theological Thoughts* (June 20, 2015), <https://www.thoughtstheological.com/a-female-soul-in-a-male-body-a-theological-proposal>. A similar view appears to be advocated by Steve Frohlich, “Christian Faithfulness and Gender Dysphoria,” *Ransom Fellowship* (May 2, 2018), <https://ransomfellowship.org/article/christian-faithfulness-and-gender-dysphoria>.

¹⁰J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 199–224.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 205.

¹²*Ibid.*, 204–5.

¹³*Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁴Tiessen, “A Female Soul in a Male Body?”

¹⁵*Ibid.* Frohlich invokes the Fall in order to come to a similar conclusion (although without explaining how this might be possible). He writes: “while functional holism is nearly universally normal, we must acknowledge (and in fact be unsurprised) that the effects of the Fall may be far-reaching enough as to sometimes create a dysfunctional holism, a disruption of the integrity of sex and gender” (“Christian Faithfulness and Gender Dysphoria,” endnote 9).

¹⁶Tiessen, “A Female Soul in a Male Body?” As part of his argument, Tiessen invokes the tragic case of David Reimer (briefly described in chapter 4 of this thesis), arguing that the reason Reimer struggled to identify as a female and eventually returned to living as a male was because he “had a male soul” and so desired “a body that matched the sex of his soul.”

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.* On this basis, he further hypothesises that (for some people, at least) homosexual desires might, in fact, be heterosexual desires — i.e., if sexual desire is a function of the soul and the soul is mismatched with the body. So, Tiessen asks, “[m]ight there be some who live with an incongruence between the sex of their soul and the sex of their body, so that desire that is actually consistent with the sex of their soul (which is hidden from us and, to some extent, even from them) is necessarily interpreted only in terms of the sex of their body?”

¹⁹Moreland and Rae, *Body and Soul*, 205.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 206, 201.

Therefore, while some DSD/intersex conditions may cloud this revelation (and so make sex-determination difficult), it does not follow that a female soul can be *hidden* inside an unambiguously male body (or vice versa). To suggest otherwise is to move away from the organicism advocated by Moreland and Rae and to embrace a considerably stronger form of substance dualism — one these authors reject.²¹

Second, Moreland and Rae's particular version of Thomistic dualism is itself difficult to reconcile with Scripture's dualistic *holism*. For despite acknowledging that "a human being is a unity of two distinct entities—body and soul," the kind of unity they affirm is functional, not ontological.²² That is, rather than being body-soul composites, "human persons are identical to immaterial substances, namely, to souls."²³ Therefore, although Moreland and Rae support a one substance anthropology, "the one substance is the soul, and the body is an ensouled biological and physical structure that depends on the soul for its existence."²⁴ This conception is more Platonic than biblical.

Historically, such a view also stands in contrast to that of Irenaeus, who held that "the soul and the spirit are certainly a *part* of the man, but certainly not *the* man; for the perfect man consists in the commingling and the union of the soul receiving the spirit of the Father, and the admixture of that fleshly nature which was moulded after the image of God."²⁵ Moreover, when the sequence of Genesis 2:7 is borne in mind (with the man's body being formed *first*) and also, behind this, the fact that Genesis 1:27 defines human beings by reference to their bodily sex (male and female), it is clear that *embodiment is basic to human ontology*. Therefore, to insist, as Moreland and Rae do, that "[t]he organism as a whole (the soul) is ontologically prior to its parts" is not merely to speculate beyond Scripture, but to push against it.²⁶ Michael Williams, then, is right to conclude that it is "not materialist, but rather fully biblical, to say that we might be more than our bodies, but we are not something other than our embodied selves."²⁷

Third, Moreland and Rae's particular version of Thomistic dualism is also difficult to reconcile with Thomas's own hylomorphic view of human persons.²⁸ Developed from Aristotle, hylomorphism maintains that all substances are composed of both matter (Gk. *hylē*) and form (Gk. *morphē*).²⁹ This means that "substances are not just things that *have* material and formal *components*. Rather, substances are those things that *are* material and formal *composites*."³⁰ As Thomas writes, "the being that a composite substance has is not the being of the form alone nor of the matter alone but of the composite."³¹ When such an understanding is applied to human beings, it leads to "an ontologically holist view of human persons that maintains that we are a composite of body and soul."³² Consequently, Thomas understands that "man is not a mere soul, nor a mere body; but both soul and body."³³ So then, in contrast to Moreland and Rae's person-soul identity view (i.e., that we *are* souls who *have* bodies), Thomas holds that each human person is a hylomorphic psychosomatic union; i.e., a body-soul synthesis.

Furthermore, Thomas regards the particularity of each human body (including its biological sex) as "the principle of existence of that particular human being."³⁴ In other words, what differentiates persons from one another is "the particular set of matter that composes their respective bodies."³⁵ As Paul Jewett expresses it: "this soul that is 'I' is

²¹Ibid., 199–201.

²²Ibid., 17, 21.

²³Moreland and Rae, *Body and Soul*, 11. For a more recent statement of this view, see J. P. Moreland, "In Defense of Thomistic-like Dualism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism*, ed. Jonathan J. Loose, Angus J. L. Menuge, and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 103.

²⁴Moreland and Rae, *Body and Soul*, 201.

²⁵Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.6.1 (ANF 1:531).

²⁶Moreland and Rae, *Body and Soul*, 206.

²⁷Michael D. Williams, "For You Are with Me: Physical Anthropology and the Intermediate State," *Presbyterian* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2019), 23.

²⁸In fairness to Moreland and Rae, they readily acknowledge that "Thomas Aquinas may not have accepted all aspects of our version of Thomistic substance dualism" (*Body and Soul*, 199). More recently, Moreland has been even more definite: "my view is not Aquinas's own view; indeed, mine departs from his at crucial points" (Moreland, "In Defense of Thomistic-like Dualism," 102).

²⁹Hylomorphism is not Thomas's own term, but first appears in the nineteenth century. For an account of its origins and various meanings, see Gideon Manning, "The History of 'Hylomorphism,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74, no. 2 (2013): 173–87.

³⁰James K. Dew Jr., *In Defense of Modified Thomistic Holism: A Proposal for Christian Anthropology*, PhD thesis (University of Birmingham, UK, 2019), 140, <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/9396/1/Dew2019PhD.pdf>. Emphasis added.

³¹Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968), 36.

³²Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 141.

³³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries*, 60 volumes, ed. T. Gilby and T. C. O'Brien (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963–1976), 1a.75.4. Thomas is here citing Augustine (*The City of God*, xix, 3) who, in turn, is citing the Roman philosopher, Varro (116–27 BC).

³⁴Andrzej Maryniarczyk, "Is the Human Soul Sexed? In Search for the Truth on Human Sexuality," *Studia Gilsoniana* 9, no. 1 (January–March 2020), 108.

³⁵Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 143.

the soul of my particular body and of no others.”³⁶ In short, it is this body that makes me me. For Thomas, then, the sex of a person’s body is integral to their identity. This is not to ignore the fact that outside of Eden bodies can be badly damaged — by disease, disability, disfigurement, etc. But it is to say that they cannot be entirely *wrong*. For if I were to take possession of a different body (as opposed to having my body restored), I would no longer be me. In this sense, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right to insist that those “who reject their bodies reject their existence before God the Creator.”³⁷

Fourth, there is good reason to question the idea that the body takes its sex from the soul. For Sprinkle, this is because “the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ are by definition descriptions of our bodies, not our souls or any other immaterial aspect of our being. Sex is a material, biological category. Accordingly, immaterial souls can’t be sexed.”³⁸ What leads some advocates of hylomorphism to think otherwise, however, is the following Thomistic principle: “Since the form is not for the matter, but rather the matter for the form, we must gather from the form the reason why the matter is such as it is; and not conversely.”³⁹ From this it follows that the soul (as the body’s form) is the cause of the body’s sex.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, other Thomistic interpreters see matters differently.⁴¹ Because Thomas insists that the body is the principle of the soul’s *individuation*, it is the soul that takes its sex (or, at least, its gender) from the body, not the other way around.⁴² As Elliott Bedford and Jason Eberl explain:

While strictly speaking the soul, which is immaterial, is not sexed, each soul is created by God as the vivifying principle of sexed bodies and is thereby individuated and sexed as an inseparable accidental quality of the human being. In short, as the vivifying principle of actually existing human beings, the human soul is properly characterised as sexed.⁴³

It is also worth noting that, on this view (no less than the alternative), there is no difficulty accounting for the Scriptural indications that departed spirits remain male or female in the intermediate state (e.g., Samuel remains Samuel in Sheol and even appears as “an old man” [1 Sam 28:14]). This is because the soul retains the sex/gender derived from the body, even after the body has returned to the dust.⁴⁴



It is difficult to determine which of these interpretations most faithfully represents Thomas’s thought. It may even be that he is at odds with himself on this point.⁴⁵ However, the second interpretation is not only plausible but, in light of what we have seen, better reflects the biblical presentation. For as Genesis 1:27 and 2:7 make plain, *sex is*, first and foremost, *a property of bodies*. That sex is also a property of human *persons* is testimony to the significance of the body for personal identity. Consequently, although I am more than my body, I am my body and my body is me. Indeed, to “assert otherwise,” write Bedford and Eberl, “is to bifurcate the essential integral nature of our body-soul unity, laying the foundation for a problematic body-self dualism.”⁴⁶

³⁶Paul K. Jewett, with Marguerite Shuster, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 42.

³⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. De Gruchy and trans. Douglas S. Bax (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 77.

³⁸Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 150.

³⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.76.5.

⁴⁰Maryniarczyk writes, “the individual human soul (as a *total* principle of the human being) is the principle of existence from which all essential (i.e., decisive as to its constitutive properties) determination of that being must come (“Is the Human Soul Sexed?” 121. Emphasis original).

⁴¹Elliott Louis Bedford and Jason T. Eberl, “Is the Soul Sexed? Anthropology, Transgenderism, and Disorders of Sex Development,” *Health Care Ethics USA* 24, no. 3 (2016), 20–23.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 20. If gender is understood as the psychological and socio-relational dimensions of personal identity — dimensions that are necessarily informed (if not determined) by a person’s biological sex, then gender may, in fact, be the better term to apply to souls.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁴Of course, Scripture insists that this separation is not permanent. The soul will be reunited and reintegrated with the body (albeit gloriously transformed) in resurrection.

⁴⁵Dew, *In Defense of Modified Thomistic Holism*, 195.

⁴⁶Bedford and Eberl, “Is the Soul Sexed?” 22.

d) Hylomorphism rules out spiritual gender identity theory

On either of the above accounts, spiritual gender identity theory is ruled out. For on both accounts *the sex of the body reveals the sex/gender of the person*.⁴⁷ In light of this, the claim that “a discrepancy between the perceiving mind and the existing body” is reflective of a genuine ontological divide can only be made on the basis of an unbiblical form of “body-self dualism.”⁴⁸ For this reason, write Bedford and Eberl, the claim is “incompatible with a Christian anthropology and so is any justification built upon it.”⁴⁹ This does not mean denying that “the deep-seated patterns of feeling and experience involved in gender dysphoria are themselves bodily”⁵⁰ — for all mental states are necessarily bodily states also. But it does mean that “transgender individuals are not experiencing an ontological disintegration, even if they perceive themselves to be.”⁵¹ Otherwise put, gender incongruence (whatever factors may have given rise to it in any particular case) is not an experience of *ontological misalignment*, but of *epistemological misidentification*.⁵² In short, there is no mismatch between body and soul.

⁴⁷Certain DSD/intersex conditions (e.g., CAIS), where phenotype and genotype are at odds with one another, might appear to falsify this conclusion. However, the question in such cases is not *whether* the body reveals the sex of the person, but *which aspect* of the body reveals the true sex of the person.

⁴⁸Bedford and Eberl, “Is the Soul Sexed?,” 24. As Sprinkle writes: “It’s one thing to say that the soul is ontologically distinct from the body; that would be Soft Dualism. It’s quite another to say that, if there’s incongruence, then the immaterial soul obviously overrules the body. That perspective would be much closer to Strong Dualism” (*Embodied*, 150).

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁰Mike Higon, “A Critique of ‘Transformed’ 4,” *Kai Euthus* (28 February, 2019), <https://mikehigton.org.uk/a-critique-of-transformed-4>. Higon’s criticism of the Evangelical Alliance’s 2018 report, *Transformed*, is curious. Acknowledging a distinction between mind and body (as the report’s authors do) does not commit them to strong dualism. In fact, in challenging “the idea of a ‘real me’ trapped inside the wrong body” (*Transformed*, 12), they clearly reject such dualism.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 27.

⁵²There are many possible causes of or contributors to gender incongruence: e.g., bullying, self-hatred, peer contagion, dysfunctional family dynamics, rigid gender stereotypes, cross-sex jealousy, experimental cross-dressing, internet influence, anime obsession, social anxiety, avatar creation, early pornography acquaintance, pornography addiction, exposure to trans ideology/trans narratives, sexual trauma, depression, desire to be special, desire to identify with an oppressed group, body dysmorphic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, dissociative disorders, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, attention-deficit disorder, autism spectrum disorder, internalised misogyny, internalised misandry, internalised homophobia, autogynephilia, autoandrophilia, etc. For a compelling account of “An ‘identification’ model of misaligned gender identity,” as well as a critical assessment of other models, see Kathleen Stock, *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (London: Fleet, 2021), 109–41.

⁵³Gilbert Meilander, *Faith and Faithfulness: Basic Themes in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 41.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

It is, therefore, not accurate to speak of the soul as if it were the real person and the body only its garment or vehicle.'

3. CONCLUSION

Whether God establishes the sex of the body *immediately* (independently of the soul) or *mediately* (via the soul), the net result is the same: a hylomorphic, body-soul composite. It is, therefore, not accurate to “speak of the soul as if it were the real person and the body only its garment or vehicle.”⁵³ Rather, we are “embodied persons and personalized bodies.”⁵⁴ Consequently, if a person’s body is unambiguously sexed as female, it is simply not plausible that their soul could be male.

By itself, this conclusion may do little to resolve the existential distress of the gender dysphoric person. But in ruling out what the problem isn’t (ontological misalignment), it directs us to where the problem likely lies (epistemological misidentification) and to the way in which true personal integration is best sought — via acceptance of and reidentification with one’s God-given and body-determined sex. ✕

Postscript: In preparing this article, I contacted Professor Tiessen to check that I had correctly understood his original proposal. He kindly confirmed that I had. At his request, I then sent him my critique of his hypothesis. He has since indicated that my arguments have persuaded him to abandon his proposal and has written a fresh article explaining how he now thinks about these matters: <https://www.thoughtstheological.com/body-soul-and-transgenderism-a-revision-of-my-earlier-tentative-theological-proposal>. I am humbled by Professor Tiessen’s integrity and grateful for his encouragement (Prov 27:17).

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Uncertain Voices: Revoice '21 Reviewed



From October 7–9, 2021, Dallas’s Chase Oaks Church hosted the fourth annual convention of Revoice, a conference conceived “to support and encourage Christians who are sexual minorities so they can flourish in historic Christian traditions.” The conference has been the focus of intense debate and controversy since its 2018 launch, with voices to the right offering concerned criticism of founding work by “Side B” writers like Eve Tushnet, Wesley Hill, and Ron

Belgau. (For the unaware, “Side B” and “Side A” are shorthand terms for self-described Christians who comfortably self-identify as “gay” but are divided on the ethics of gay acts. “Side B” abstains from gay practice, while “Side A” includes affirming revisionist voices like Matthew Vines or Justin Lee.) With the exception of Tushnet, most of the original Revoice voices did not speak at the 2021 convention, which featured a new mix of laymen and active ministry workers.

For those of us familiar with the debate, the conference proceeded along some predictable lines. Eve Tushnet opened the event by affirming attendees’ grievances even against church people who “may have loved you well in many ways,”¹ because (she takes as a given) these mentors were incompetent to address same-sex attraction (SSA). By contrast, she encourages

attendees to explore what it would mean if they were “grateful to be gay.”² Airing grievances would be a recurring theme throughout multiple sessions, as speakers alternately expressed anger, frustration, and sadness over perceived hurts at the hands of other Christians. Exploring the positive facets of same-sex attraction was likewise a topical staple.

¹Eve Tushnet, “Opening Session,” 03:40 (talk presented at Revoice, Dallas, Texas, October 7–9, 2021).

²Ibid, 10:20.

But controversies specific to 2021 hung over this particular convention, particularly the PCA's recently proposed constitutional amendments on gay pastors and church officers. From beginning to end, the core message was the same: While there may be individual exceptions, the church writ large has handled this issue horribly wrong, but Revoice has the antidote.

STILL TIME TO CARE

PCA Pastor Greg Johnson was the first pastor to host Revoice, at Missouri's Memorial Presbyterian Church. He came out as gay himself the following year, and much of the PCA controversy has subsequently swirled around him. His book *Still Time to Care* is pending a December release with Zondervan. The title functions as an implicit litmus test: Do you care about LGBT people, or do you not? The answer depends on the extent to which one agrees with Pastor Johnson.

But in his session, Pastor Johnson tells his detractors to take up the debate with older voices, including C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, John Stott, Billy Graham, and Richard Lovelace. For these "spiritual forefathers," he claims "what today is called Side B Christianity was just called biblical Christianity."³

This is a sweeping statement, to say the least. Johnson's appropriation of Lewis is especially strained, as he draws *non sequiturs* from the mere fact that Lewis's best friend Arthur Greeves was same-sex attracted, or that Lewis acknowledged a man could be "pious" and homosexually inclined at the same time, or that he was sensitive and compassionate towards such

men as they wrestled with a deep sense of inadequacy in their brokenness. Johnson draws a direct line between Lewis's musings on what "the positive life" of the homosexual should be and Eve Tushnet's declaration that homosexual vocation can and should be "a vocation of yes" — not merely saying "no to gay sex," but saying yes to all the good things into which a gay orientation could be channeled.⁴ Johnson has additionally made an anti-anti-Obergefell parallel to Lewis's comments on divorce law, as part of a broader thesis that if evangelicals had only heeded the wisdom of their forefathers, they would never have gotten down in the mud of the gay vs. Christian culture wars.⁵

Much of Lewis's thinking on the issue was captured in letter form, so it's odd from the start to speak of it as "laying a foundation" for a whole school of Christian thought about homosexuality. It's particularly odd to claim him in a cultural moment where concepts such as "preferred pronouns" wouldn't even have crossed Lewis's mind. The top-down redefinition of marriage as an institution of marriage would likewise have shocked him, even if the concept of *ersatz* marriage wasn't new to him (as he explores in letters with Sheldon Vanauken). Granted, his thinking on divorce was flawed and vulnerable to critique (which none other than J. R. R. Tolkien drafted in an unsent letter). Indeed, several of Lewis's "gay proof-texts" are vulnerable to some measure of critique. But why should Christians be afraid to critique C. S. Lewis?

The same question applies as Johnson runs through his litany of other names. Some, like Stott and Lovelace, could more accurately be said to have been working

out theology and church praxis around the issue. It may be apt for Johnson's purposes to highlight quotes where they insist that churches must ordain gay men to the ministry as a token of repentance for their homophobia. But this is then an opportunity for thoughtful Christians in 2021 to make their own measured evaluation of these comments in hindsight, not to accept wholly and blindly every word that once proceeded from the mouth of an old evangelical superstar.

A MATTER OF DISCERNMENT?

One of the conference's more complicated sessions was a presentation by Nashville-based counselor and non-profit director Pieter Valk (later published in transcript form on Valk's website⁶). Valk is an ACNA member who spearheaded a dissenting letter to a new official bishops' statement on homosexuality in early 2021. His session named and attempted to address the problem of "gay Christian incels" — gay Christians who are involuntarily celibate. After sharing stories of gay friends who had drifted away from a traditional sexual ethic, Valk said he was afraid "we're gonna lose more if we don't do something."⁷

Valk's appeal was sincere and driven by a concern to better resist temptations which he expressly framed as satanic.

But this concern was framed by blame-shifting onto conservative churches and church leaders. Specifically, Valk blames churches for "romance idolatry," for not cultivating vocational singleness, and for not giving gay incels "space" to "figure out" if they affirm a traditional ethic. "Instead," he complained, "we're pressured to choose quickly, choose correctly, and become public apologists for a traditional sexual ethic."⁸

Valk proposes that "discernment" can provide a helpful alternative frame that allows the gay incel to "own" his celibacy: "Discernment can help us move from seeing our celibacy as involuntary to seeing our celibacy as chosen."⁹ But the language of "discernment" is misapplied in a context where one's very position on the traditional ethic has not yet been "figured out." Such language is only meaningful for a firm Christian deliberating between equally biblical vocations. Valk shifts to this context when he talks about discerning between celibacy and "Christian marriage" (between man and woman), and this is the language used on the official site for his Family of Brothers monastery in Nashville.¹⁰ But Valk's setup makes it clear that he believes the term is cross-contextually apt, an improvement on the flawed church leadership model of "pressuring" gay incels to "choose quickly."

³Greg Johnson, "Still Time to Care," 28:40 (talk presented at Revoice, Dallas, Texas, October 7–9, 2021).

⁴Ibid, 20:20.

⁵"Same-Sex Attracted, Sexually Pure, and...Unfit for Ministry? Dr. Greg Johnson," Preston Sprinkle, June 29, 2021, YouTube video, 37:00, <https://youtu.be/BuULNCBaoiY>.

⁶EQUIP, "From Involuntary Celibacy to Thriving," accessed October 21, 2021, <https://equipyourcommunity.org/blog/from-involuntary-celibacy-to-thriving>.

⁷Pieter Valk, "Discerning and Embracing Celibacy," 08:00 (talk presented at Revoice, Dallas, Texas, October 7–9, 2021).

⁸Ibid, 12:00.

⁹Ibid, 28:30.

¹⁰Family of Brothers, "Discern Your Call," accessed October 21, 2021, <http://familyofbrothers.org/discern-your-call/>.

This is deeply misguided. It is one thing to encourage the church to handle seekers patiently, but it is quite another thing to insist that church leaders not take swift, biblically indicated steps to address destructive heresy in the body. And while it may be that in some individual cases, leaders have regrettably not taken similarly strong steps with heterosexual sin, this is an argument for raising standards across the board, not relaxing the ones related to homosexual sin.

Ultimately, the whole attempt to press SSA singleness into the mold of vocational singleness is based on a category error. The singleness of priests and monks who give up marriage is different in kind from the singleness of a same-sex attracted man who eschews marriage out of respect for a would-be spouse who deserves romantic consummation. The former is a considered supererogatory sacrifice, whereas the latter is a tragically necessary function of privation — a privation which could follow from other limitations besides same-sex attraction, but in all cases is a wound to be lamented.

Valk concludes by saying “gay incels” will need to come up with their own strategies for embracing celibacy instead of “waiting” for straight leaders to help them “make our celibacy good.”¹¹ He places special emphasis on seeking and building “permanent family” as he shares about his modern-day monastery. Had he not built this “brotherhood” for himself and other men, he confesses he probably “would have already abandoned celibacy, and probably a belief in God altogether.”¹² While this may be an honest statement of fact for Valk personally, such “permanent family” structure may be neither available nor wise for many “gay incels.”

Valk’s genuine desire to encourage fellow gay celibates in chastity is commendable. And pastors could be more careful in language that presupposes God will provide a spouse for every faithful Christian. But they are not required to lose all language which treats marriage as any kind of a norm or places it on any kind of a platform. Nor are they required to help establish the kind of “permanent family” structure Valk envisions. To insist on such conditions betrays a fragile foundation for a sexual ethic that desperately needs sturdier support. We who are single in Christ must recognize that while our faith may be subject to shifting moods, it is the single Christian’s task to strengthen it so that it can sustain us through seasons of companionship and profound loneliness alike, grounded in the Word of Scripture and the Word made flesh. It cannot and should not be dependent on the accessibility of particular kinds of relational human comfort, comfort which may be a blessing, but may also be a temptation, and in any case is never promised.

INTRODUCING THE “T”

In one of the conference’s most delicate sessions, a mixed panel of men and women took the stage to share their experience of gender dysphoria as Christian believers. All currently present themselves in keeping with their biological sex. I was especially moved by Kyla Gillespie’s story of detransitioning after decades of alcoholism and six years of “passing” as a man. Another woman who preferred to go only by her first name, Lo, shared touchingly that her bonding with an eccentric small boy at church had given her a glimpse of how God might see her — a little strange, but still loved. A man going only by his



first name confessed his struggle with autogynephilia and shared about the support and accountability he had found in a group of male Christian peers.

Christians should not be dismissive about mental illness, and it is valuable to hear testimonies of God’s work in the midst of profound brokenness. But, sadly, when it came to “T,” the conference sent mixed signals. On the website’s speaker page, two panelists gave their preferred pronouns as “he/they” and “she/they,” while panelist Lesli Hudson-Reynolds gave “they/them.”¹³ The panel was moderated by Bill

Henson, whose Posture Shift ministry aims to restructure the church’s response to LGBT issues, publishing curriculum that explicitly instructs Christians to use preferred pronouns for dysphoric adults.¹⁴ (It stops short of telling parents to use preferred pronouns for minor children, but for adult children, parents are instructed to “Love. Include. Accept. No matter what.”¹⁵ As a case study, the curriculum praises and showcases a letter from a proudly female-to-male transitioned daughter who “forgives” her parents’ “mistakes” without repenting of her own.¹⁶)

¹¹Valk, 25:30.

¹²Ibid, 36:00.

¹³Revoice, “Speakers and Sessions,” webpage accessed October 18, 2021, <https://www.revoice21.com/speakers/>.

¹⁴Bill Henson, *Guiding Families of LGBT+ Loved Ones: Expanded Edition* (Acton: Posture Shift Books, 2020), 83.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid, 93.

"Kindness is
necessary.
But it is not
sufficient."

Hudson-Reynolds, whom Henson referred to as “they” during the conference¹⁷, is Posture Shift’s Gender Identity Ministry Director. She recalls that at age four, “I realized that I was a boy. I wasn’t saying I felt like a boy, I was saying I *am* a boy. And that’s language that’s important [for a parent] to hear when a young person is coming out.”¹⁸ When Henson asked each panelist to name the “moment of realization” that they were trans, all gave ages between 4 and 8.¹⁹

Meanwhile, some attendees were apparently choosing to wear their own “they/them” stickers, as indicated by speaker Elizabeth Black in the intro to her session.²⁰ Ironically, her topic was “growing into sexual maturity,” but she didn’t appear to see a tension between this goal and the affirmation of a self-identity that erases one’s God-given sexual individuality. Offering such affirmation to professing believers lacks even the “missional” logic used to excuse the choice with non-believers, though neither should be seen as an acceptable compromise. Tellingly, Black said she was excited to see these name tags along with various “fabulous” haircuts and wardrobe choices. The pronouns were thus subtly framed as accessories, something that could be tried on or shrugged off, mixed and matched, subject to change.

This is dangerous and disturbing talk even from a non-believing perspective, let alone a biblical one. It’s ironic that Revoice sees itself as a “missional” endeavor, when many self-identified gay people outside the church strongly oppose “pronouns in bio” culture. As Revoice continues to shape itself to increasingly far-left fads, it is unclear what its representatives have left to offer them.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Preston Sprinkle, in his session, proposed that until the LGBT person’s “knee-jerk response” to “What do you think of when you think of the church?” is “kindness,” then “the church is failing to embody the presence of God as we ought.”²¹ But while kindness may be a necessary condition for a faithful church presence, it is not a sufficient one. By either dismissing or straw-manning legitimate concerns as “unloving,” Revoice proponents have made it clear that they will only consent to have the discussion on their terms, thus closing themselves off to the warnings of many faithful believers, including believers who openly navigate their own crosses of same-sex attraction.

Contrary to what many speakers at the conference seem to presuppose, its critics do not speak from a place of ignorance or bigotry. Indeed, to use Bill Henson’s language, some of us are deeply familiar with the history and culture of gay people as a “people group,” and we have seen fruit as we apply that knowledge missionally. But the “posture shift” proposed by Henson and his co-laborers, so far from aiding this good gospel work, would leaven it in ways that are neither truthful nor ultimately loving.

Furthermore, we stand and always have stood ready to lament with fellow believers as they carry crosses they did not ask for, including the cross of persistent same-sex attraction. Orientation change is not

a guaranteed fruit of faithfulness, and heterosexuality is not a pre-condition of holiness. Revoice proponents say nothing that isn’t trivially true when they repeat these things. Our concern is that they say a good deal more beyond this. It is no longer sufficient for us to join the same-sex attracted believer in lament. We are being asked, indeed, instructed, to deny that there is anything to lament.

Kindness is necessary. But it is not sufficient. It must flourish together with biblical fidelity, or else our gospel witness to a perishing world will wither and die on the vine. Revoice may claim the mantle of biblical fidelity in this endeavor. But if its 2021 incarnation is any indication, that mantle is an increasingly uncomfortable fit. ✕

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¹⁷Bill Henson, “A New Church History,” 21:00 and following (talk presented at Revoice, Dallas, Texas, October 7–9, 2021).

¹⁸Lesli Hudson-Reynolds comments in Panel: Gender Minorities, 13:20 (panel held at Revoice, Dallas, Texas, October 7–9, 2021).

¹⁹Ibid, 21:55.

²⁰Elizabeth Black, “Growing in Sexual Maturity,” 00:10 (talk presented at Revoice, Dallas, Texas, October 7–9, 2021).

²¹Preston Sprinkle, “Faith, Sexuality & Gender,” 04:00 (talk presented at Revoice, Dallas, Texas, October 7–9, 2021).

Sociology as Theology: The Deconstruction of Power in (Post)Evangelical Scholarship

In the past few years, numerous Christian scholars have produced books garnering national attention. Kristen Kobes Du Mez was interviewed on NPR about her book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* and was featured in a story for *The Washington Post*. Beth Allison Barr, the author of *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, was likewise the subject of an NPR interview and a *New Yorker* article. Andrew Whitehead and William Perry’s *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* earned a treatment in *Time* magazine. Robert Jones’s *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* was discussed in *The New York Times* and the author himself is a frequent contributor to *The Atlantic*. This list could be expanded to include

Jemar Tisby’s *The Color of Compromise* and *How to Fight Racism*, Willie James Jennings’s *After Whiteness*, Sechrest et al’s *Can ‘White’ People Be Saved?* and Anthea Butler’s *White Evangelical Racism*.

These books share numerous common features: all of them were written by professing Christian scholars with advanced degrees from prestigious universities, all of them address hot-button issues in contemporary culture, and all of them reach conclusions that resonate with left-of-center perspectives. However, for the purposes of this article, I’ll expand on one other commonality: they all share a dangerous approach to theology via the disciplines of sociology and history. Even if we agree with their conclusions, we should recognize that they are sowing the seeds of a deconstruction that goes far deeper than race, gender, and politics.

THE STRUCTURE OF THEIR ARGUMENTS

The books listed above share a similar rhetorical structure.

Step 1: the author identifies a problem, either in history or in contemporary politics. This problem involves power dynamics of one kind or another: white supremacy, patriarchy, nationalism, etc. In most cases, the historical events described by the authors are indeed horrific and call attention to our nation’s lamentable failure to live up to biblical standards of justice. In contemporary times, sexual abuse scandals, patriotic celebrations in the middle of worship services, and cringe-worthy displays of so-called “biblical masculinity” should also give us pause.

Step 2: the author argues that Christians either actively endorsed or were complicit in these widespread acts of injustice. Again, many of these accusations are true. Entire denominations split over the issue of slavery. At a time when church attendance was far more widespread than today, the government was engaging in the forced displacement of Native Americans, and white professing Christians were engaging in acts of racial terrorism (i.e. lynching).

Step 3: the author concludes that Christian lament and even explicit, public repudiation of past injustices are not enough. Hundreds of years of participation in white supremacy, patriarchy, and nationalism have warped

“white evangelical theology” such that it needs to be fundamentally reimaged.

To many evangelicals, especially among the younger generation, this argument strikes a chord. What are we to make of it?

BROAD CATEGORIES

To begin with, careful readers will realize how broadly some of the key terms in these discussions are being defined (or redefined). For example, in Du Mez’s and Barr’s books, Christian “patriarchy” does not narrowly refer to some specific conceptualization of gender roles that assumes men should rule over women. Instead, it refers to any conceptualization of gender roles that is not fully egalitarian. Rousas Rushdoony, who “disapproved of women’s suffrage and of women speaking in public,” is listed as a supporter of the patriarchy.¹ But so are the Promise Keepers, who promoted “servant leadership [through] obligation, sacrifice, and service,”² alongside the signatories of the Danvers Statement, the Gospel Coalition, Together for the Gospel, and the entire Southern Baptist Convention.³ Barr is even more explicit, criticizing Russell Moore for teaching that “women should not submit to men in general . . . but wives should submit to their husbands.”⁴ Barr insists that his framework still places “power in the hands of men and [takes] power away from women” and therefore constitutes oppressive Christian patriarchy.⁵

¹Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2020), 75.

²Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 153.

³Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 167-168.

⁴Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2021), 17.

⁵Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 18. To be fair, Moore himself uses the label “Christian patriarchy” for his view, which he distinguishes from an oppressive “pagan patriarchy.” However, Barr’s reasoning that male headship is necessarily oppressive is the salient point.

Similarly, Tisby, Jones, and Butler assume that racism is not merely racial prejudice, but is a system of oppression that includes laws which produce “a disparate impact on people of different races.”⁶ Jones laments that the phrase “white supremacy . . . evokes white sheets and burning crosses” when it ought to refer more broadly to “the way a society organizes itself, and what and whom it chooses to value.”⁷ Moreover, the idea that racism is static and easily recognized is naïve. According to Tisby, “racism changes over time . . . racism never goes away; it just adapts.”⁸ Thus, an eighteenth-century Christian who endorsed chattel slavery and the curse of Ham is complicit in racism. But so is a twenty-first-century Christian who “[responds] to black lives matter with the phrase all lives matter.”⁹

“Christian nationalism” receives the same treatment in Whitehead and Perry’s book, and to a lesser extent in Jones’s and Butler’s. On the one hand, “Christian nationalism” is defined as “Christianity co-opted in the service of ethno-national power and separation.”¹⁰ On the other hand, it is expressed in the affirmation of statements like “The federal government should advocate Christian values” and “The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.”¹¹ Indeed, Whitehead and Perry’s operationalization of “Christian nationalism” is so broad that they find Black Americans are more supportive of Christian nationalism than any other racial group¹² and that twenty-one percent of Jews are supportive of Christian nationalism.¹³

The use of overly broad and sometimes nebulous definitions is crucial for the next step in the argument, which is the push to “deconstruct” oppressive theology.

MORAL LEVERAGE

A hallmark of the books discussed above is that they are unmistakably prescriptive. In generations past, modernist, “value-neutral” approaches to history and sociology aimed to merely describe objective facts about the past or the present. The influence of critical social theories, however, has motivated contemporary scholars not only to recognize their own biases, but to embrace an intentionally activist, “value-laden” stance toward their subject matter. As a result, books like *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* or *White Too Long* or *The Color of Compromise* are not merely intended to teach us about the past, but to shape our attitudes, actions, and beliefs in the present. The authors of these books move from the descriptive “is” to the normative “ought” in two ways.

First, the use of broad categories enables the authors to compress a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices into a narrow, good-bad binary using morally-loaded language. For example, once we accept the idea that male headship, no matter how qualified or nuanced, is a form of “Christian patriarchy,”¹⁴ it will be increasingly difficult to defend. The battle is not being waged at the level of exegesis, but at the level of terminology. Similarly, if “Christian nationalism” encompasses opposition to abortion and a defense of traditional marriage, then the debate — at least at the rhetorical level — is over. Few people want to be called a “Christian nationalist.” Evangelicals may not even realize the game being played until it is too late, when they find themselves forced to defend “white supremacy,” or “Christian nationalism,” or “the patriarchy” — not

because they support any of those things but because the terms have all been redefined. One is reminded of Alice’s admonition, “The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things,” and Humpty Dumpty’s prescient rejoinder, “The question is, which is to be master — that’s all.” When words are weapons, the one who controls the language controls the debate.

Second, all the books in this genre look “underneath” traditional evangelical justifications for complementarianism or sexual ethics or pro-life positions to expose the “real” reasons for these positions: power. What evangelicals have claimed to be the clear, biblical teaching on these issues is merely a way for them to justify their white, male, Christian privilege. Hence, we find countless statements like these:

“[E]vangelicalism is not a simply religious group at all. Rather, it is a nationalistic political movement whose purpose is to support the hegemony of white Christian men over and against the flourishing of others.”¹⁵

“Complementarianism is patriarchy, and patriarchy is about power. Neither have ever been about Jesus.”¹⁶

“[T]he battle over inerrancy was in part a proxy fight over gender. . . Inerrancy mattered because of its connection to cultural and political issues [like abortion and same-sex marriage]. It was in their efforts to bolster patriarchal authority that Southern Baptists united with evangelicals across the nation. . . . Patriarchy was at the heart of this new sense of themselves.”¹⁷

If the critic is permitted to continually “see through” evangelical reasoning, arguments, and exegesis to reveal them as mere tools for protecting white male power, then disagreement is impossible. Indeed, disagreement is merely further evidence of evangelicals’ commitment to the “white supremacist patriarchy” (if they are a white male) or to their “internalized oppression” (if they are not).

THE IMPLICATIONS

If the impossibility of disagreement is troubling, the far-reaching implications of these books’ arguments should be even more so. One might naïvely assume that their only goal is self-reflection and the narrow re-examination of particular points of doctrine. That is untrue, however, for two reasons.

⁶Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 4-5.

⁷Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 16.

⁸Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 19. Cf. pp. 110, 154, 155, 160, 171.

⁹Tisby, *Color of Compromise*, 191.

¹⁰Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 145.

¹¹Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 8.

¹²Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 41.

¹³Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 42.

¹⁴It could be argued that “patriarchy” is the term traditionally used to describe Christian views on gender and that “complementarianism” is a recent coinage. However, this argument obscures the way in which the term “patriarchy” — in its common usage — has come to refer to something that is inherently oppressive. Thus, attempts to defend anything labelled “patriarchy” will be unavoidably understood as attempts to defend injustice.

¹⁵Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2021), 138.

¹⁶Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 218.

¹⁷Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 108-109.

First, in keeping with an intersectional framework, these books view white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and nationalism as mutually reinforcing and interlocking systems of oppression that can't easily be disentangled, leading to phrases like "white evangelical patriarchy" or "white Christian nationalism." For example, Barr explicitly cites Tisby's comments on racism to elucidate sexism: "Jemar Tisby writes 'racism never goes away. It just adapts.' The same is true of patriarchy. Like racism, patriarchy is a shapeshifter — conforming to each new era, looking as if it had always belonged" (Barr, MBW, p. 186). Whitehead and Perry write that Christian nationalism "glorifies the patriarchal, heterosexual family as not only God's biblical standard, but the cornerstone of all thriving civilizations."¹⁸ Jones asks: "What if . . . conceptions of marriage and family, of biblical inerrancy, or even the concept of having a personal relationship with Jesus developed as they did because they were useful tools for reinforcing white dominance?"¹⁹ And in an incredibly revealing passage, Du Mez writes:

Within this expanding [evangelical] network, differences . . . could be smoothed over in the interest of promoting 'watershed issues' like complementarianism, the prohibition of homosexuality, the existence of hell, and substitutionary atonement Evangelicals who offered competing visions of sexuality, gender, or the existence of hell found themselves excluded from conferences and associations,

and their writings banned from popular evangelical bookstores and distribution channels.²⁰

In all these passages (and many more I could cite), we find that the authors view their concerns as one part of a larger and seamless liberatory project. They are not merely aiming to challenge racism or specific interpretations of gender roles, but our understanding of marriage, sexuality, hell, inerrancy, and the gospel itself.

Second, these authors' "deconstructive" approach to theology is necessarily a universal acid. Even if they weren't explicitly committed to challenging evangelical doctrine broadly, their methodological approach makes such an outcome inevitable. This erosion is, perhaps, one of my greatest fears. I worry that pastors will embrace these books thinking that their application can be confined to, say, race alone. But once a white pastor endorses the view that he — as a white male — is blinded by his own white supremacy, unable to properly understand relevant biblical principles due to his social location, and in need of the "lived experience" of oppressed minorities to guide him, how long before someone in his congregation applies the same reasoning to his beliefs about gender? Or sexuality? At some point, he will have to reverse course and (correctly) insist that although he, like all of us, has blind spots and biases that will distort his understanding of Scripture, nonetheless it is to Scripture — properly interpreted — that we must appeal as our final authority on these issues.

A RESPONSE

A conservative evangelical response to these works should include several points.

First, we should concede criticism whenever it is valid. No doubt, conservative Christians helped to prop up (and dismantle) slavery. Some conservative Christians today are insensitive, at best, when it comes to racial issues. The downfall of celebrity pastors and cover-ups of sexual abuse are appalling. Complementarian churches are not always places where women are valued, honored, and equipped for ministry. To deny these truths is not only to ignore reality, but to further convince people that the only way to take racism and sexism seriously is to embrace unbiblical ideologies.

Second, we should resist responding in kind. Recent discussion of "evangelical elites" and "#BigEva" has occasionally devolved into the kind of shallow Bulverism that I've just finished decrying. In other words, rather than analyzing our opponents' arguments, we debunk them by unearthing their hidden ulterior motives: "they're merely trying to curry favor with cultural gatekeepers," "they're just positioning themselves as respectable evangelicals," etc. This approach is dangerous. How compelling will our critiques of deconstruction be when we routinely engage in deconstruction ourselves? Besides, our mantra must never be "turnabout is fair play," but rather "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Finally, our arguments must always be rooted in Scripture. What is notably absent from almost all these books is any attempt to defend or square their claims

with the Bible or with historic Christian theology. Yet the errors of postmodernism are not refuted by returning to the conceits of modernism, nor are they answered by retreating to biblicism. The problem is not sociology or history per se, but rather the unbiblical assumptions being made by sociologists and historians. Humility is required, but so is conviction. Like all disciplines, sociology needs to fulfill a ministerial, not a magisterial, role. Science, history, psychology, and sociology can all contribute to our understanding of the world around us and even to our understanding of Scripture. But we must always return to Scripture as our final and ultimate authority. To the extent that we abandon it, we will understand not more but less about race, class, gender, sexuality, history, the world, and ourselves. ✕

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¹⁸Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 152. ¹⁹Jones, *White Too Long*, 70-71. ²⁰Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 204.

The Counterfeit, Anti-Biblical Epistemologies of Postmodernism and Critical Theory

Among the world currencies, some are strong, others weak. And yes, there are the parasitic counterfeits. Unfortunately, these pretenders can do a lot of damage, trading on another's good name. Albert Talton is a case in point: Using only a standard inkjet printer in the early 2000's, he managed to produce seven million dollars' worth of phony one-hundred-dollar bills, circulating many of them before going to jail in 2009. Unfortunately — even tragically — postmodernism and critical theory have generated epistemological counterfeits that have beguiled and bankrupted much of our culture.

¹Plato, *Theaetetus*, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 918

KNOWLEDGE

Treasury agents are trained to spot counterfeits by first scrutinizing the real thing, and so we shall begin with the classic definition of “knowledge” — what it is, how you get it, and how you can be confident you have it — the subject of epistemology. The formula traces back to Plato, who, in the *Theaetetus*, has Socrates identifying it as “correct belief” together with “an account” of why the judgment is made.¹ Socrates hesitated to endorse it, since, as worded, it was circular, including *knowledge* of supporting evidence in the definition of “knowledge.” But the core notion endured, thanks in large measure to the identification of the need for and availability of foundational, epistemic premises, whether empirical or rationalistic. So, we press on with the ancient characterization, today expressed as “**justified true belief**.”

"But the 'theory'
in critical
theory is a
snide conceit,
immune —
yea hostile
— to rational
pushback."

Of course, all sorts of philosophical analysis have challenged and refined the definition. For instance, we contrast “knowledge that” (propositional) with “knowledge of” (e.g., how to ride a bike), and a fellow named Edmund Gettier came up with an ingenious counter-argument in the 1960’s, where all three elements were present, but still no knowledge — prompting philosophers to rise in defense of the received concept.² But there is a strange new assault on it, mounted by purveyors of postmodernism and critical theory.

Just as Christian Science is neither Christian nor scientific, critical theory is hostile to critical thinking, and it commends a posture, not a theory. A genuine theory, such as plate tectonics, generates testable/falsifiable hypotheses, in this instance seabed fissures oozing magma and continual earthquakes along the “Ring of Fire.” But the “theory” in critical theory is a snide conceit, immune — yea hostile — to rational pushback. It’s the very antithesis of judicious inquiry, the practice that has prospered the Judeo-Christian West. Indeed, it attempts to lay the ax at the roots of the best in our civilization, nullifying the truths of the created order laid out in the opening chapters of Genesis.

So, back to the definition, as it relates to a given proposition:

If it’s **true** and **warranted**, but **I don’t believe it**, then I don’t know it. (Think of an atheist actor mouthing the lines of a faithfully-biblical sermon.)

If it’s **true** and **I believe it**, but **I lack good reasons** for my belief, then I don’t know it. (A hypochondrial hysteric can get things right now and then, even when his self-diagnosis is based on the flimsiest of evidence.)

If my **belief is warranted**, but it turns out to be **false**, then you don’t say I had knowledge of it. (Such is the case when I’m deceived by a typically reliable, but currently addled, source.)

So, again: **Justified. True. Belief.** Sad to say, these three are cast aside today by cultural patricians and plebeians alike under the postmodernist spell.

ANTI-KNOWLEDGE

So what is casting these spells?

Postmodernism

As Gene Veith demonstrated in his 1994 book, *Postmodern Times*,³ postmodernism boils down to relativism and pluralism, which have replaced modernism, whose god was the latest deliverances of scientific materialism. The chaos has now been nurtured by new technologies, a topic Veith takes up in *Post Christian*: “Individuals can latch onto the ‘truths’ (often put into quotation marks today) that they *want* to believe in or that accords with their *will to power* (the will taking the place of the intellect; power taking the place of reason).”⁴

Postmodern Times discussed the sexual revolution in terms of extramarital sex; now the issues are homosexuality, pornography, and sex robots. In the 1990s we were deconstructing literature; in the twenty-first century we are deconstructing marriage. In the 1990s we were constructing ideas; in the twenty-first century we are constructing the human body. In the 1990s we had feminism; in the twenty-first century we have transgenderism. In the 1990s we were urged to embrace multiculturalism; in the twenty-first century we are warned about committing cultural appropriation. Pluralism has given way to identity politics. Relativism has given way to speech codes. Humanism has given way to transhumanism, the union of human beings and machines.⁵

In the confusion, social commentators are scrambling to coin new terms to catch up with developments, e.g., “post-postmodernism,” “metamodernism,” “transpostmodernism,” “altermodernism,” and “performatism,” but all are fruit of relativism.⁶

²To paraphrase his problematic example, imagine that a Ford salesman has bought a Volkswagen, and he’s embarrassed to drive up to his dealership in it, so he parks it a few blocks away and then shifts to a new Ford he pre-positioned there the previous afternoon. When he arrives at work, the showroom personnel think (belief) he has a new car. They’re right (truth), he does. And they have good reason (justification) to believe it. But they don’t really know it, because of the misalignment of the conceptual parts.

³Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994).

⁴Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Post Christian: A Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 72.

⁵Veith, *Post Christian*, 17.

⁶Veith, *Post Christian*, 17–18.



Venturing outside the evangelical camp, we find substantial testimony to complement Veith's portrayal. British professor Zygmunt Bauman (a Polish, Jewish expatriate) construed postmodernism in these terms:

The mistrust of human spontaneity, of drives, impulses and inclinations resistant to prediction and rational justification, has been all but replaced by the mistrust of unemotional, calculating reason. Dignity has been returned to emotions; legitimacy to the "inexplicable," nay irrational, sympathies and loyalties which cannot "explain themselves" in terms of their usefulness and purpose [In the postmodern world] things may happen that have no cause which made them necessary; and people do things which would hardly pass the test of accountable, let alone "reasonable," purpose We learn again to respect ambiguity, to feel regard for human emotions, to appreciate

actions without purpose and calculable rewards. We accept that not all actions, and particularly not all among the most important of actions, need to justify and explain themselves to be worthy of our esteem.⁷

Of course, there is a place of honor in Christianity for emotions, spontaneity, and mystery, but when these are the ruling criteria, contemptuous of reasonableness, then we gut the faith "once for all delivered to the saints" as well as "the whole counsel of God."

Unfortunately, postmodern relativism produces thuggery rather than a joyous festival down at Vanity Fair. Ohio State professor Brian McHale plays off Jean François Lyotard's characterization of postmodernism as "incredulity toward the master narratives of Western culture" as he presents Thomas Pynchon's novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, as "a test case of postmodern incredulity, relentlessly questioning,

⁷Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 33.

opposing, and undermining cultural narratives about scientific knowledge and technological progress, about the nation and the people, about liberalism and democracy.” Its “[c]haracters’ epistemological quests succumb to ontological uncertainty in a world — a plurality of worlds — where nothing is stable or reliably knowable.” Rather, he says we need to put our faith in “little narratives” which support “small-scale separatist cultural enclaves.”⁸ And so, armed with postmodern tools, academic departments, media empires, and even the military are bullied into honoring heretofore-considered-degenerate “cultural enclaves,” as wonderful giftings and exemplars of treasured diversity, protected under pain of penalty.

Earlier, I mentioned Socrates’ reservation over the definition, “justified, true, belief.” The problem was that you had to assume to *know* certain things (items you raise in justification, e.g., “I’m sure the accused was in the mall that afternoon. I saw him there.”) in order to demonstrate that you *knew* other things, and so looms the threat of circularity. Well, indeed, there needs to be external grounding for our claims, items philosopher Alvin Plantinga has called “properly basic.” If we can’t agree on those matters, then we reach an impasse, and this destroys perhaps the main tool of analytical reasoning, the *reductio ad absurdum* (“reduction to absurdity”). On this model, a thinker will advance a fact-claim or alleged principle, and then his interlocutors will jump in to trace the implications. If these prove to be laughable or grotesque, then the assertion must be retooled or discarded for another try. The problem comes when the parties involved are unable to agree on what is laughable or grotesque. Take for instance the rejoinder to the claim that people can self-identify with a gender at odds with the chromosomal facts. When you show that this could mean that a young man might compete in womens’ events at the Olympics, sane people would agree that you’ve blown up the transgender conceit. But there are those who would ask, “What’s your point? I don’t see a problem there.” And that is where we are today. A rare madness has fallen upon our nation, whereby unmasked fools are standing their ground and making public policy.

⁸Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge, 2015), 72–74.

CRITICAL THEORY

American English professor Lois Tyson provides a crisp and enthusiastic account of critical theory’s realm and ethos:

Simply speaking, when we interpret a literary text, we are doing literary criticism; when we examine the criteria upon which our interpretation rests, we are doing critical theory Of course, when we apply critical theories that involve a desire to change the world for the better — such as feminism, Marxism, African American criticism, lesbian/gay/queer criticism, and postcolonial criticism — we will sometimes find a literary work flawed in terms of its deliberate or inadvertent promotion of, for example, sexist, classist, racist, heterosexist, or colonialist values. But even in these cases, the flawed work has value because we can use it to understand how these repressive ideologies operate.⁹

She continues by working from the thought of Jacques Derrida, the French postmodernist who dismissed “structuralists,” those who saw universal commonalities in the way we grasp and construe the world (the sort of thing that could reflect and point to a created order). Rather, he magnified the variations, licensing *human* language (rather than the *logos* of John 1:1) to make a mockery of overarching accounts of reality.

[A]ll systems of Western philosophy derive from and are organized around one ground principle from which we believe we can figure out the meaning of existence While these ground concepts produce our understanding of the dynamic evolving world around us — and of our dynamic, evolving selves as well — the concepts themselves remain stable. Unlike everything they explain, they are not dynamic and evolving They are “out of play,” as Derrida would put it. This type of philosophy — in short, all Western philosophy — Derrida calls logocentric because it places at the center (centric) of this understanding of the world a concept (*logos*) that organizes and explains the world for us while remaining outside of the world it organizes and explains. But for Derrida, this is Western philosophy’s greatest illusion. Given that each grounding concept —Plato’s Forms,

⁹Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

Descartes' cogito, structuralism's innate structures of human consciousness, and so on — is itself a human concept and therefore a product of human language, how can it be outside the ambiguities of language? That is, how can any concept be outside the dynamic, evolving, ideologically saturated operations of the language that produced it?

For Derrida, the answer is that no concept is beyond the dynamic instability of language, which disseminates (as a flower scatters its seed on the wind) an infinite number of possible meanings with each written or spoken utterance. For deconstruction, then, language is the ground of being, but that ground is not out of play; it is itself as dynamic, evolving, problematical, and ideologically saturated as the worldviews it produces. For this reason, there is no center to our understanding of existence there are, instead, an infinite number of vantage points from which to view it, and each of these vantage points has a language of its own, which deconstruction calls its discourse. For example, there is the discourse of modern physics, the discourse of Christian fundamentalism, the discourse of liberal arts education in the 1990s, the discourse of nineteenth-century American medicine, and so on For deconstruction, if language is the ground of being, then the world is infinite text, that is, an infinite chain of signifiers always in play.¹⁰

Again, relativism, albeit a tendentious and aggressive relativism.

¹⁰Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 256–57.

TRUTH

With this in mind, let's return to the three-part definition of knowledge, taking a closer look at how these elements have been undermined and dismissed in our culture. For starters, the traditional standard of truth is *correspondence* with reality, and it's propositional: "The cat is on the mat" is true if the cat is on the mat.

So what's the problem? Well, as Cambridge-educated, Kenyan-Christian-school-administrator Philip Dow explains, postmodernism makes the pursuit of knowledge pointless:

Relativistic openness . . . undermines progress for the simple reason that progress assumes a goal. We only know we are making progress when we are getting closer to that goal. Take away the goal of truth and any talk of advancing becomes meaningless. All our attempts at moral scientific or spiritual improvement simply become nonsense unless we believe that there are targets we are shooting for.¹¹

Furthermore, it makes us prey to the notions of "my truth" and "your truth," casting aside the sensible concept of *the* truth. Nevertheless, Middlebury professor Heidi Grasswick is all in on jettisoning objective knowledge, in effect dismissing Kepler's notion that, in our studies, we should be concerned with "thinking God's thoughts after Him":

Analysis of testimony has formed one of the largest and most active areas of discussion in contemporary social epistemology. Feminists' attention to the role of social power relations in the economics of credibility has provided a distinct angle from which to develop insightful descriptive and normative assessments of testimony across differently situated agents . . . The basic idea of socially situated knowing amounts to a denial of the traditional framing of the epistemic point of view as a "view from nowhere," embracing instead the idea that knowing is inherently perspectival, with perspectives being tied to our materially and socially grounded position in the world."¹²

¹¹Philip E. Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 49.

¹²Heidi Grasswick, "Feminist Epistemology," *The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology*, ed. Miranda Fricker, Peter J. Graham, David Henderson, and Nikolaj J. L. L. Pedersen (New York: Routledge, 2020), 296





Biblical Regard for Truth

It's obvious to any student of the Bible that truth is a non-negotiable feature of Christianity, from its grounding in Old Testament prophecy (where Amos pictures God holding a plumb line accusingly beside Israel's morally crooked wall) on through the Gospels (where, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly uses "truly" and "you have heard it said, but I say . . ." to set the record straight), the epistles (where, in 2 Timothy 3, Paul compares current enemies of the gospel to the truth-opposing Jannes and Jambres of Moses's day), and Revelation 21, where liars are consigned to "the lake that burns with fire and sulphur). And, of course, we have Jesus' explanation in John 8, that the devil is "the father of lies," his declaration in John 14, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," and Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 13, "Love . . . rejoices with the truth." Scriptural testimony to the reality and value of truth is manifold.

Meaning

Of course, the possibility of a proposition's being true depends upon the **meaning** of the words. When you say that the whale is a mammal, you need to have a reliable, exacting definition of "mammal." And fastidiousness must extend beyond the glossary to punctuation, as underscored in the book title, *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*.¹³ (As it stands, you have a gunfighter extracting himself from a hostile saloon. Drop the commas, and you're talking about a panda.)

Knowing that pesky matters of truth and falsity can wreck their enterprise, postmodernists and critical theorists can simply queer (in both senses) the issue upstream. Simply commandeer the language, and you avoid accountability. Consider the expression, "begs the question." It's typically cast as "raises the question," as in "The advance of the polar ice sheet this year *begs the question*, 'Is anthropogenic global warming a reality?'" However, the concept refers classically to unfairly front-end-loading the conclusion, often in the form of a "question-begging epithet" — a slur that rigs the conversation. Imagine, for instance, a survey that asks, "Do you oppose the tyrannical Texas law, robbing women of their right to choose their own path to reproductive health?" It seems as though the right answer would be Yes. But more dispassionate wording might shift the results. If you spoke more clinically about a fetal-heartbeat red line, you'd see more No's.

Notice that both nouns ("health") and adjectives ("tyrannical") do heavy lifting in the original question. No, there's nothing wrong *per se* in the use of highly charged words. No one should object to the sentence, "In territories under his control, the *despotic* Adolph Hitler implemented a policy of *genocide* against the Jews." The problem comes when you assume the very thing you're trying to demonstrate, either through specious definitions or super-charged modifiers. And both are stock-in-trade for critical theory.

A favorite suffix, serving both nouns and adjectives, derives from the Greek word for fear, *phobos*. It shows up in "homophobia" and "homophobic" and signals a malady. Consider the poor fellow who stays cooped up

¹³Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (London: Profile, 2003).

in his home, terrified of normal contact with folks at the mall (“agoraphobia”); who insists upon the statistically more dangerous highway for long trips, refusing to fly (“aerophobia”); or who clicks past Channel 13, feeling much safer watching Channel 14 (“triskaidekaphobia”). Even when the danger may be real in certain circumstances, e.g., for the “germaphobe,” the subject’s fear is judged irrational, ideally addressed by therapy. But when you label as a “phobia” a phenomenon warranting concern, revulsion, or indignation, you speak viciously, not judiciously. If, for instance, you raise the alarm over the erasure of gender identity and the abominable public policy implications that follow from it (e.g., with boys self-identifying as girls in the girls’ locker room), you’re dismissed as a “phobe” rather than a “guide,” a distinction whose soundness should be in play, not something to be bulldozed by raw stipulation.

One of the most breathtaking examples of linguistic bulldozing involves the construal of “racism” as beyond the capability of disadvantaged people. The traditional and plausible understanding of the term disparages those who refuse to “judge people by the color of their skin rather than the content of their character” (cf. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech). But what if the prejudice flows upward rather than downward, it’s excused — whether from a financially struggling Malay toward the prosperous Chinese immigrant with a shop in the atrium; from a black custodian living on Chicago’s Near West Side toward the white building manager who enjoys better lodging on the city’s North Shore; from Filipino contract workers serving as housekeepers in shimmering, high-rise condos in Dubai. This curious definition gives “underdogs” a blank check to despise, indiscriminately, Chinese, Anglos, and Arabs for being Chinese, Anglo, and Arab. Guilt-free racism, utterly un-Christian, yet touted even by some who call themselves Christian.

The list goes on and on: disagreement-discourse called “hate speech;” dispute-free zones called “safe-spaces;” straightforward speech labeled a “dog whistle,” implying subterfuge; “We need to have a conversation,” meaning “You need to meekly receive my authoritative lecture;” and “Just listen,” implying, “Just alter your behavior to accommodate my feelings and convictions,” as in “They

doesn’t listen to me.” Of course, on many of these matters, we’ve been *listening* for centuries, even millennia, and those suggesting that we’ve not done our civilizational homework or are suffering from ethical and logical malformation are likely trading in insult and specious implication.

As the account goes, if you don’t “just listen,” you’re guilty of “testimonial injustice.” This “occurs when prejudice on the part of the hearer leads to the speaker receiving less credibility than he or she deserves.” And some would cast this offense as a failure of distributive justice: “If we think of credibility as a good (like wealth, healthcare, education or information), then it is natural to think that testimonial injustice consists in an unjust (or unfair) distribution of this good . . .”¹⁴ Of course, that kicks the can down the road. You still have to determine whether the speaker is sagacious, befuddled, or mendacious. But the postmodernists have an answer: If and only if he’s marginalized, his account is important, and to ignore it is evil. For them, it’s obvious that you must grant some sort of epistemological equity to all voices so that no one is denied a seat of honor at the roundtable of adepts.

On the contrary, it’s reasonable to think that much marginalization is due to the bad epistemological choices the marginalized have made. That sounds harsh, but everyone — postmodernists included — must make such value choices. Consider the counsel of Tasmanian philosopher David Coady. He begins with a veneer of dispassionate wisdom, but then shows his esteem for the deliverances of wanton sexual passion:

There is nothing unjust about distributing credibility unequally. On the contrary, justice requires credibility to be distributed unequally. Something similar may be true of hermeneutic power.

This seems to be more than a hypothetical possibility. Take neo-Nazis, for example. They appear to be a hermeneutically marginalized social group. They have very little impact on the generation of social meanings. They understand the world “Jew” and “Muslim” quite differently from the wider society in which they live, and their attempts to popularize certain expressions,

¹⁴David Coady, “Epistemic Injustice as Distributive Justice,” *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 61. The cover of this book is dominated by the image of an outstretched hand, with “LISTEN” scrawled on the palm.

such a “Jewish conspiracy” and “Islamization,” to explain their social experiences have been largely unsuccessful. It seems in short that they are victims of hermeneutical injustice . . . because they have had some significant areas of their “social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutic marginalization.” If I am right, hermeneutic marginalization in this case is not an injustice. It is a good thing. Even if I am wrong, and it is not true that neo-Nazis have been hermeneutically marginalized, there seems to be a very good case that they should be. Some groups of people, I suggest, do not deserve to have as much hermeneutic power as others.

Neo-Nazis are, of course, a very extreme case, so I will consider another example, which makes the same point in a somewhat different way. In the past, proponents of same-sex marriage were hermeneutically marginalized. They were members of a group that did not have equal access to the generation of social meaning. In particular, they did not have an equal say in the social (and more specifically, legal) meaning of the word “marriage.” But increasingly the tables are turning, with large majorities in most Western countries in favour of marriage equality and more and more countries legislating to keep pace with public opinion. What are we to make of this? Certainly opponents of same-sex marriage have lost their hermeneutical monopoly, but more than this, it seems clear that they have themselves been hermeneutically marginalized (at least in Western counties).¹⁵ Their claims and arguments are (rightly, in my opinion) given scant consideration in the public domain, and, as a result, they are often not heard and have little or no influence on the social meaning of “marriage.” If hermeneutic egalitarianism were correct, their hermeneutic marginalization would constitute an injustice. But it seems to me that this is not an injustice . . .

This example also makes it clear that hermeneutic power, like credibility, is a finite resource and, as a result, there can be competition for it. The political and social struggle over the meaning of the word “marriage” is a zero-sum game.¹⁶

Philosopher Alvin Goldman brings an important word of corrective counsel to this effort to supplant the wisdom of the past.

Many writers, especially postmodernists, defend multiculturalism by appeal to a kind of relativism Respecting other cultures, according to such writers, involves respecting their epistemologies as equally valid or legitimate. To insist on the superiority of one’s own Western or Enlightenment epistemology would be cultural imperialism. Since the hallmarks of Enlightenment epistemology are standards like truth, reason, and justification, these standards cannot be invoked under relativism

In reply to this defense of multiculturalism, I first challenge the claim that non-Western cultures have no concept of or commitment to truth in their epistemologies [T]ruth is a goal for humankind across history and culture. Diverse cultures have certainly differed on the best methods for arriving at truth, as Westerners have differed among themselves, but that does not mean that they reject or ignore truth as a goal. The conception of education as a knowledge-producing enterprise, in the truth-entailing sense of “knowledge,” is not a piece of Western imperialism.

Next let us look more carefully at the relativist or postmodern claim that respecting other cultures involves respecting their epistemologies as equally valid or legitimate. Granting the moral imperative of respecting the view of others, the question arises whether this means regarding their views as having equal merit as one’s own [T]his is not an appropriate construal. Respecting the view of others would involve taking them seriously, recognizing that many people accept them, seeing what can be said for them, and allowing them to challenge one’s own view. But it does not necessarily mean agreeing with them . . . [A] hearer might reasonably decline to accept a speaker’s view even if she (the hearer) grants that the speaker has some good reasons for it. The hearer may simply think that she has good defeaters of that view. So it is not illegitimate to employ Enlightenment epistemology even in the context of multiculturalism.

¹⁵Serving as the SBC Executive Committee’s Vice-President for Convention Relations in the early 1990’s, with access to a clippings service revealing our daily coverage in the press nationwide, I saw this slippage in real time as the gay agenda was implemented apace, even as we were acting to exclude churches affirming homosexuality.

¹⁶David Coady, “Epistemic Injustice As Distributive Justice,” *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, edited by Ian James Kidd, Jose’ Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus (New York: Routledge, 2017), 65–66.

Furthermore, Enlightenment epistemology is required for postmodernism even to get its defense of multiculturalism off the ground. When the postmodernist claims that other cultures deserve respect, she makes a moral claim, a claim endorsed as true and justified. But this already presupposed the Enlightenment concepts of truth and justification. Such a claim also clashes with postmodernism's rejection of universalism and "totalizing metanarratives." In endorsing the universal moral claim that other cultures deserve respect, postmodernists undercut their own often-repeated strictures against universalizing Thus, whereas multiculturalism is defensible from [an] . . . Enlightenment standpoint, it cannot be successfully defended from a postmodern one.¹⁷

Sad to say, Goldman and other traditionalists have daunting work cut out for them. They face, for instance, feminist epistemologists who argue that the woman's perspective is to be preferred in STEM enterprises, in that they make the best use of holistic, intuitionist modes of thought — the better to do justice to the phenomena. And across the board, it's not just a matter of, "Why not try this?" but rather one of addressing grievances with a vengeance. And so we have "decolonialising, queer, and trans epistemologies."¹⁸

Well, yes, we need to be sure to do our homework. If we're missing something important from any sector, we need to incorporate it in our calculations. (Following Acts 6:1: "What's that you say? The Hellenistic widows are being ignored in the daily distribution of food! Sorry. We'll get right on it.") Since the goal is optimum church life, you need to be well informed. But, of course, not every utterance is worthy of honor. When a child in the grocery store pitches a fit because mom didn't get the candy he wanted, she doesn't have to bow to that "information." When an internet phisher says he needs personal information to send good things your way (or to keep bad things from coming your way), you do best to ignore him. He's toxic, as are all sorts of adult crybabies and frauds. And it's not the job of epistemology to indulge the counsel of fools and malefactors; rather, epistemology is instituted to filter out their blandishments.

"And it's not the job of epistemology to indulge the counsel of fools and malefactors; rather, epistemology is instituted to filter out their blandishments."

This is not to say that you utterly dismiss the claims, proposals, and practices of any group of people. If the ancient Egyptians, who venerated beetles and used slaves to build the Pyramids, seemed to find pain relief in the bark of the willow, we should take notice. (The ingredient, which we know as salicin, is the key component in aspirin.) All truth is God's truth, whoever might stumble upon it.

Nevertheless, it's good to recall a classic example of proper disdain for another culture's convictions. It comes from Sir Charles James Napier, who commanded British forces in India in the mid-nineteenth century. When a Hindu priest objected to the abolition of *sati*, Napier replied, "Be it so. This burning of widows is your custom; prepare the funeral pile. But my nation has also a custom. When men burn women alive we hang them, and confiscate all their property. My carpenters shall therefore erect gibbets on which to hang all concerned when the widow is consumed. Let us all act according to national customs."¹⁹

¹⁷ Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 355–56.

¹⁸ Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus, *Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

¹⁹ William Francis Patrick Napier, *The History of General Sir Charles Napier's Administration of Scinde, and Campaign in the Cutchee Hills* (London: C. Westerton, 1851), 35.

Discerning God's Will

Epistemology is a theoretical enterprise concerning both destination (believed truth) and the route to it (justification). Not surprisingly, there are many versions of how to get there. Within the church, we differ over how to discern God's will for the particulars of our lives, whether, for instance, I should become a minister or marry someone or buy a house. The book, *How Then Should We Choose?*, presents three approaches, namely "specific-will" (Henry and Richard Blackaby), "wisdom" (Garry Friesen), and "relationship" (Gordon Smith).²⁰ Into the conversation, John MacArthur has pitched a warning against "charismatic chaos," wherein believers run off on extra-biblical tangents, spurred by personal experiences, issuing in "God showed me that . . ." Tradition, encapsulated in creeds and catechisms, can also play a role in our sorting things out, as when the pastor politely declines the gift of a framed copy of Salman's *Head of Christ* for the church lobby, appealing to the Westminster Divines' treatment of the Second Commandment. And on it goes down through sects and cults and world religions, with the devotees settling things by appeals to papal encyclicals, the fatwas of imams, pretenders to scripture, and such.

Lie Detectors versus Tesla Coils

The jury trial is a mainstay of the Western judicial system, but its record is less than flawless if the aim is to generate correct decisions. Any number of embarrassing decisions come to mind, including the O. J. Simpson acquittal and the 1963 hung juries who freed Byron De La Beckwith, the assassin of civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Still, it's an improvement over the Star Chamber, kangaroo courts, and their many counterparts throughout history. Of course, a host of procedural safeguards (at best) and gratuitous obstacles (at worst) alternatively lubricate, maintain, or cripple courtroom "truth machines" — whether depositions and other rules of evidence, the employment of grand juries, *voir dire* sessions in the selection of jurors, and the adversarial (as opposed to the inquisitorial) system. It's complex, but the question always remains, "Did the accused really murder the victim? Did the court get it right?"

All around the world, cultures are fielding their own deciders with varying compositions and reliability. The French favor "guilty till proven innocent" over "innocent till proven guilty," and in their *cours d'assises*, dealing with serious criminal cases, the jury is made up of three professional judges and nine citizen jurors. Thailand works with specialty courts, made up of jurors with expertise in the matters at hand. History also records the operation of all-woman juries, dealing, for instance, in the pleas of pregnant women.²¹

In stark contrast, Lavrentiy Beria, Soviet head of security/internal affairs and engineer of the purges Stalin directed, is well known for assuring his boss, "Show me the man; I'll find you the crime." His policy machine generated power, not truth. The end alone justified the means, and the end, the goal, was different. Think of the distinction between a lie detector and a Tesla coil: The former takes the best readings it can to determine the veracity of the subject; the latter fills the air around it with colorful, brush-and-streamer-like, electric discharges.

While Beria murdered and imprisoned millions on specious pretexts (when they were offered at all), contemporary Western postmodernists do their vicious work through "high-tech lynchings" (to use Clarence Thomas's expression) — in the form of "cancelling" and "deplatforming" and through "running out of town on a rail" folks who would dare to question their pieties — from Portland State, where philosophy professor Peter Boghossian resigned amidst torment, to ESPN, where Rachel Nichols criticized "fatally" a diversity hiring. The issue is not whether they uttered justified truth, but whether they spoke truth to power-merchants, and thus disqualified themselves from further commentary. It's as though they touched the Tesla coil, and it made their hair stand straight out.

²⁰*How Then Should We Choose?: Three Views on God's Will and Decisionmaking*, ed. Douglas S. Huffman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009).

²¹Valerie P. Hans, "Jury Systems Around the World," *Cornell Law Faculty Publications*, January 1, 2008. 278–79, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1378&context=facpub>.

It can make for exquisite delirium: Playing off Freud’s 1935 letter saying that homosexuality was “nothing to be ashamed of,” but only a “variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development,” UC Riverside English professor Gregory Bredbeck suggested a better take, that “we view homosexuality not as a sexuality but as epistemological conditionality — that is, a set of conditions, propositions, discourses, and assumptions that delineate a field of significance.”²² Sexual perversion is then analogue to a literary genre, like haiku or limerick, satire or memoir, personal essay or fairy tale. To dismiss a type out of hand or force it to follow another’s rules (as in, “Wait a minute. Are you saying Orcs exist?”) is to totally misunderstand the world of letters.

Bredbeck’s counsel suggests that what spunky Catholic writer E. Michael Jones claimed of modernity is also a force in postmodernity:

[W]e know that cultural relativism, as propounded by Margaret Mead, was nothing more than a clever rationalization for her own adultery. What better way to salve the conscience than to find that Samoans, the natural man, don’t take adultery seriously. . . . The evidence . . . is all in, and the verdict is clear: modernity is rationalized lust.²³

It’s a commonplace that “ideas have consequences.” After first reading Jones, it occurred to me that, so to speak (awkwardly), “consequences have ideas” — that people find themselves in reputational binds so they hatch conceptual schemes that will erase their stigmas, elevate their status, and rank down those who’ve heretofore enjoyed a measure of honor. Mead used her “study” (the results of which have been thoroughly debunked) to cast herself as noble while construing her critics as “repressed,” “puritanical,” or otherwise damaged and damaging. This would fit the pattern we see in postmodernism and critical theory: Identify the disparaged and turn the tables, valorizing the disparaged and then disparaging their disparagers, regardless of the merits of their case.

²²Gregory W. Bredbeck, “The Postmodernist and the Homosexual,” *Postmodernism Across the Ages: Essays for a Postmodernity That Wasn’t Born Yesterday*, ed. Bill Readings and Bennet Schaber (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 234–35.

²³E. Michael Jones, *Degenerate Moderns: Modernity As Rationalized Sexual Misbehavior* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 16–17.

JUSTIFICATION

For Socrates, the Sophists were his epistemological foils, much as the Pharisees were special targets of Christ. Sophists were say-anything-to-win lawyers, ready to deploy whatever might sway the crowd, contradicting themselves from issue to issue, indifferent to consistency. They were allergic to the judicial marshalling of evidence, unless that is, by chance, it served their cause. Against their ilk, philosophers have identified scores of their “fallacies,” cheap moves to bypass responsible argument. Some of the most familiar are *ad hominem* (attacking the person rather than his claim), *ad misericordiam* (appeal to pity), *ad populum* (appeal to the prejudice or ignorance of the mob), and *ad baculum* (enlisting threats to compel agreement). And, without the Latin, we speak of statistical shenanigans (e.g., “100% of heroin users began on milk.”), fantastical slippery slopes (e.g., “Elect him, and you’ll be back in chains.”); false dichotomies (e.g., “If you love Jesus, you’ll open the borders.”). There are scores of these lame and noxious maneuvers, scorned in responsible discourse, but deployed with gusto and shamelessness by postmodern sharpies facing off against truth-searchers and “deplorables” employing “linear thinking.”

Biblical Regard for Justification

Isaiah 1:18 records the Lord’s saying, “Come now, let us *reason* together,” a passage in which God invites them to get a proper fix on their circumstances. And in 2 Corinthians 5:11, Paul says that he seeks to *persuade* (not coerce) people to accept the truth of the gospel. Though both passages reference dire consequences facing those who dismiss this reasoning, the counsel is cast in the language of entreaty, not threat — “Can’t you see the funnel cloud? Please come with me to the storm shelter,” not “See this pistol? Give me your wallet.”

In Athens, according to Acts 17:16–33, we see Paul *reasoning* with “the Jews and the devout persons” in the synagogue (presumably from the *Tanakh*) and with philosophers on Mars Hill (explicitly from their religious statuary and poetry). He urges the Thessalonians (in 1

Thess 5:21) to be neither sweepingly dismissive of, nor naively open to, proffered prophecy. Rather, they should “test everything” and “hold fast what is good.” He called them and us to be proposition-scrutinizers.

Both Jesus and Paul employed arguments as they went about fishing for men. For instance, the Lord pointed analogously to the need for financial prudence in tower construction to ensure clear-eyed assent to the cost of discipleship (Luke 14:25–33); and, in 1 Corinthians 15:12–34, Paul dismantled the untenable reasoning of those who claimed to believe in the risen Christ but denied the resurrection of the dead in Christ.

To be sure, “lowly” biblical figures also offered helpful rationales in their dealings with skeptics. Take, for instance, the case of the leprous Syrian general Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1–14. His captive Israelite servants reasoned with him that Elisha’s directive to bathe in the Jordan River was worth a try. To his contemptuous “It can’t help,” they responded, “It can’t hurt,” and so he complied and was cured.



Credentials

When you make a knowledge claim, you, so to speak, lay down your “paperwork” for assessment by an audience you more or less respect, and the project is universal. Muslims are concerned with their standing in the eyes of Western critics. Though they’ve suffered centuries of embarrassment for the relative squalor and technological fruitlessness on display in their homelands, they point to their “golden age” when they built the Alhambra Palace in occupied Spain and refined “algebra” (from the Arabic *al-jabr*). While many argue that the accomplishments of medieval Muslims were informed by other cultures and that notable achievements are the product of ethnic ingenuity, not religion, Muslims insist that the *ummah* was an excellence-generator across the board; alas, the full flowering of the caliphate’s potential was crippled by the machinations of infidels. In doing so, Muslims join a host of others who bring their justificatory credentials to the table of public opinion.

Or we might speak of “laying one’s epistemological cards down.” Someone made his propositional bet; now he has to show what he’s got to back up his wager. Some appeal to “justified group belief,” where, for instance, committees have been deemed better than individuals at “tracking the truth.”²⁴ Then there’s Alvin Goldman, who has given fairly high marks to the track record of “Wikipistemology.”²⁵ And in our current fixation on “pandemic,” we’ve seen deference to the contrasting statements and behaviors of Dr. Fauci and Gov. DeSantis. All concerned are following the example of Thomas Jefferson, who, in the Declaration of Independence made his case saying, “To prove [the rightness of our cause], let Facts be submitted to a candid world.”

Postmodernists find this a quaint and toxic conceit. They’re not interested in ingratiating themselves to those in power; rather, they want to bulldoze them with whatever power they can muster. On this model, community organizer Saul Alinsky has written the playbook, *Rules for Radicals*.²⁶ He begins with a tip of the hat to Machiavelli, who thought nothing of lying, a technique he commended in *The Prince*:

²⁴Jennifer Lackey, *The Epistemology of Groups* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 91.

²⁵Don Fallis, “Wikipistemology,” *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*, ed. Alvin i. Goldman and Dennis Whitcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 297–313.

²⁶Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971).

Every one admits how praiseworthy it is in the prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who are doing great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who rely on their word [I]t is necessary . . . to be a great pretender and dissembler . . .²⁷

Alinsky proceeds, then, to urge his readers to use whatever means are necessary in effecting social change; (“[O]ne’s concern with the ethics of means and ends varies inversely with one’s distance from the scene of conflict.”); to discount objections as just so much empty whining (“[A]ny effective means is automatically judged by the opposition as being unethical.”); to treat their reasoning as lame excuse-giving (“Learn to search out the rationalizations, treat them as rationalizations, and break through”); to cloak whatever you do in fine moral talk (“[G]oals must be phrased in general terms like ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,’ ‘Of the Common Welfare,’ ‘Pursuit of Happiness,’ or ‘Bread and Peace.’”); to employ smoke and mirrors freely (“Always remember the first rule of power tactics: Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.”); and to strip the opponent of his dignity (“Ridicule is man’s most potent weapon. It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule. Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage.”)²⁸

Of course, there is a time to deflate pretense, to speak of grand ideals, and to ridicule, but Alinsky is not commending the principled use of these utterances, but rather their employment as first-strike bludgeons or as intricate weapons of treachery. He has no patience for those who would give their opponents credit for a measure of understanding or for those who might venture a joint-pursuit of truth with dissenters. No: “The thirteenth rule: Pick the target, freeze it, paralyze it, and polarize it.”²⁹ This is war.

Naturally, there are other techniques to short circuit the justification enterprise. A favorite is to tell the interlocutor, “Stay in your lane.” It’s used to dismiss the judgment of “outsiders,” whether those with “white privilege” giving advice to persons of color; men saying that women shouldn’t elect abortions for the sake of personal freedom (“No Womb; No Opinion”); or, back in the day, civilians condemning Lt. Calley for leading his troops to effect the My Lai Massacre. “How dare you pass judgment, Sir! You have no idea what it’s like to operate under enemy fire!” (Or suffer an unwanted pregnancy or have to navigate the streets when the police are itching to humiliate or harm you.)

What great insulation from accountability. But the question remains, “Are ethical judgments best rendered in the heat of battle or at a distance, when you are cool and collected?” Of course, one can be too detached, utterly insensitive to the stress, strain, and experiential particularities of others in a bind. But arguably, one of the worst times to make a sound moral call is when chaos, embarrassment, or the prospect of personal disadvantage overtakes you. Better to have your principles sorted out before entering the maelstrom. Indeed, epistemology was “invented” for just such situations; it presses us to cut through the fog and fury of partisanship, expediency, and precipitous judgment to grasp reality with as much detachment as we can manage. But this is far from the postmodern/critical theorist’s mind and heart.

"Indeed, [epistemology] presses us to cut through the fog and fury of partisanship, expediency, and precipitous judgment to grasp reality with as much detachment as we can manage."

²⁷Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* in *Great Books of the Western World*, Robert Maynard Hutchins, editor in chief, Volume 23, (Chicago: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1952), 25.

²⁸Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 26, 35, 112, 45, 126–27, 128.

²⁹Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 130.

BELIEF

Devotees of critical theory don't even have to believe what they say. Their behavior mirrors that of the Allies in WWII, who fielded a mock army with inflatable tanks near Dover, across from Calais, implying that the invasion wouldn't touch Normandy. (No moral problem with that since we were dealing with horrific Nazis who didn't deserve the truth.)

Biblical Regard for Genuine Belief

Of course, the Bible insists upon belief from start to finish, and provides a roll call of faith in Hebrews 11. It also condemns those who profess belief on the surface, but harbor contrary convictions underneath. Jesus lowered the boom on scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 15:7–8, when he declared, “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.’”

Scholars speak of a “dispositional analysis” of belief and affective states: If you truly believe something (or love someone or admire the work of an artist), then you will act accordingly. You'll step out in confidence, extend warm thoughtfulness, or invest time in their (or its) company. These behavioral indicators, or the lack thereof, can confirm or disconfirm your outward pledges. You may even be fooling yourself, thinking that you believe one thing when your performance belies that claim. Jesus warned in Matthew 7:21, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus also had no patience for oaths, as if your veracity were so tenuous that you had to enlist exotic modes of swearing to back up your statements: “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’: anything more than this comes from evil” (Matt. 5:33–37). Though this simple directive hit his first-century hearers hard, it is especially challenging to postmodernists in that 1) they have such a slippery notion of truth and falsity that they're in no position to land firmly on a “Yes” or a “No”; and 2) honesty and candor are not postmodern values when it comes to cultural struggles, the same as with Muslims who practice *taqiyyah* (tactical and strategic lying to protect or advance themselves or their cause).

The Culpable Believer

In recent years, fresh attention has been given to “virtue epistemology,” to the believing parties' stewardship of their doxastic capacities. In this vein, Wheaton philosopher Jay Wood speaks of “acquisitional,” “motivational,” and “dialectical virtues,” including “inquisitiveness, teachableness, attentiveness, persistence, circumspection . . . [and] tenacity . . .,” all connected to moral integrity. On the other hand, he discusses “epistemic vices” such as “obtuseness, gullibility, superstitiousness, close-mindedness, willful naivete and superficiality of thought.” Attention to these standards is a component of human flourishing.³⁰

But in the spirit of zero-sum power plays, nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared, “The great epochs of our life come when we gain the courage to rechristen our evil as what is best in us.”³¹ Why bother with the niceties of developing circumspect convictions when circumspection is a fool's game? And even when you know the truth, it can be to your advantage to foster flimsy beliefs in your followers. So says Saul Alinsky:

The organizer must become schizoid, politically, in order not to slip into becoming a true believer. Before men can act an issue must be polarized. Men will act when they are convinced that their cause is 100 per cent on the side of the angels and that the opposition are 100 per cent on the side of the devil. He knows that there can be no action until issues are polarized to this degree What I am saying is that the organizer must be able to split himself into two parts — one part in the arena of action where he polarizes the issue to 100 to nothing, and helps to lead his forces into conflict, while the other part knows that when the time comes for negotiations that it really is only a 10 per cent difference — and yet both parts have to live comfortably with each other. Only a well-organized person can split and yet stay together. But this is what the organizer must do.³²

³⁰W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 34–53.

³¹Friedrich Nietzsche, “Epigrams and Interludes,” *Beyond Good and Evil: Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 276.

³²Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 78–79.

So we turn to gamesmanship, where sincerity is incidental. It's stock-in-trade for politicians, who act as if a deed were horrific if a member of the opposition party did it, but treat it as negligible when it involves one of their own. We know that many of them will *say anything* to win. One wonders whether this habit of insular dissembling so corrupts their minds and hearts that they finally arrive at the sorry state of *believing anything*.

CONCLUSION

A Tale of Two, Yea Three, Cities

Though the devotees of postmodernism and critical theory love to sport epistemological terminology, they betray its essence at every turn. Truth is a fiction. Justification is a waste of time. Belief is purely optional. Their epistemology is counterfeit.

It's as though one group — the epistemologically earnest — is on the highway, at least aspirationally, toward Sanity City in the framing and defense of propositions. Some make good progress in roadworthy vehicles, such as those acquired at a faithfully Christian liberal arts college. Others chug along as best they can with their scientism, selecting the wrong gear or backfiring when they turn their attention to metaphysics. Still others, like tea-leaf readers, end up in the ditch right away. But they're all at least pointed toward the right destination.

In contrast, the postmodernists are racing toward Power City. They care not a whit for the “epistemological three,” but, instead are obsessed with turf, leverage, and privilege, regardless of whether they are acquired licitly. And they'll run right over thoughtfulness, circumspection, and civil discourse if it's convenient. But there's a big hitch. Though they may gain access to Power City, it soon evolves into Rubble City. As I write this, the United States has just ceded Kabul to the Taliban, and the ruin of that city is well underway. They have the power, but that over which they have power is less and less desirable. And, of course, we Americans can point sadly to swaths of San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle, where often-riotous occupiers have turned blocks into large outdoor toilets. “You win. Now look at what you've done with your winnings.”



"Envy, resentment, and confiscation are not the skyways to satisfaction."

The True Haves and Have Nots

Saul Alinsky began his book saying, "*The Prince* was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away"; and he adds, "The Haves develop their own morality to justify their means of repression and all other means employed to maintain the status quo."³³ This is the counsel of a fool.

For one thing, it may well be the case that his Have-Nots are short on benefits because of choices they have made. A variety of studies have shown, for instance, that by doing a handful of things, (e.g., finishing high school; holding a job for a year; avoiding out-of-wedlock pregnancy, drugs, and the abuse of alcohol), a person can almost surely avoid poverty. The status of those who neglect these minimal items is not so much the result of oppression, as personal, moral immobilization or regression. And this applies to baleful cultures as well as individuals; you don't get a Mogadishu out of a Judeo-Christian base. Yes, of course, there are genuine victims, and, yes, injustices occur. But Alinsky's typology doesn't allow for nuance. He only works with conceptual blunt objects.

A big problem is Alinsky's resonance with Marxist folly in identifying man as an economic being, whose *having* and *not having* are basically fiscal. What he does not realize is that man is above all a spiritual being, whose

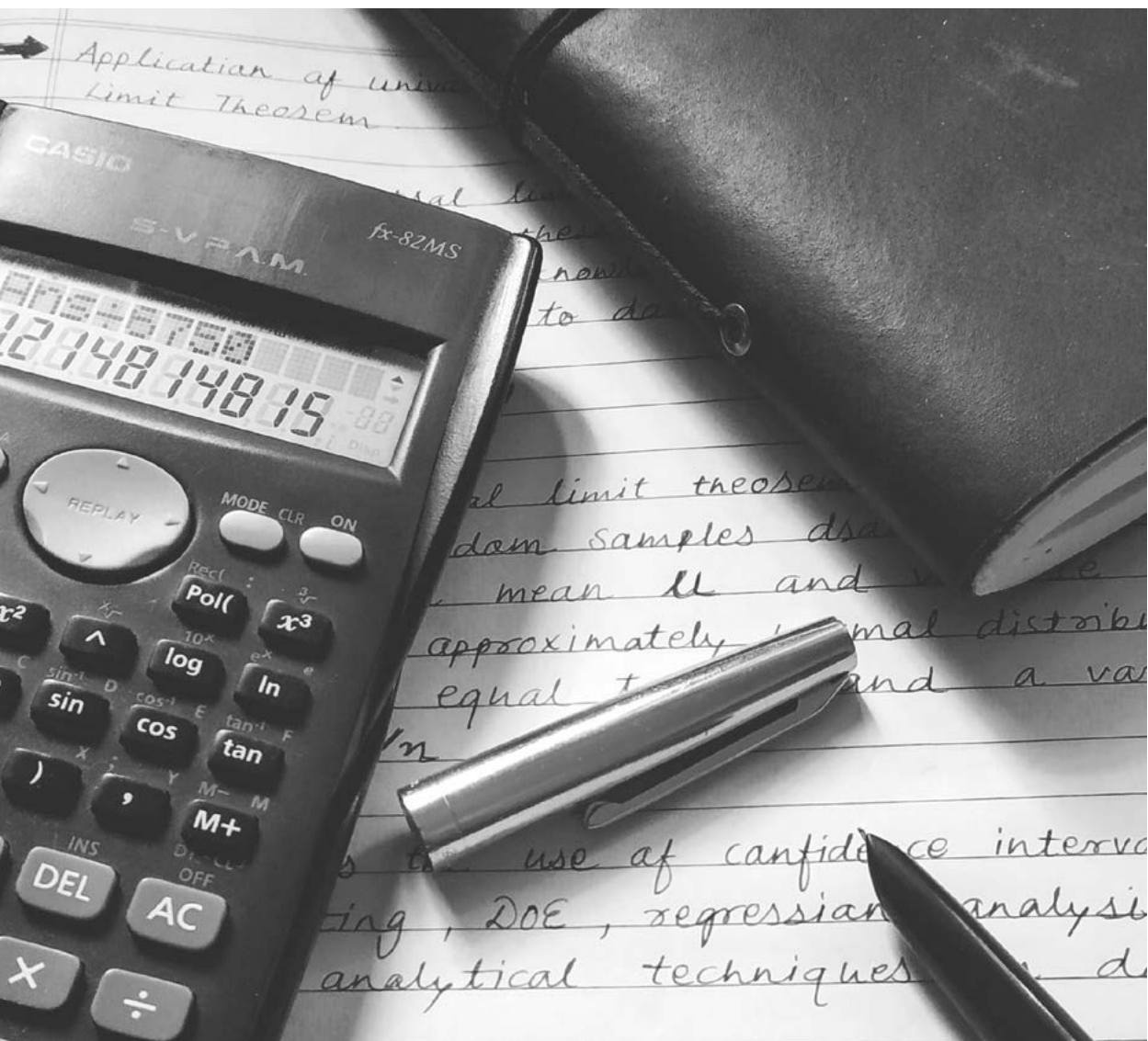
eternal fate is in the balance, and whose hope of joy lies in regeneration, not material accumulation or power multiplication. Envy, resentment, and confiscation are not the skyways to satisfaction. Little does he understand that the morality that motivates the born again is beneficent and salubrious, the outworkings of the abundant life, a life with high regard for truth, accountability, and belief. These are the Haves, and such having is offered free to all — not something to be seized by resentful people but received humbly by self-consciously broken people.

Where shall we begin in vitiating the charm of postmodernism and critical theory? We might start with a visit to the Decalogue, upon which we break ourselves to the extent that we break them. Starting with the Tenth Commandment, proscribing covetousness, we remove the stinger from the hatred of Haves. Then, working back through them, we excise illicit paths to power (stealing, lying, and murder) as well as a reason to gin up fictions of the Margaret Mead variety (adultery). As we approach the top of the list, we find other antiseptic directives built upon the created order, centered on the Living God, whose special revelation in Scripture is unmistakably zealous for truth, epistemic accountability, and genuine belief. ✕

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³³Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 3, 42.

Does Mathematics = Western Imperialism?



Is mathematics next on the chopping block to be deconstructed as a form of “Western imperialism”?

A young woman describing herself as a teacher, PhD student, and “social justice change agent,” recently gained notoriety for tweeting, “The idea of $2+2$ equaling 4 is cultural,” a product of “western imperialism/colonialism.”¹

Yes, even mathematics, held up as the most objective and neutral of disciplines, is being reshaped by critical theory, which claims that all ideas are social constructions by groups using their power to advance their own interests.

This is not just the inflammatory language of young social justice warriors. Alan Bishop, who teaches at Cambridge University, wrote an article titled “Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism,” in which he deplores “the process of cultural invasion in colonised countries by western mathematics.”²

In *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, two math educators at Georgia State University write, “Dominant mathematics is a system established as right and True by the White men who have historically controlled and constructed the game.” The authors call for “critical mathematics” to expose “the power dynamic between the oppressor — White, male mathematicians — and the oppressed — the marginalized Other.”³

"Yes, even mathematics...
is being
reshaped by
critical theory..."

¹Paula Bolyard, “Orwellian: Teacher Blames ‘Western Imperialism,’ ‘Colonization’ for Concept of $2+2=4$,” *PJ Media*, July 8, 2020, <https://pjmedia.com/news-and-politics/paula-bolyard/2020/07/08/orwellian-teacher-blames-western-imperialism-colonization-for-concept-of-224-n614048>.

²Alan J. Bishop, “Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism,” *Race and Class* 32(2), 1990.

³David W. Stinson and Erika C. Bullock, “Critical Postmodern Theory in Mathematics Education Research: A Praxis of Uncertainty,” *Educational Studies in Mathematics* (February 2012).

Rochelle Gutiérrez, an education professor at the University of Illinois, writes that “mathematics itself operates as Whiteness. Who gets credit for doing and developing mathematics, who is capable in mathematics, and who is seen as the mathematical community is generally viewed as White.”⁴ Gutiérrez charges that algebra and geometry perpetuate white privilege because the textbook version of math history is Eurocentric: “[c]urricula emphasizing terms like Pythagorean theorem and pi perpetuate a perception that mathematics was largely developed by Greeks and other Europeans.”

I’m not sure which history textbooks she’s talking about. We all use Arabic numerals, and in my college math class, we learned that the concept of zero as a place holder came from India; that the Babylonians gave us the 360-degree circle and the 60-minute hour; that the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Chinese all had a rough idea of the value of pi. The approximate ratio for pi even appears in the Bible: “And he made a molten sea, ten cubits from the one brim to the other: it was round all about, and his height was five cubits: and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about” (1 Kings 7:23).

A website for teachers, “K–12 Academics,” calls for the development of “anti-racist” mathematics:

Anti-racist mathematics is part of a larger social constructivist movement in which traditional Western or scientific world views were developed within the context of a Judeo-Christian Western culture or set of cultures. Anti-racist educators suggest that these assumptions are dominant because of the abuse of political power.⁵

Note the accusation that racism is a product of Judeo-Christian or Western culture, which became dominant not because it made any genuine contributions, but only “because of the abuse of political power.”

Critical theory takes to heart Marx’s dictum that the purpose of philosophy is not to interpret the world, but to change it. It calls people to become activists — to identify groups as either oppressors or oppressed, and then to liberate the oppressed from their “false consciousness” and resist their oppressors.

In critical theory, the key question is not whether an idea is true, but rather, whose interests does it serve? How does it legitimate domination? How does it perpetuate unequal power relations? Critical theory has been dubbed “the sociopolitical turn” in mathematics education. It has roots, like Marxism itself, in the philosophy of Hegel. The German philosopher held a kind of pantheism, in which the real actor in history is not the individual, but a collective consciousness that he called the Absolute Mind or Spirit (in German, *Geist*). This collective consciousness expresses itself through a community’s language, laws, morality, religion, and culture.

Indeed, according to Hegel, individuals do not even have original ideas of their own. Their thoughts are merely expressions of the pantheistic Mind. In his words, individuals “are all the time the unconscious tools of the World Mind at work within them.”

Hegel’s successors reduced the collective consciousness to a metaphor — to the

Zeitgeist (literally, the spirit of the age: *Zeit* = time, *Geist* = spirit). What his followers retained, however, was the idea that individuals are “unconscious tools” of a communal consciousness. They are not producers of culture so much as products of a particular culture and community.

In our own day, this idea has led to the extreme conclusion that individuals are little more than mouthpieces for communities based on sex, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Every community is said to have its own “truth” derived from its unique experience and perspective, which cannot be judged by anyone outside the community.

This reductionistic vision treats individuals as puppets of social forces. It says people hold convictions not because they have good reasons, but because they are men or women, heterosexual or homosexual, black or white, Asian or Hispanic, or some other group identity. Sound familiar? This is multiculturalism. Identity politics. Political correctness.

Critical theorists argue that mathematics is just another arbitrary human creation that has been used to privilege certain groups while excluding others. Since all worldviews are regarded as equally valid, the selection of any one worldview to teach in the classroom can only be a matter of privileging the interests of one social group over others.

But critical theory contains a fatal self-contradiction. While proponents of the theory treat everyone else’s beliefs as relative to social conditions, they treat their own beliefs as objective and universally true. And they are just as exclusive as anyone else in insisting that their view captures the way things really are.

Critical theory is also inherently coercive, which makes it dangerous. Because it reduces truth claims to power plays, it has no problem with using power to advance its own views. Gutiérrez warns, “Any resistance to the sociopolitical turn is a form of hegemony.”⁶ In other words, no resistance, no disagreement allowed.

Many educators are buying into critical theory because it promises them a more culturally sensitive approach for helping non-white students become more confident in their mathematical abilities — certainly a worthy goal. But ultimately, critical theory will harm more than help. Because it denies the very possibility of knowledge, ironically, it undercuts the deepest motivation for education: the unrelenting search for truth.⁷ ✕

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⁴Rochelle Gutiérrez, “Political Conocimiento for Teaching Mathematics: Why Teachers Need It and How to Develop It,” in *Building Support for Scholarly Practices in Mathematics Methods*, ed. by Signe E. Kastberg, et al (Charlotte, NC, Information Age Publishing: 1963), 11–38.

⁵“Context for Anti-Racist Mathematics,” *K-12 Academics*, <https://www.k12academics.com/educational-philosophy/anti-racist-mathematics/context>.

⁶Rochelle Gutiérrez, “The Sociopolitical Turn in Mathematics Education,” *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* 44, no. 1 (2013): 37–68.

⁷This article originally appeared at *The American Thinker* and is republished with permission from the author.

If Christ is Not Savior, He Cannot be Liberator: A Response to Ibram Kendi

"Antiracists fundamentally reject savior theology, which goes right in line with racist ideas and racist theology. . . . Jesus was a revolutionary and the job of the Christian is to revolutionize society. The job of the Christian is to liberate society from the powers on earth that are oppressing humanity . . . so that's liberation theology in a nutshell."¹

—IBRAM X. KENDI

The previous quote is from an interview Ibram Kendi gave at the progressive Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan. It came in response to the following question: "I am curious if you see any role that churches, or communities of faith can play in this antiracist movement."² Kendi's answer has since gone viral. It is rather jarring to watch the interview and see Matthew 28:18–20 etched in stone on the wall directly behind Kendi and his interviewer.

It ought not be lost on us that this man was invited into a church and is treated as an authority on the matter of antiracism and social justice. As one listens to the entire interview, it becomes abundantly evident how religious antiracism is. Kendi speaks of the need for constant self-examination and repentance from our racism, both implicit and explicit. He is fond of the word *confession* throughout the interview and calls for everyone to examine their heart to find manifestations of anti-blackness and turn from them. And, as the quote above captures, he is not shy about invoking the name of Jesus as a revolutionary who liberates society from oppressive structures and policies. This is the argument Kendi advances in his best-selling book *How to Be an Antiracist*, and it is directly related to the influence of black liberation theologian James Cone mediated through his parents. He tells the story of a time when his dad met

Cone and asked him what his definition of a Christian was. Cone responded, "A Christian is one who is striving for liberation."³ Kendi continues, "James Cone's working definition of a Christian described a Christianity of the enslaved, not a Christianity of the slaveholders. . . . My parents arrived at a creed with which to shape their lives, to be the type of Christians that Jesus the revolutionary inspired them to be."⁴ Kendi argues that this creed grounded his parents' lives and his life and confesses, "I cannot disconnect my parents' religious strivings to be Christian from my secular strivings to be an antiracist."⁵ This admission makes sense of Kendi's consistent usage of Christian terminology in his antiracist doctrine.

But the fundamental errors present in black liberation theology are even more pronounced as Kendi secularizes Cone's logic further. He avers, "To be queer antiracist is to serve as an ally to transgender people, to intersex people, to women, to the non-gender conforming, to homosexuals, to their intersections, meaning listening, learning, and being led by their equalizing ideas, by their equalizing policy campaigns, by their power struggle for equal opportunity."⁶ Antiracist liberation, according to Kendi, necessitates the licensure and celebration of a legion of immoral identities and behaviors.

¹Ibram Kendi, "How to Be Anti-Racist: Ibram X. Kendi in Conversation with Molly Crabapple," Judson Memorial Church, June 19, 2020, <https://youtu.be/BhbbmjqrVY>.

²Kendi, "How to Be Anti-Racist."

³Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, (New York: One World, 2019), 17.

⁴Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 17.

⁵Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 17.

⁶Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 197.

I am convinced this error flows from Kendi's rejection of savior theology, which he has explicitly disavowed, because in so doing he disconnects from the biblical presentation of Christ coming to fulfill the law of God and redeem humanity from the curse of sin (Gal 3:10–14, 4:4–5). Understanding the God-law-sin relationship is crucial to having a proper Christology and a proper view of the atonement. My aim in this essay is to argue for the absolute necessity of savior theology by providing a biblical presentation for how salvation is wrought for us in Christ. To do this I will (1) defend the classic Reformed understanding of penal substitution as central to all other atonement motifs and (2) contend that Christ's identification and solidarity with his people is the precondition for atonement, not the atonement itself.

IF JESUS CHRIST IS NOT OUR SAVIOR, HE CANNOT BE OUR LIBERATOR

By rejecting savior theology and claiming antiracism is fundamentally at odds with human beings standing in need of salvation, Kendi's standard of justice and righteousness is divorced from the biblical presentation of Christ's person and work. As Adam Johnson correctly points out, "Theories of the atonement are synthetic in nature, in that they necessarily bring together and depend upon a number of other doctrines."⁷ Therefore, getting the cross and the reconciling work of Christ wrong is *significant* in that it exposes missteps elsewhere in our theology. As John Stott famously wrote, "At the root of every caricature of the cross there lies a distorted Christology."⁸ And as Stephen Wellum rightly deduces from this logic, "[I]t's crucial to remember

that a true Christology is also dependent on a correct theology proper. Thus, it's more precise to say: 'At the root of every caricature of the cross is a distorted doctrine of God.'"⁹ While Kendi does not explicitly mention the cross, by rejecting savior theology and teaching that people are not the problem, we can rightly deduce that he has a significant misunderstanding pertaining to the cross. By decoupling liberation from salvation, Kendi betrays his distorted doctrine of God, anthropology, and hamartiology, just to name a few.

Those within the Reformed stream have long held to the conviction that liberation from the curse of sin is integral to the atonement. Because mankind's main problem is sin, the solution God has arranged for sin's remedy is the incarnation of the Son and his substitutionary atonement. This Reformed conviction stands opposed to Kendi's understanding of Christ's work, because he does not view people as the problem, but instead argues policies that create disparity are mankind's main problem. Kendi emphasizes sin's systemic character to the exclusion of its personal nature, and thus he understands humanity's plight as not fundamentally vertical, but horizontal. In other words, he does not prioritize the reconciliation between God and man, but rather equality between genders, races, and classes. As such, Kendi sees the aim of salvation as the restoration of the *personhood* and dignity of the victim of oppression. In this view, Christ's mission is one of identifying and standing in solidarity with those who are marginalized by societal constructs. True preachers of liberation theology thereby "fundamentally preach about the

problem being structural, racism, and society. They use Jesus and the word to galvanize people to challenge society."¹⁰ This perspective on Christ's atonement is woefully reductionistic, at best, and is guilty of rejecting the primary reason the Son of Man came to earth, namely, to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

When we follow the unfolding narrative of Scripture as it relates to salvation, central to its presentation is salvation's propitiatory character. This is by no means to denigrate or push aside other motifs. But for the other atonement motifs to have a secure foundation, we must not reject the wrath-bearing nature of the cross. Further, these other motifs of Christ's atoning work are contingent on God's nature and law, for he must be true to himself in bringing about man's salvation.

Stephen Wellum is right to argue that penal substitution best captures the view of the Reformation and post-Reformation era, however he is quick to qualify this assertion by stating, "In thinking of the cross in this way, the Reformers and their heirs were *not* reducing the diversity of the biblical presentation merely to one concept. Instead, they were attempting to capture what was central to the *why* and *what* of the cross. Central to their view of penal substitution was increased clarity on

the God-law-sin relationship."¹¹ Wellum makes two crucial claims here that need to be unpacked as they relate to Kendi.

First, the God-law-sin relationship Wellum mentions captures the biblical connection between God's righteousness and his hatred of sin. The wrath of God is not an intrinsic perfection as is his love or holiness, but his perfect nature requires that he judges and punishes sin (cf. Exod 34:6-7).¹² As John Owen taught, "God enjoys eternal and infinite happiness and glory."¹³ This speaks to his intrinsic perfection, but when the Creator-Covenant Lord is disobeyed by those created in his image, his jealous and righteous wrath flows from his all-consuming love for holiness. As Joel Beeke says, "Wrath is not an intrinsic perfection of God, but rather the exercise of righteous love."¹⁴ Because God is holy, sinners rightly receive God's personal opposition. And God must be personally opposed to sinners, for, as Owen put it, "God hates sin, not merely by choice but by nature."¹⁵ Thus, since God is holy, sinners justly and *necessarily* receive God's personal opposition as the expression of his eternal love for righteousness. Since Kendi rejects savior theology, he has discarded the only solution for man's greatest need. If Christ did not come to save us, then we are a people to be most pitied and are without hope of reconciliation or liberation.

⁷Adam Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2015), 37.

⁸John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 159.

⁹Stephen Wellum, "Answering 4 Common Objections to PSA," *9 Marks Journal* (August 2019): 81.

¹⁰Kiratiana Freelon, "Is Your Church Anti-Racist?: An Interview with Dr. Ibram X. Kendi," *The Christian Recorder*, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://www.thechristianrecorder.com/is-your-church-anti-racist/>.

¹¹Stephen Wellum, *Christ Alone: The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 193 (emphasis original).

¹²Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 260n.

¹³John Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* in *The Works of John Owen*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 10:543.

¹⁴Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology Volume 1: Revelation and God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 859.

¹⁵Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice*, 10:550–51.

Second, Wellum points out that the Reformers did not reduce the diversity of the biblical presentation regarding Christ's atoning work to that of penal substitution. But they did argue it is central to the *why* and the *what* of the cross. What this means is all other motifs are grounded in and flow from penal substitution. We must never divorce the fruit from the root. As Stott said, "Substitution is not a 'theory of the atonement.' Nor is it even an additional image to take its place as an option alongside others. It is rather the essence of each image and the heart of the atonement itself. None of the images could stand without it."¹⁶ But this is precisely what Kendi has done.

In rejecting savior theology in favor of liberation, Kendi denigrates the severity of sin and distorts God's justice. In so doing, he reframes Christ's mission: "And so, to me, the type of theology liberation theology breeds is a common humanity, a common humanity against the structures of power that oppress us all."¹⁷ He incredulously asks those who hold to savior theology, "The way you change people first is by becoming saved?"¹⁸ The Bible offers a resounding "yes!" in response. Paul could not be clearer on this matter:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Eph 2:14-16).

Christ is the remedy, granting peace and reconciliation between Jew and Greek by dying in their place to remove the hostility aroused by the fact that all are lawbreakers. Everything that is true of Ephesians 2:14-16 is contingent on the glorious expression of God's mercy towards us in Christ, in which we have been saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:4b, 8). Christians who have been saved by God's grace are first transformed by his grace, and then enabled to walk in the good works prepared beforehand for them by God (cf. Eph 2:14-16). Yes, the way people are changed is by first becoming saved. To reject savior theology is to reject the gospel and leave liberation floating in midair, disconnected from its life source, and the crash landing is inevitable. If our Savior did not die on the cross in our place, there is no hope for killing the hostility. It is vital that we do not miss Paul's clear teaching that Christ reconciles Jew and Greek "both to God in one body through the cross." By his death on the cross Christ saves us by redeeming us from sin, restoring us to God and our fellow man, and freeing us from sin's dominion over us.

IDENTIFICATION AND SOLIDARITY ARE A PREREQUISITE TO ATONEMENT, NOT THE ATONEMENT ITSELF

Another mistake made by liberation theology that enters Kendi's logic is an error that makes the root the fruit. In the previous section, our focus was on how antiracism plucks liberation from the fertile soil of salvation from sin. But the error here is how a precondition for atonement is made out to be the atonement itself. James Cone, for example, said, "Jesus is not a human

being for all persons; he is a human being for oppressed persons, whose identity is made known in and through their liberation."¹⁹ This sentiment is commonplace in liberation theology, which tends to emphasize Christ's identification and solidarity with the oppressed as the atonement. The Bible, however, foreshadows the coming of Christ through the various sacrifices instituted under the Old Covenant, and it uses substitutionary and identification language in this system of atonement (see Lev 1-7). The graphic scenes of Abraham taking Isaac to slaughter him on the mountain, only to be granted a ram to sacrifice in his son's place, or an Israelite taking his best animal from the herd to the temple in Jerusalem to slit its throat and burn it on the altar, are laying the groundwork for the principle of substitution. Yet we are told in Hebrews 10:1-4 the perpetual nature of animal sacrifices reinforces a sobering reality: it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. What can wash away our sin? Not the blood of animals. Nothing but the blood of Jesus will do. Though God was gracious to Israel in providing high priests who could deal gently with wayward and sinful people, these priests were themselves sinful, subject to the same weakness (Heb 5:1-3).

Therefore God sent us a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses, and he is one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15). It is vital for our salvation that God the Son incarnate be made like

us in *every respect* to be a sin offering. By bearing our sin in his body on the tree he condemns sin in the flesh (Rom 8:3; 1 Pet 2:24). In this we find freedom from the tyrannous dominion of sin: "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Heb 2:15). This salvation from the fear of death flows from both Christ's identification with us and his taking our curse upon himself. So, as the author of Hebrews argues later, "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). For us and for our salvation, it is necessary the Son of God take on flesh to identify with his people, to stand in solidarity with us as a fellow human, to live a sinless life, and then to die in our stead, bearing the wrath of God against sin so that we would be free from the fear and lifelong slavery resulting from our sin nature and its necessary consequence. As Wellum summarizes, "Our redemption requires incarnational identification *and* atonement. Christ's identification and solidarity *with us* is a prerequisite to atonement, not atonement itself."²⁰ Contrary to liberation theology, Christ's identification and solidarity with us is necessary for atonement to be possible, but it is not to be confused with the atonement.

¹⁶Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 158-59.

¹⁷Kendi, "How to be Antiracist."

¹⁸Freelon, "Is Your Church Anti-Racist?"

¹⁹James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 85-86.

²⁰Wellum, *Christ Alone*, 114-15.

CONCLUSION

The gospel according to Kendi is a message of human autonomy (self-law) untethered from God's law which leads to the message that Jesus did not come to save lawbreakers, but to free victims from oppressive human power structures. But "liberation" apart from God's righteous character and law is no new deception; it is a death work that has been perpetuated by the serpent and his seed since the beginning (Gen 3:1, 4-5; 2 Cor 11:14). In divorcing liberation from salvation, Kendi unravels the God-law-sin dynamic central to the person and work of Christ. This separation simply will not do, as the flower of liberation from oppression withers and dies when uprooted from the reality that God is holy and therefore personally opposed and hostile towards sin. Moreover, it is a mistake to take the prerequisite by which Christ was uniquely equipped to do away with sin (incarnational identification) and make it out to be the atonement itself. The Bible emphasizes the necessity of Christ identifying with us so that he could bear the wrath of God in his human body on the tree, thus bearing the curse of sin for all who would believe in him (Gal 3:13; 4:4-5; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 2:17).

Though Kendi claims liberation theology breeds a common humanity, it actually does the opposite. It removes any perceived oppressor from Christ's reach by emphasizing his exclusive solidarity with the marginalized. The Bible, on the other hand, speaks to what is truly common in our humanity: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Moreover, as Paul adds elsewhere, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into

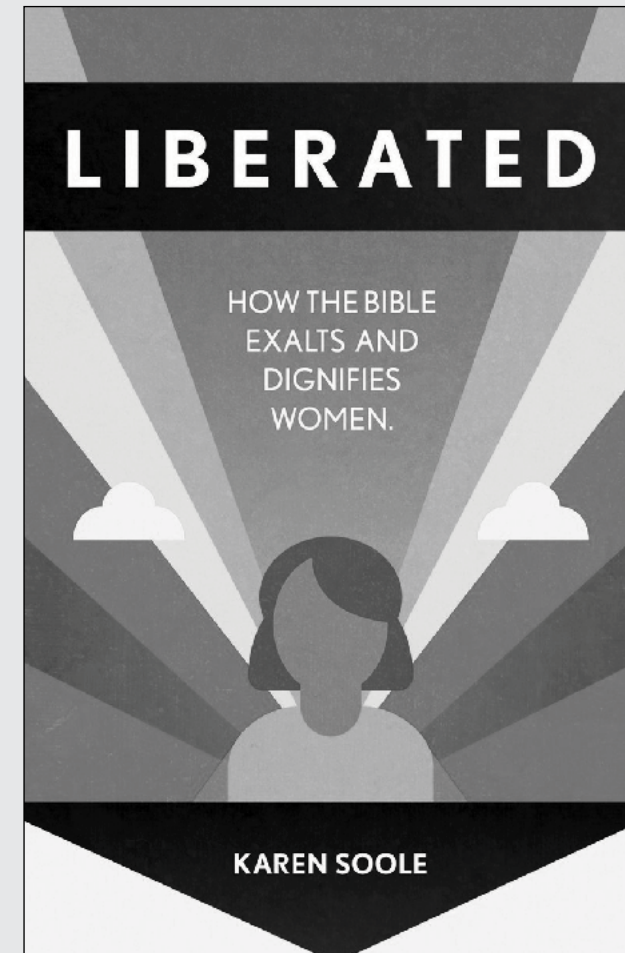
the world to save sinners." (1 Tim 1:15). The most equalizing reality available to mankind is found at the foot of the cross where all who come to Christ are one in him (Gal 3:28). There is nothing that will establish a more common humanity than the scriptural teaching that all have sinned, and that Christ Jesus came to save sinners. In rejecting savior theology, antiracism fundamentally rejects the gospel of Jesus Christ and thereby forfeits the experience of true liberation. ✕

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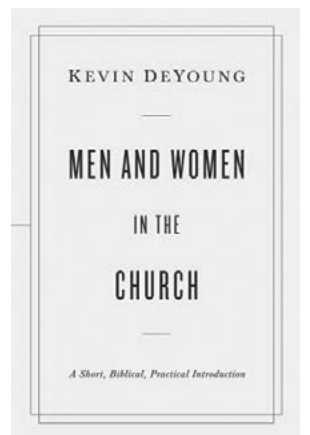
BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEWED BY MATT DAMICO

Men and Women in the Church: A Short, Biblical, Practical Introduction

Kevin DeYoung's *Men and Women in the Church* lives up to each adjective in its subtitle: *A Short, Biblical, Practical Introduction*. Because of those three features — clocking in around 150 pages, faithfully addressing the relevant portions of Scripture, and giving readers guidance for how to respond to the Bible's teaching — DeYoung's book deserves to be a go-to resource for anyone wanting an introduction to the complementarian position and the debates that surround it.

The book is divided into two parts; the first is “Biblical Exploration” and goes through different portions and passages of Scripture, from Genesis through the Old Testament, to the teaching of Jesus and the crucial epistolary passages. Part two, called “Questions and Applications,” is shorter and discusses more practical matters.



Kevin DeYoung. *Men and Women in the Church: A Short, Biblical, Practical Introduction*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021.

The book is excellent with much to commend it. For one, DeYoung writes with characteristic clarity and level-headedness; it would be difficult to find evidence that the author lacks a grasp of the subject or that he writes with a shrill pen. Second, there are chapters that would serve as helpful standalone resources. I would highlight the chapter on marriage, which consists of a brief explanation of Ephesians 5:22–33 and some on-the-ground exhortation for husbands and wives. Chapters 4 and 8 stand out in the way they address difficult matters head on — the former addressing questions arising from Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, the latter responding to common objections to complementarian teaching. Rather than just presenting his case in these chapters, DeYoung does the reader a favor by naming the common objections and questions and answering them.

Maybe the most unique contribution DeYoung makes is his consistent willingness to affirm not only the distinct roles that God assigns to men and women, but that these distinctions are rooted in the way men and women are made. There can be a tendency among some complementarians to affirm the distinct roles in a way that makes the distinctions seem arbitrary, as though something like a divine coin flip determined whether it was men or women whom God would call to lead families and churches. DeYoung is convinced that God’s design of men and women informs the stewardships entrusted to each.

He orients his reader to the basis of this complementarity in the introduction, where he says “this book is about the divinely designed complementarity of

men and women as it applies to life in general and especially to ministry in the church” (15). For DeYoung, complementarianism is not merely a name for traditional views about the church and family, but a descriptive view of men and women in general — a view derived from both special and natural revelation.

DeYoung comes back to the implications of natural revelation throughout the book. He concludes the book’s first chapter, which consists of 15 observations from Genesis 1–3, with the observation that men and women won’t find “marching orders” in Genesis, but that there are “creational capacities” that are commended to us that “establish the shape of sexual differentiation and complementarity” (33). In other words, when one begins to grasp the teaching of Genesis 1 and 2 — teaching that predates the fall, predates any cultural setting we might blame, and predates any author being held captive by the assumptions of his time — one will then see the pattern of complementarity in the rest of Scripture for what it is: a natural outworking of the way men and women are made.

While the theme of natural revelation is in the background of much of the book, it comes to the fore in the final two chapters. It’s here DeYoung makes statements like “our physiology corresponds to a divine moral injunction” (121) and “the body is not incidental to our purpose as human beings” (122), and where he encourages readers that “the more we see in nature (partly) and in God’s word (mainly) what it means to be men and women, the better our marriages, our children, our churches, and our society will be” (129).

“So rather than shrug our shoulders in confusion as to why God assigns the roles he does, we can nod in unsurprised agreement because, given the truths of Genesis 1–3 and the created order, the assignments make sense.”



It’s in the book’s last chapter that DeYoung clearly articulates the need for this emphasis on divine design: “I fear that the ‘rules’ of complementarianism — male headship in the home and male eldership in the church — are sometimes construed as divine strictures absent any deeper recognition of natural theology and sexual difference.” I share this concern. If Scripture consisted only of Paul’s writings, his teaching on men and women would still be authoritative. But thanks be to God, divine revelation is more fulsome. So rather than shrug our shoulders in confusion as to *why* God assigns the roles he does, we can nod in unsurprised agreement because, given the truths of Genesis 1–3 and the created order, the assignments make sense. Viewed this way, the roles are not mere *limitations* as to what men and women can and cannot do, they are *invitations* to live in accordance with the way our wise, good, and gracious God has made us.

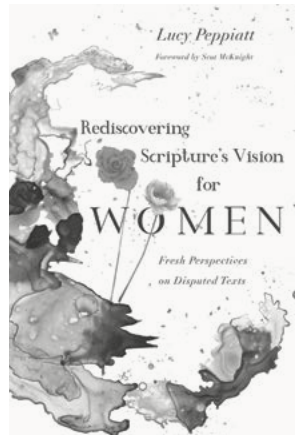
Any reader will find things with which to quibble, whether with the necessity of debating Junia’s gender, or any number

of practical implications DeYoung offers about women deacons or the involvement of women in corporate worship. But these are minor matters, and when it comes to the practical side of things, DeYoung is quick to qualify that every church is different and will need to make some decisions with contextual awareness.

Pastors and churches would do well to keep copies of this book on hand. Small groups could go through it, a Sunday School class could read it together, and it would be a great resource simply to make available for members. Whether it’s someone looking to dip their toes in the discussion for the first time, or someone looking to bolster their grasp and appreciation for Scripture’s teaching, this book is a trustworthy help. ✕

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Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts



Peppiatt, Lucy. *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019.

INTRODUCTION

In *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts*, Lucy Peppiatt, the principal of Westminster Theological Centre, analyzes what the Bible says about the role of women in the church and home. Her intended audience is primarily “the evangelical Protestant world” (160), and she aims to show that the relevant biblical texts are not as straightforward as they are often made to sound, and that when read properly, actually support an egalitarian — she prefers the term “mutualist” — viewpoint. Specifically, she argues that the complementarian — she prefers the term “hierarchicalist” — interpretation of the relevant texts promotes “the exclusion, subordination, and silencing of women” (142), and does not accord with the text.

SUMMARY

In order to accomplish this aim, Peppiatt divides the book into eight chapters. In Chapters 1 and 2, she reckons with the apparent androcentricity of the Bible, especially “the maleness of Jesus” (10), and she queries how that might impact our understanding of God and salvation history. From the standpoint of theology, she rightly dismisses the notion that God is embodied and does not have biological gender as humans do. She also notes that Scripture, while often referring to God with the masculine pronoun (“he”) or with the signification of “Father,” can speak of God using maternal imagery (e.g., Isa. 46:3–4). Hence, the maleness of Jesus shouldn’t lead us to believe that God has masculine gender. Instead, Peppiatt suggests that in the incarnation the Son chose to be born a male in order that, through him as a “free Jewish male,” everyone who is united to him can hold “the place of highest honor in the closest proximity to God” (40).

In Chapters 3 and 4 she analyzes the Genesis creation account and Paul’s teaching on head coverings (1 Cor. 11:2–16). At creation, Genesis 1:26–27 is the controlling text, and the subsequent creation account in Genesis 2:4–25 must be interpreted to fit into its paradigm. Accordingly, the phrase *‘ezer kenegdo* (Gen. 2:18) is taken to mean “a power equal to man” (49, quoting R. David Freedman). Adam’s naming of Eve, the description of Eve as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” and her creation from his side — Peppiatt finds it significant that she was not created from his head — combine to emphasize Eve’s equality with Adam and do not in

any way designate Adam’s authority over her. Regarding the nature of the woman’s “desire” (*teshuqah*) in Genesis 3:16, she seeks a *via media* such that the desire is not “contrary to” her husband but as an idolatrous “turning to man rather than to God” (54) instead finds male domination. How this fits with the use of *teshuqah* in Genesis 4:7 is left unanalyzed.

The analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is perhaps the most novel analysis in the book and helps the book live up to its subtitle. In this chapter, which distills her monograph on the topic, she analyzes the egalitarian and complementarian interpretations and finds them both wanting. Contra the egalitarian view, *kephalē* (“head”) does not mean “source,” and that Paul grounds his teaching on headship in creation shows it transcends culture. But contra the complementarian view, *kephalē* doesn’t mean “authority,” which does not cohere with the Genesis creation account. Instead, following the view of Chrysostom, *kephalē* refers to a “first principle” and can thus apply to things that coexist (unlike “source”) and share the same essence. This preserves an orthodox Trinitarian interpretation of 11:3 and fits with the equality between the man and the woman in the creation account. Moreover, she suggests that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is nonsensical as it stands, for it is filled with contradictions (e.g., 11:7–10 is corrected by 11:11–12). She concludes that some of the pericope must express the errant and distorted viewpoints of the Corinthians and not Paul’s view. Relying on the likelihood that elsewhere in 1 Corinthians Paul quotes their slogans and then responds to them, she suggests that 11:4–5, 7–10 reflects their distorted view, and 11:2–3, 6, 11–16 reflects Paul’s response.

In Chapters 5 and 6 Peppiatt critiques the complementarian view of marriage and offers a defense of the egalitarian view. She takes issue with *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim and Kathy Keller, deemed to be a fair representation of the complementarian view. She rightly dismisses the Son's eternal subordination to the Father, and she denies that the Triune God in himself is any model for human relationships, whether hierarchicalist or mutualist. In both chapters she addresses the New Testament's household codes and finds them especially noteworthy in their instruction for men, both for what they say (e.g., "love your wife") and for what they don't say (e.g., nothing is said about a husband's power). She understands 1 Peter 3:7 to mean the husband should work to bring his wife to Christian maturity since she is weaker in both a physical and social sense.

Chapter 7 is one of the most important chapters for Peppiatt's thesis, for in it she asserts that the New Testament depicts women as apostles, prophets, and teachers/pastors. She contends that in Romans 16:7 Junia was a female apostle. Regarding prophecy, Peppiatt asserts that it includes a "teaching element" (123), yet women were prophesying in the gathered assembly at Corinth. Hence, women were teachers. Phoebe in Romans 16:1–2 was not only a deacon (*diakonos*) but also held a position of authority (*prostatís*) and was expected not only to carry Paul's letter to the church at Rome but also to read and explain its contents to the gathered assembly. The goal of this analysis is to prove "women's involvement in the church at every level" (113).

Finally, in Chapter 8 Peppiatt analyzes 1 Timothy 2:9–15. Her hermeneutical method explains the rationale for putting 1 Timothy 2:9–15 at the end: It is better to start with the more positive affirmations of the extent to which women were involved in the church and then read any prohibitions in light of them. Following the work of Gary Hoag and Sandra Glahn, she contends that "there is compelling evidence that the Artemis cult lies behind this text" (146). She rests her case on the words and themes common to 1 Timothy and Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*. The result is as follows: Paul needed to regulate women's attire in Ephesus (1 Tim. 2:9–10) because the women were wearing their hair and dressing like devotees of Artemis. He prohibited them from teaching, not permanently but only for a time, because they weren't willing to learn but were attempting to teach in line with the myths of Artemis and Isis (1 Tim. 2:11–12). Hence Paul corrected their misinformed view about the order of creation and who was deceived (1 Tim. 2:13–14). He also encouraged them not to fear Artemis, the goddess of childbearing, but to trust in God who would protect them (1 Tim. 2:15).

APPRECIATION

Due to space constraints, I am unable to mention all the ways in which I appreciate this book, but I will mention a few. Often this kind of book does not interact extensively with the biblical text but simply asserts the thesis with a few arguments vaguely rooted in Scripture sprinkled in for good measure. But Peppiatt takes the biblical text seriously. She doesn't give prominence to a "trajectory hermeneutic" by which the interpreter moves beyond the text of the New Testament, but she engages the biblical

text for what it says. For instance, while I remain unconvinced that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is contradictory, I appreciated her effort to follow its flow of thought. Similarly, she doesn't overlook the major debated texts. She doesn't always engage with the strongest arguments from those texts against her position — for example, she doesn't entertain the possibility that in 1 Timothy 2:13 Paul says Eve was deceived because of the serpent's attempt to overturn the created order — but one cannot say everything in a book. Put one way, what the book lacks in depth, it certainly makes up for in breadth.

Also, I appreciated Peppiatt's keen insights into the cultural background of the New Testament, especially in the *Haustafeln*. That women are addressed at all in the household codes is significant, and wives being equated with the church in Ephesians 5:22–24 would have dignified Christian wives. The mutual conjugal rights of 1 Corinthians 7:3–4 would have been "particularly arresting" (95), and Paul's teaching on the interconnectedness and mutual dependency of those in the body of Christ would have been dignifying to all those in the body, including women.

Even though I do not agree with her overall conclusions, much of her exegesis is compelling, especially in cataloguing the extent to which women in the New Testament participated as "disciples, patrons, and witnesses" of Christ (31). Luke highlights the women who followed Jesus (esp. Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42), women are key witnesses in John's Gospel (John 11:27; 20:18), and Paul entrusted Phoebe with the task of carrying his letter to the church at Rome (Rom. 16:1–2). The critiques I offer below should not diminish my appreciation for her exegetical insights and desire to dignify Christian women.

DISAGREEMENT AND CRITIQUE

While I appreciate much of Peppiatt's work, I have four points of disagreement and critique. The four are linked in that they all have to do with hermeneutical method and the handling of the biblical text. Hence, the goal of my critique is aimed at honing the hermeneutical method of Christian scholarship so as to interpret the biblical text more soundly.

First, even though Peppiatt extensively interacted with the biblical text so as to marshal evidence for her position, the evidence did not always support her conclusion. For instance, Paul's labeling Christian women as his "coworkers" does not mean those women were apostles (see 128–29). Again, just because there may be female deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11 does not necessitate that Paul would allow for female overseers earlier in the qualification list. Again, does the virgin birth signify that Mary had "an apostolic role" (31)? Much of Chapters 2 and 3 I agree with — women were Jesus' "disciples, patrons, witnesses" — but this does not prove they had an "apostolic function" (28) or that Jesus' choice of the Twelve did not bestow any greater authority upon them but was merely symbolic (33). Again, by no means is it clear that the present tense *epitrepo* in 1 Timothy 2:12 should be pressed to mean, "I am not allowing this for now or in this current season" (144). One of the strengths of the book is that it engages with the biblical text, but one of its weaknesses is that in doing so it presses the evidence too far, beyond what it can bear. The effect is that the book's thesis is much weaker because it rests on evidence that, upon further reflection, is much thinner than it initially appeared to be.

Second, and related to this critique, is that evidence that could be construed as contrary to Peppiatt's thesis was sometimes, though not always, either ignored or explained away. For instance, the *Haustafeln* instruction that a wife should submit to her own husband is explained away because it was an expected behavior in Graeco-Roman households and thus isn't really shocking (93). But does apostolic paraenesis only possess abiding value if it was unexpected to the original audience? Does the expectedness of the instruction to submit nullify its continuing significance for Christian wives today? And if not, then what does it mean for wives to submit to their own husbands? Again, it was noted that in the qualification lists for overseers and deacons that the only gender-specific term is found in the phrase "one-woman man" (133; see 1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). This may be so, but what does the phrase mean, and how does its inclusion in a qualification list affect whether women can serve in such offices? Similarly left unexplored was the relationship between Paul's injunction against women teaching in the congregation (1 Tim. 2:11–12) and his qualification in the following passage that an overseer must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). How might this impact our understanding of the injunction in 1 Timothy 2:11–12? Peppiatt's thesis would have been more convincing if she had analyzed more thoroughly the evidence that appears to contradict her thesis.

A third critique regarding the handling of the biblical text has to do with nuance. Especially on topics that are hotly debated, we need scholarly writing that

is careful and nuanced. But occasionally *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women* lacks such nuance. One example will suffice, which comes from the discussion on Junia in Romans 16:7. Peppiatt claims that "[i]t is now accepted" that Junia was a female apostle (120), that "without exception Junia was considered a woman by all the early church writers" (121), that "Junia was glossed out of the Bible" (121) through the appearance of the name in a masculine form in various Bibles, and that this was done as a conscious effort among Bible translators and theologians over the past 800 years to remove women from church leadership positions. These bold statements lack nuance, for they don't accurately portray the complexity of the issue. The name "Junia" could derive from Latin or Hebrew; the former would be a female name, but the latter could be a masculine name. As the recent scholarly literature will attest, this question is by no means settled, despite Peppiatt's claims to the contrary. Even more,

regarding the text's reception history, it simply isn't true that "without exception Junia was considered a woman by all the early church writers." It is more accurate to say that some thought the name was male (e.g., Origen, Epiphanius), and others female (e.g., Chrysostom, Jerome). To claim the early Christians were univocal on the question obscures the historical complexity surrounding its reception. Finally, the claim that Bible translators intentionally altered the text to protect their androcentric bias is hardly charitable and amounts to an *ad hominem*. Without further examination of the evidence, such claims should be put to rest or nuanced with greater care and precision.

Finally, Peppiatt's analysis raised a question about how a hypothetically reconstructed historical situation should function in elucidating a biblical text: How much weight should such historical reconstruction bear in shaping the way a text is read, especially if that reconstruction

is tenuous? This question was particularly acute in Peppiatt's analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15, which can provide a case in point. As indicated in the summary above, Peppiatt is convinced, especially from the similarities between 1 Timothy and Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*, that the Artemis cult lies in the background of Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 2:9–15. What should we make of this reading? To be sure, every biblical text is situated in space-time history, and thus interpretation is aided by historical and cultural awareness. In this sense Peppiatt's effort in tracing possible connections to the Artemis cult is commendable. Her analysis, however, fails to convince because it rests on a tenuous historical reconstruction that overturns what appears to be otherwise a culturally-generic and indefinite prohibition of women teaching and exercising authority over the congregation (1 Tim. 2:11–12). Despite Peppiatt's attempts to the contrary, it is by no means clear that the Artemis cult lies in the background, for Paul never mentions Artemis or Isis,



and the proposed links with Xenophon's *Ephesiaca* are too generic to establish a link. For instance, should we be surprised that "nearly every word in 1 Tim 2:9–10 appears in *Ephesiaca*" (148, quoting Gary Hoag), since the latter is a story about, among other things, lavish adornment and wealth? Are these not the words we would expect an author to use if he wanted to address such a topic? The appearance of these words in 1 Timothy 2:9–10 is no more an argument that Paul alluded to Artemis priestesses than it is that Peter did so with similar words in 1 Peter 3:3–4. To be sure, discerning the historical circumstances that gave rise to Paul's instructions is difficult and complex, and it is possible the Artemis cult is in the background. Further, it is possible that Paul's instructions may have been heard in particularly meaningful ways by women in Ephesus who had formerly been associated with the Artemis cult. But in light of the paucity of such evidence, such an interpretation is tenuous and uncertain. In such cases, it is hermeneutically unsound to allow a tenuous historical reconstruction to render as culturally-specific and temporal what appears to be a culturally-generic and indefinite apostolic instruction — in this instance, Paul's injunction against women teaching and exercising authority in the congregation. A better hermeneutical approach seeks to understand the text as it stands, mining the historical and cultural background in such a way that it sheds light on and coheres with the text. Elsewhere Peppiatt rightly cautions against letting our interpretive imaginations run wild in assuming what life was like in the early church (117). But it seems to me that her analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 is guilty of precisely that — letting her interpretive imagination run wild.

CONCLUSION

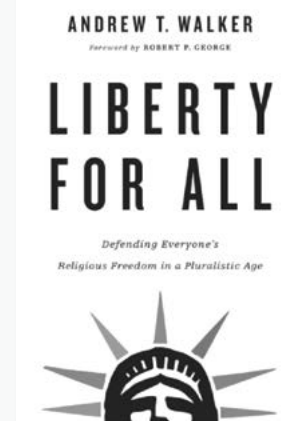
I want to end with a brief commendation of Peppiatt and echo one of her frequent exhortations. She notes that the gospel means we should expect "visible results" (38; cf. 37, 137, 161) in the lives of Christian men and women, including how they relate to and treat one another. This is exactly right, and such a claim needs to be commended because it is the natural outflow of the gospel and highlights the power and majesty of Christ who transforms our lives by grace. The exhortation that often follows when Peppiatt makes this claim is that, therefore, we should seek these "visible results" in our lives and churches. What she thinks constitutes such results, as I have indicated above, was not proven by her analysis, and in my estimation she missed the biblical mark. Rather, the Bible calls for, among other things, godly male headship and godly female submission manifested in Christian homes and churches. Still, we should heartily agree with Peppiatt that having "visible results" are not optional but are a necessary consequence of the gospel in our lives. ✕

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REVIEWED BY J. ALAN BRANCH

Liberty For All: Defending Everyone's Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age

Christians often defend their own right to worship freely and live out their faith in the public venue, but are sometimes reluctant to defend the same rights for non-Christians. In *Liberty For All: Defending Everyone's Religious Freedom*, Andrew T. Walker argues that if Christians truly want to be free to express their faith, they should defend the rights of non-Christians to do the same. Walker is a faculty member at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics and Apologetics, Associate Dean of the School of Theology, and Director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement. Previously, he served as a Senior Research Fellow for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. He also co-edited the *Gospel for Life Series* and authored *God and the Transgender Debate* (2017).



Andrew T. Walker. *Liberty For All: Defending Everyone's Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021.

"The quest to connect religious liberty to biblical theology is the central and driving concern of this book"

SUMMARY

To defend the thesis that Christians should defend religious liberty for all people, Walker takes an interesting approach and combines Baptist emphases on personal conversion and religious liberty with natural law theory drawn from Catholic roots. The Baptist emphasis on conversion is seen when he says, "Entry into God's kingdom depends on the conscience being convicted of sin and persuaded by the gospel . . . which means rationally self-chosen without external coercion" (45). Along these lines, many Christians who practice various forms of infant Baptism will find the book's appendix quite provocative, as Walker forcefully insists the Baptist view of baptism following conversion leads most naturally to a stronger foundation for religious liberty. At the same time, natural law theory is central to Walker's thesis, providing essential common ground among people from competing and different religious beliefs. Walker defines natural law, saying,

"The idea of natural law ethics is that there are binding moral principles, governed by reason and attested to in nature, that all persons, regardless of whether they are Christians or not, are obligated to obey for their own sake and God's" (202).

Liberty For All moves through the disciplines of eschatology (chapters 2 and 3), then anthropology (chapters 4 and 5), and then missiology (chapters 6 and 7) to provide evidence for a generous approach to religious liberty. Walker says, "The quest to connect religious liberty to biblical theology is the central and driving concern of this book," (15) and adds, "The kingdom of God is the orienting [eschatological] doctrine, the image of God is the practical [anthropological] doctrine, and the mission of God is the [missional] cultural apologetic" (16). In this way, the structure of the book seeks to bridge a gap between religious liberty arguments based on natural law *alone* versus religious liberty arguments based on scripture *alone*.

CRITICAL INTERACTION

Of many commendable aspects of *Liberty for All*, the most compelling is the book's fervent and urgent argument for Christians to defend religious liberty for all people, not just Christians alone. And Baptists have an important point to make here to the rest of our brothers and sisters. Let me illustrate: As the United States has become progressively more secular, many Christians have pointed back to the pre-Colonial constitutions of states such as Connecticut or Massachusetts as evidence that Christianity should have a privileged position in American civics. Likewise, the magisterial reformers are sometimes cited as evidence for establishing a Christian nation. Once, I was at a meeting of various Southern Baptist academics at which a non-Baptist addressed us on the relationship of church and state. When this dear brother finished his presentation, I asked, "Are you arguing for a stance somewhat like Colonial New England or the magisterial reformers?" After he answered in the affirmative, I said, "You do realize you are talking to a room full of Baptists and our forefathers did not fare well in Colonial New England and our Anabaptist cousins didn't fare well with the magisterial reformers." On some occasions, I have teasingly asked, "Would Calvin have allowed a Baptist church in Geneva?" I think the obvious answer is, "No." When Christians are in power they can be as oppressive as others and Walker points all Christians towards a consensus which honors the right of people to decide for themselves whether or not they will be followers of Christ and how they should serve Him.

Liberty for All wisely places the concept of religious liberty in an eschatological perspective. Walker advocates a form of inaugurated eschatology, and insists only Christ himself will usher in perfection. He apparently rejects postmillennial schemes, and says "I do not believe there is, in a secular age short of the coming of Christ, a 'golden era' of the church" (68). Along these lines, he seems also to reject theonomic ideas of reinstituting Biblical law, saying, "A Christian politics . . . ought to be more focused on the common good than seeing the order radically transformed. Social orders do not get saved; they get influenced. The former is a politics of incremental, specific realism; the latter is a politics of ambiguous, utopian triumph" (209).

Walker's argument concerning eschatology could have been stronger in two ways. First, though he rejects postmillennial concepts, how might his ideas for religious liberty be viewed differently by premillennialists and amillennialists? Is there common ground between the groups such that both can agree on his argument? By and large, church history has seen believers wax and wane between premillennial ideas (Irenaeus) to amillennial views (Dionysius of Alexandria, Augustine). How might these two groups along with postmillennialists share common ground? Second, *Liberty for All* doesn't explore in depth the manner in which the Antichrist shapes the Christian vision for the future of religious liberty. As a premillennialist myself, I see human government ultimately ending with *no religious liberty* under the reign of the Antichrist. While amillennialism is experiencing a resurgence within academic circles, the majority of Evangelical laity, and Baptists

in particular, hold to some form of premillennialism and see the Antichrist as a real person, not a metaphor for earthly powers oppressing the church. *Liberty for All* could have greater influence with more work here.

Various readers will also take issue with some of Walker's claims based in natural law. For example, he says, "We Christians should extend religious liberty to everyone, because everyone is pursuing truth, even if incorrectly" (4). While this is a standard part of natural law theory, it is also a claim that a long tradition in Protestantism finds troubling. While Walker is acutely aware that the conscience can become seared and non-functioning, there is a long-standing debate about the way natural law should be viewed based on Paul's comments in Romans 1:18 – 32. That argument won't be solved in this book, but even if one disagrees with Walker's thoughts on natural law at this particular point his arguments for religious liberty are still compelling.

Another area which could have received more attention is how the arguments for religious liberty articulated in *Liberty for All* interact with Islam. Walker argues from a Baptist perspective of a free church in a free state, but Islam sees no such distinction: It is a religious-political system with an Islamic state as the ultimate goal. How do Christians stand for religious liberty and grant freedom to their Muslim neighbors when their neighbors want an Islamic state? Perhaps it is enough for *Liberty for All* to defend the broad principle of religious liberty and leave the interaction of Christianity and Islam on religious liberty issues to future work from Walker.

CONCLUSION

Liberty for All is a vibrant defense of religious liberty with a pleasing logical flow and sound conclusions which should be compelling to Christians. It serves as a needed counterbalance to poorly framed popular arguments regarding the relationship between church and state, arguments too often based on an inadequate understanding of religious liberty. ✕

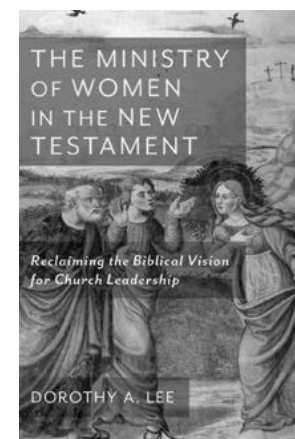
J. Alan Branch is Professor of Christian Ethics at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author of Born This Way? Homosexuality, Science and Scripture and Affirming God's Image: Addressing the Transgender Question with Science and Scripture.

REVIEWED BY JOHN KITCHEN

The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership

INTRODUCTION

The title is inviting: *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament*. One would welcome a comprehensive, evenhanded pursuit of what the New Testament reveals about women in service to God and others. It is the subtitle, however, that hints at the actual contents of the book: *Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership*. The true "Biblical Vision" must be reclaimed, having been hijacked by a misogynic (3, 11, 188), racist (3), abusive (11, 187, 188), idolatrous (182, 185), deceitful ("guise," 1; "misleading," 11), "domineering," and "scummy" (182) theological splinter-group ("a reactionary movement," 3; led by "Reactionary scholarship," (122) who are misleading the faithful. The book thus touts itself as something of a "myth" buster (191), streaming the light of truth into the descending darkness of a complementarian night.



Dorothy A. Lee. *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021.

SUMMARY

The book is divided into two unequal parts, a review of women's ministry in the New Testament (15-150) and a briefer review of women's ministry in the tradition of the church (151-184).

The seven chapters of the first section discuss each book of the New Testament except 2 Peter and Jude, with Luke and Paul each receiving two chapters.

The second, shorter section explores some of the tradition of the church, mostly in the first five hundred years after Pentecost. Chapter eight ("History and Texts") searches post-canonical writings, arts and artifacts, and the "Early Church Mothers" for support of an egalitarian position. Chapter nine ("Theology") makes several women equal to "the Twelve," explores "Women and the Divine Image," the place and role of the Virgin Mary, and the matter of "Gender and the Trinity."

The conclusion (185-191) summarizes points already made and makes demands for their application today.

The intent is clear: "The purpose of this study is to revisit the arguments against women's full participation in ministry and leadership within the church" (10). Wishing to dub complementarians as "reactionary" (3, 122), the author defines herself right into that category. By stating "this study on women is about presenting ways of interpreting the New Testament text in all its diversity, ways other than those we have always held" (8); the author admits her goal is to achieve something novel in church history.

CRITICAL INTERACTION

The title suggests a project of gargantuan scope. However, the volume's size (191 pages plus bibliography and indices) impedes the author from plowing much new ground with the actual text of the New Testament.

The chapters are generally more subdued in rhetoric than the introduction (1-12) and conclusion (185-191), where the verbiage turns incendiary. The language is that of warfare ("the battle," 3). In Lee's estimation, the "aftermath"

of the Reformation (169) must be cleaned up. The term "complementarian" cannot even be intoned without placing it in quotation marks (11, 123). Lee calls out "claims to be 'complementarian'" (11), demands "the term is misleading" (11), and is a cover for "a hidden misogyny" (11). She pits herself and Jesus over against complementarians as "neither belittling nor patronizing" women (7). Those who disagree are deceitful ("old antiwomen arguments have reemerged in contemporary guise," 1; "a hidden misogyny," 11) and obstructionist ("those who wish to hold back the full working out of the gospel," 135). History cannot be trusted, for it is a "male historiography" (170). Yet history is used to support full inclusion of women in the authority and titles of ministry (151-184). The author weds gender and race, tying "male dominance" to "white dominance" (3).

The goal of *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament* from the beginning was not a comprehensive theology, but an egalitarian manifesto. Sadly, where the faith and ministry of countless women could have been celebrated, they are too often used to prop up an agenda.

Consider three areas which reveal the author's general approach: hermeneutics, methodology, and conclusions

Hermeneutics

In terms of her hermeneutical approach, Lee's favorite word seems to be "trajectory" (9, 72, 95 [2x], 156 [2x], 157), hinting at both her view of Scripture and her hermeneutic. Scripture, it would seem, is not a fully sufficient guide for the people of faith. Each Scriptural text is "capable of more than one meaning" (9). The text does not mean one thing that then may find a variety of applications in daily life but might mean something different to a subsequent age than it did to the Apostles, Luther, Wesley, or the Puritans. This allows women in our day "to read and reread the biblical texts from their own perspective . . . to discern meanings for today" (9). The Scriptures have not been inspired in any definitive sense, but we look for "the continuous, inspiring work of the Holy Spirit" in our time (9). The goal is not faithful application of the original meaning of the text of Scripture to each successive age but the discovery of new truth in our own. Faithfulness to the text of Scripture and its ultimate Author must give way to "a new imagination to reread" the Bible (60).

Through “fresh readings,” “new research,” and “New insights” (2) undertaken in “New settings,” “new contexts” (9), and “a new world” (94) we allow Scripture “to speak in unimagined ways” (9). Ways that, apparently, not even the apostles and authors of Scripture could have anticipated.

Methodology

In Lee’s methodology, skepticism reigns over what the New Testament says. Large portions are swept into the bin of doubt. The authorship of nearly every epistle is questioned (98-102, 137-140, 142, 144, 146). Galatians 3:28 is her go-to passage, but other Pauline passages are declared “ambiguous” (115, 116, 118). Regarding 1 Timothy 2:11-15, “almost every word has been disputed in recent years” (121). But disputation does not negate authority. Otherwise, we must eliminate the record of the Old Testament prophets. Doubt-casting clears the way and “allows the biblical text to be understood in new ways” (150).

Gold is found in what the New Testament does not say. Arguing from the silence of the text, we must assume women’s presence in many scenes (33). In these silences is evidence that “their ministry exceeds that of the apostles” (35). In Acts, “not many women have explicit leadership roles” (37). Yet the author concludes, “We have seen something of the place and role that women have in Acts as disciples of Jesus and leaders in the early church” (72). Admitting “Revelation has little to say about women’s ministry or gender in relation to ministry” (146), she deduces that the book holds forth “symbols of the life-giving way authority can be wielded in female as well as male hands” (149).

The text must submit to things imagined. We must “recognize the contextual nature of Paul’s teaching and . . . question whether it is normative” (122). Local, time-bound issues of the first century limit the text’s authority. But these remain unverified and unproven, only assumed to have existed: “What is clear [regarding 1 Corinthians 14:34-36] is that . . . some level of contextual practice is at stake, a practice that is local and now lost to us” (121). Without evidence she declares “the particularity of the mores assumed in 1 Peter (just as is the case with Ephesians) cannot be binding on future generations” (144).

Conclusions

Finally, in Lee’s conclusions, God’s self-revelation is reworked. This is one of the “real issues” (10) upon which the case for egalitarianism hangs. She designates all male language (Father/Son) in the fourth Gospel as “patriarchal” language and captive to a bygone culture. In her words, “the nomenclature is not about a masculine God . . . but . . . ‘in order to evoke a new world in which intimate, loving relations with God and with one another are possible’” (94). Furthermore, she writes, “The Spirit is presented in maternal metaphors” (94) and “The maternal images . . . imply a trajectory of language and symbol that” hold truth yet unseen (95).

Lee also seems to deny Christ’s eternal sonship, limiting Father/Son language to Jesus’ earthly life (94). And in a peculiar statement, Jesus’ “humanity is dependent solely on his mother” (23). Had the Father and Spirit no part in the formation of the “holy thing” (Luke 1:35, KJV) in Mary’s womb? Was Jesus truly male? Did He merely appear to be male for cultural and contextual reasons?

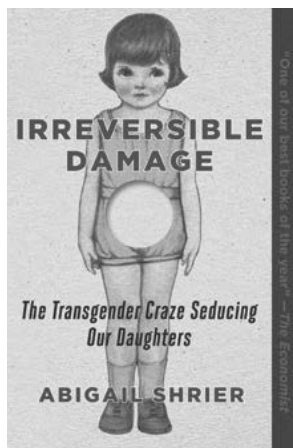
In the end, God’s sovereignty is downgraded, making Him captive to culture and language. By setting aside large swaths of the New Testament as too situationally specific to be imagined, Lee conceives of the text in terms of unverifiable cultural particulars from the first century. In the end, then, the author leaves us with a holy book that possesses little enduring authority.

CONCLUSION

The volume declares itself a polemic against complementarianism. As such it sets out, not to build a New Testament theology, but to deconstruct someone else’s. Both its aim and size limit the author. One could wish for less citation of other egalitarian authors and more work in the text of Scripture. In the end the book serves as a diorama of the thought patterns, assumptions, methodologies, hermeneutics, and conclusions drawn by those of an egalitarian persuasion. ✕

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Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters



Abigail Shrier. *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2021.

“You’re not supposed to pick favorites among the amendments, because it’s silly, but I have one, and it’s the First” (xxv). In the Introduction to her controversial best-seller, *Irreversible Damage*, Abigail Shrier explains how her commitment to free speech led her to write about a gross violation of it. Her article, “The Transgender Language War,”¹ addressed state laws mandating the usage of an individual’s preferred pronouns and threatening jail time for noncompliance. Shortly after the article appeared, a prominent Southern lawyer reached out to Shrier with a sad but increasingly common tale: her daughter had recently identified herself as “transgender.”

The daughter, Lucy [a pseudonym], “had discovered this identity with the help of the internet, which provides an endless array of transgender mentors who coach adolescents in the art of slipping into a new gender identity — what to wear, how to walk, what to say” (xxxvi). Lucy was not alone, her mother said. There seemed to be a surge of early-adolescent girls who had never displayed any boyish proclivities, now claiming that they were boys all along.

A follow-up article in the *Wall Street Journal*² attracted so many comments, pro and con, that Shrier opened a Tumblr account for them. Comments led to contacts, followed by almost two hundred interviews with parents, school administrators and counselors, “detransitioners,” medical specialists, social-media “influencers,” and Trans adults. In her words, “The responses I received formed the basis of this book” (xxix).

¹Abigail Shrier, “The Transgender Language War,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-transgender-language-war-1535582272>

²Abigail Shrier, “When Your Daughter Defies Biology,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/when-your-daughter-defies-biology-11546804848>

Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria, which goes by the unlovely acronym ROGD, had become a hot topic even before Abigail Shrier began her research. Not too long ago, gender transitioning was a phenomenon exhibited almost entirely by males. But since the middle of the last decade, more and more girls began insisting that they were actually boys, and most of them were from white, high-income, progressive families. A majority of therapists and physicians were affirming these inclinations and prescribing hormone blockers, testosterone treatments, and even “top surgery” (the removal of healthy breasts).

These alarming trends deserved book-length treatment, but as *Irreversible Damage* neared publication, Regnery Publishing faced a storm of demands that it be cancelled for the untold damage it was likely to cause. After the book’s publication, leading review journals ignored it, Amazon refused advertising for it, and the American Booksellers Association abjectly apologized for including it in a monthly newsletter. What was this explosive, lethal content?

Most of Shrier’s interview subjects hold views about Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria ranging from doubtful to devastated (particularly parents whose relationship with their daughters was destroyed). She attempts to be fair to the advocates: the psychologists, social justice warriors, and YouTube influencers who insist every identity claim by a teen must be taken seriously. But the evidence she piles up is decidedly against them.

“Evidence” is a sticking point with those critics of the book who actually read it. They complain that most of Shrier’s

research is anecdotal and that she ignored scientific evidence contrary to her thesis. In his review in *Psychology Today*, Christopher Ferguson disputed some of Shrier’s scientific claims, but admitted the science is unsettled: “[I]n an age of inflamed identity politics, we need more data-based pieces willing to consider the complexities of data and the nuances of difficult situations, and intellectual humility to acknowledge where more information is needed.”³

Quite right; more information, and the freedom to evaluate it impartially, are desperately needed. But *Irreversible Damage* should not be seen as a scientific treatise. It’s a cry of protest from individuals who were swept up, blindsided, shouted down, or simply heartbroken by the peculiar madness of gender identity. The author recalls her own fraught years in junior high as a sympathetic link to anxiety-ridden young girls today. She points out the cultural influences, particularly social media, that make it difficult for teens to cultivate a realistic worldview: “Perhaps we’ve trained adolescents to regard happiness as a natural and constantly available state. Perhaps they’ve come to believe momentary sadness amounts to a crisis” (31).

But she also highlights a trait humans have shared from the beginning of time. Quoting one of her interview subjects, Jungian analyst Lisa Marchiano: “Human beings are susceptible to psychic contagion. We just are. All of us” (136). Or as Jeremiah 17:9 reminds us, “The heart is deceptive above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Abigail Shrier is not a Christian. She supports the right of adults to transition



and does not question their belief that gender realignment was best for them. She has no problem with homosexual relationships, and interprets the Bible her own way, such as this reference to “Eve, who ate from the Tree of Knowledge only to be punished with labor pains and a domineering husband. Adam’s sin saddled him only with the burden of having to work for a living. (Big deal)” (209).

Shrier’s occasional snark aside, *Irreversible Damage* is a valuable look into the weird and confused world of gender identity that can threaten even Christian families. In a culture that teaches girls to think of themselves as victims, exhorts women to act like men, and links value to earning ability, she offers a ringing endorsement

of women *as women*: mothers, nurturers, home builders. Her final chapter, “The Way Back,” offers seven practical guidelines for all families, ending with “Don’t Be Afraid to Admit: It’s Wonderful to Be a Girl” (217).

“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). It’s wonderful to be what we were created to be, by God’s loving design. In an age bent on thwarting design, *Irreversible Damage* is a secular wake-up call to the consequences. ✕

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³Christopher J. Ferguson, PhD, “A Review of ‘Irreversible Damage’ by Abigail Shrier,” *Psychology Today*, January 19, 2021. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/checkpoints/202101/review-irreversible-damage-abigail-shrier>

Marriage, Scripture, and the Church: Theological Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union

Darrin Belousek's *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church* cannot not be quickly dismissed. His volume is well researched, historically informed, and logically rigorous. Belousek, professor of philosophy and religion at Ohio Northern University, examines the question of whether the church should reassess its view of marriage and bless same-sex unions, and builds a Scriptural, doctrinal, and historical argument that it should not do so. Yet, despite this strong stance, there is a deeply concerning flaw woven into Belousek's language that, I fear, will make the book significantly harmful to the church and the cause of biblical marriage. The combination of Belousek's strong argument for traditional marriage and his devastating concession to contemporary ideologies makes this book worthy of attention.

SUMMARY

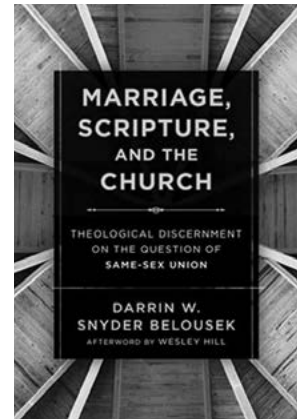
Belousek's book is structured in four parts. Part One assesses the current landscape and lays out Belousek's own commitments, Part Two lays out a biblical and historical case for traditional marriage, Part Three considers various "innovationist" (Belousek's term) proposals for blessing same-sex marriage, and Part Four suggests Belousek's way forward. The book also contains an afterword by Wesley Hill (to be considered below). Due to the limitations of this review, I cannot do justice to the middle two sections of Belousek's book. Let me simply say that they mount a very rigorous defense of traditional marriage based on the "form, figure, and function" (those terms occur repeatedly) of marriage in Scripture

and theology. Among these chapters, "Admiring Virginity, Honoring Marriage," was especially helpful. Belousek surveys different views of marriage throughout church history, especially early debates about marriage, asceticism, and celibacy. Belousek makes clear that while there have historically been debates regarding whether marriage or celibacy represented the more desirable state, or how marriage related to God's providential plans in the new era initiated by Christ, the church has *always* taught that marriage is between one man and one woman and that procreation is one of the intrinsic goods of marriage. This point should be underscored in current debates: the overwhelming consensus on this point throughout church history and throughout the global church suggests that modifications to the definition of marriage by Western Christians says more about the current cultural moment in Western Christianity than about Scripture or historical theology.

After making this strong argument, Part Three carefully considers counter-arguments for innovation. While I cannot detail all of these arguments, I found this section well written, charitable to other views, but biblically and logically unrelenting in its advocacy for traditional marriage.¹ These strengths are, however, marred by a deep and persistent flaw in Belousek's use of terms like "gay believer" or "sexual minorities." As a case study, I will focus on the last chapter and Wesley Hill's afterword.

¹The notable exception is Chapter 7, specifically pages 199-217, where Belousek considers the argument that the church has changed its position on slavery and women's ministry in the church, and so should also change its position on same-sex unions. While Belousek does not find this argument persuasive, he adopts as virtually unquestioned an egalitarian perspective on women's ordination. In a book that is typically well-researched, this section is notably weak: he cites not a single complementarian writer and simply presents the argument that texts like 1 Timothy 2:11-12 are addressing only particular circumstances, not universal commands. Belousek acknowledges that he is married to an ordained minister (208), which perhaps makes this a more personally-charged debate than might otherwise be the case.

Darrin W. Snyder Belousek.
*Marriage, Scripture, and the Church:
Theological Discernment on the
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Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021.



"The combination of Belousek's strong argument for traditional marriage and his devastating concession to contemporary ideologies makes this book worthy of attention."

In the final chapter, Belousek focused on the “testimonies of gay believers” who are committed to follow Christ (281). This leads into to a chain of reflections on Christ’s word to voluntary eunuchs in Matthew 19:12, Isaiah’s prophecy of the place of eunuchs in the new covenant in Isaiah 56:3-8, Paul’s doctrine of Christian unity in Christ regardless of ethnicity or sex in Galatians 3:28, and John’s vision of the new creation and the marriage of the Lamb in Revelation 21:1-4. According to Belousek, all of this should “refresh our vision of salvation and the church . . . straight and married believers will be saved the same way as gay and single believers, by the grace of Jesus. Regarding salvation in Christ, neither marital status nor sexual identity counts for us or against us — all that matters is faith working through love as we become a new creation by God’s power” (283). This conclusion is restated in similar form, using a Jerusalem council paradigm of “old” and “new” in the last paragraph of the book: “we discern what is new by listening to the testimonies of gay believers who are living faithfully and serving fruitfully as followers of Jesus . . . At the same time we discern what is old by looking into the treasury of Scripture and tradition: the consistent testimony of Scripture, confirmed by the authoritative teaching of Christ and conserved through the consensus teaching of the church, that God ordained marriage as man-woman monogamy and blessed sex within marriage” (287-288).

CRITICAL INTERACTION

Nowhere in the book does Belousek addresses the validity of the “gay believer” or “sexual minority” category.

Belousek does, however, provide a large amount of supplemental material online. On page eight of his online Appendix A, “Sexuality: Terminology and Theology,” he describes his concern with modern terminology based on contemporary understandings of sexuality, but argues that it is possible to use language like “gay” in two differing ways: ontologically (giving a normative definition of human sexuality) or phenomenologically (merely describing various kinds of human experiences without commenting on their normativity). He states that his use of such terminology is phenomenological and descriptive, not ontological and normative. Yet herein lies the problem: even “mere” phenomenological language does not come to us uninterpreted. Labels are not neutral, but imply an entire substructure of meaning. In other words, describing a category of human experience is an analytical act. Categories *are* interpretations. Why are sexual desires intrinsic to one’s identity, but not some other set of desires, or some other feature of human experience? Belousek seems to think that by defining his language as “phenomenological” he can bypass this problem. Thus, Belousek contends that the church should “allow and affirm marriages of mixed-orientation couples, man-woman couples of differing sexual attraction/orientation: gay man and straight woman, straight man and bisexual woman, and so on” (181). The problem, however, is not a debate over whether the church should bless “mixed-orientation” weddings; the problem is whether, biblically, such a thing exists at all. I suggest that the unquestioned acceptance of those terms is itself symptomatic of a deep problem.

This problem emerges even more clearly in the afterword written by Wesley Hill. Hill writes to the church with what he believes are necessary lessons to make traditional marriage plausible and good news to self-identified gay believers. These lessons begin with a call for repentance for the ways the church has mistreated LGBTQ Christians through “discrimination and rejection” (290), and end with a plea to “foreground the question of vocation” (295). When Hill speaks of vocation, he poses the question, “how should a gay man or woman *live*, how should a same-sex-attracted person like me *express* his sexuality, rather than merely repress or try to deny its existence” (296, emphasis original)? He says that, in much of his life in the church, he had not heard “much at all about what I might be called *toward*,” a proclamation of a vocational “yes” instead of a vocational “no” (296, emphasis original). But is this a failure of church teaching, or the hidden (perhaps even unrecognized on Hill’s part) demand that Scripture’s teaching address categories defined by culture?

Throughout Belousek’s work, I was reminded of a sentence in Carl Trueman’s *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*: “If sex-as-identity is itself a category mistake, then the narratives of suffering, exclusion, and refusals of recognition based on that category mistake are really of no significance in determining what the church’s position on homosexuality should be.”² To be clear, Belousek is not calling for the church to rethink its position; but his work, and Hill’s afterword, simply accept the validity of what Trueman calls

(rightly) a category mistake: allowing sexuality to define our identity. This issue is pastorally very challenging. The brother or sister in Christ who struggles with same-sex attraction has a valid point if they say, “I did not choose this struggle, yet it is a major part of my life story.” Yet part of the challenge of Christian discipleship in Western culture is for all of us to embrace the massively counter-cultural position that our identity is given to us, and defined for us, by God, in Christ, through Scripture. This means rejecting both the voluntarist strain of self-chosen identity or identities (here one confronts the trends that underly the “T” in the LGBTQ movement), and the sex-as-identity version that is assumed by Belousek and Hill. This is not to call us to a grudging acceptance of Scriptural terms for human identity and nature, even as we tacitly wonder if contemporary theories of identity give us a richer, more true-to-human-experience picture. Rather, it is to reject the imperialism of human terms and theories that are intrinsically reductionistic and simplistic. He who formed the hearts of us all discerns all our deeds (Psa 33:15), and in Scripture has given us all the self-knowledge we need for life and godliness.

A book review is not the place to develop an alternative vision of human identity, and without that it could sound as though I am engaging in verbal sniping, picking at aspects of Belousek’s word choices. My intent is to suggest a deeper critique than mere lexical nitpicking. Perhaps that concern can be made clear by considering two relevant moments in the church’s

²Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 403.

life: marriage services, and the Lord's Supper. In blessing marriage, the church is not creating a new category of human relationship; rather, the church witnesses to the givenness of God's created order by acknowledging that two have in God's sight become one flesh. Belousek is strong on this point. But what about the church gathered at the table? Again, Belousek is clear that, regarding salvation, "neither marital status nor sexual identity counts for us or against us [instead we are] . . . male and female, married and single, straight and gay" (283). The last pair in that list is not like the others! And so we must ask: who are we as we come to the table? There are many factors that make up my present vocation — husband, father, pastor, etc. — and many sins and struggles which I confess and lay aside at the table; yet I do not come to the table defined by any those vocations, nor may I commune there while retaining my sin or defining myself by my struggles. To put it another way, in blessing marriage, the church witnesses to the created order; in celebrating the Lord's Supper, the church witnesses to the coming eschatological order as the consummation of our present salvation. But there are no additional categories by which we may define ourselves as the Lord's people. Belousek and Hill's adoption of "sexual minority" language appears to me to be founded on an unstable third category. It is neither a creational given nor an eschatological destiny — and yet, *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church* consistently gives such identity categories a valid place among the people of God. Is "gay believer" a category of human experience that belongs to the creation order? If so, then Belousek's entire defense of man-woman marriage is flawed. If it is not part of

our created identity, then does it belong to our eschatological destiny? If so, then we would expect Scripture to address it explicitly. But it does not. Then how can we bring this identity to the table and ask Christ to bless it? What fellowship has light with darkness? What hath Jerusalem to do with Greenwich Village?

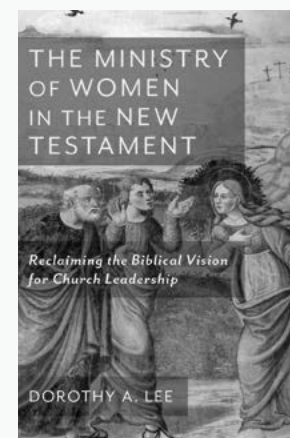
If this sounds like a vocation of "no," then it may reflect how deeply we have allowed the "sex-as-identity" category to penetrate into our subconscious assumptions. If sexuality is so pervasive a part of human identity that, unless Scripture and the church speak to all possible sexual identities, we cannot have full and flourishing human lives, then what are we to make of the elderly widow who worships, sits under the Word, and takes the Lord's Supper week by week? Is she somehow incomplete, lacking in personhood, unable to flourish as God intended? I can think of several such saints who would vehemently contest such a view — or, better yet, whose joyful demeanor and daily walk with Christ gives the lie to our truncated modern views of personhood.

Perhaps, living amidst a world obsessed with youth, sexuality, and self-expression, we could all learn something about Christian identity from the church's elderly widows. ✕

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REVIEWED BY MILES SMITH

The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership

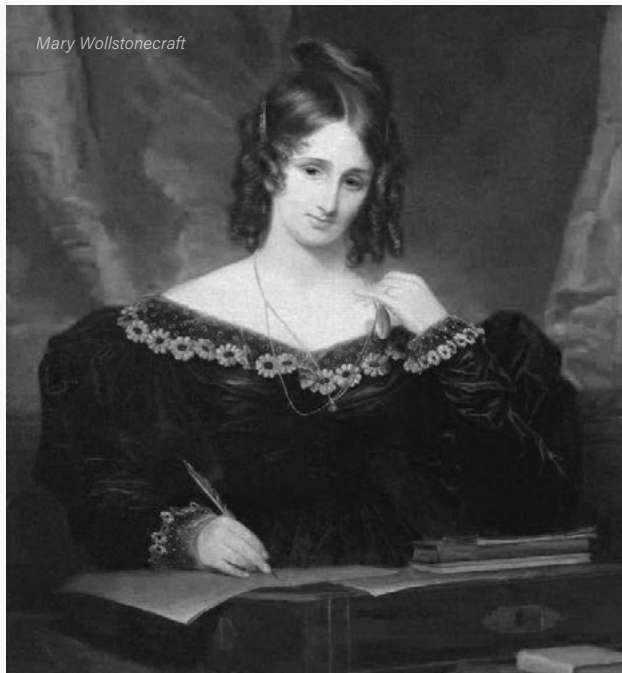


Dorothy A. Lee. *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021.

Two marches, just over one hundred years apart, mark the introduction of Erika Bachiochi's *The Rights of Women: Reclaiming a Lost Vision*. The first march took place in 1913. Women gathered to make their voices heard in support of federalizing the right of women to vote in general elections. Some states gave women the right to vote in the nineteenth century; Utah allowed women to vote in 1870. Other states lagged behind and by 1913 marchers loudly — and confidently — proclaimed that women's suffrage represented high ideals like charity, liberty, justice, peace, and hope. The second march occurred in 2017, and, as Bachiochi notes, if there were high ideals present, their impact was lost in the cacophony of explicit-filled, insulting, sensationalist, and sexualized rhetoric that asserted the coming of a generation of so-called nasty women. Bachiochi's work offers a narrative of how conceptions of women's rights changed in the late modern era, and what the consequences of those changes means for a substantive vision of women's rights in modern society.

Bachiochi uses the figure of Mary Wollstonecraft to explain the advent of women's rights. The British philosopher and writer pioneered the struggle for women's rights in the United Kingdom but always maintained preeminence of what it was to be a woman in her work. Wollstonecraft, for example, argued that women should be trained for other vocations other than motherhood and that they should be educated with male peers. Her reason was not to desex women but to allow women to achieve intellectual and moral excellence *as women*. Wollstonecraft's great gift to women's rights was her conviction that education provided women the opportunity to pursue true virtue, and not mere power.

Wollstonecraft's reputation as a revolutionary came from her willingness to rethink societal articulations regarding women's place and role in society. She was not, however, seeking to overthrow the natural order. She hoped instead to reaffirm it by strengthening the place and station of women. Wollstonecraft believed that in human history, tensions between men and women in the practice of law, certain socio-moral strictures regarding marriage, and state mandated prescriptions on women's status disordered women's rightful practice of virtue and often



made it difficult for them to get the respect they deserved as women. The origins of the movement for women's rights in the United States did not lie in eradicating marriage, the place of women in society as women, or even state delineated gender differentiation. American women's rights movements sought society's affirmation for women's important roles maintaining society.

Industrialization in the United States brought about shifts in how women interacted with vocation in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Employment in capitalistic and industrial enterprises changed how women interacted with and related to the family, but as late as the 1950s early generations of feminist valued and worked to protect marriage and child-bearing. Even Betty Friedan, whose book *The Feminine Mystique* was lauded by socially progressive intellectuals and politicians, did not argue that women should abandon natural vocations of child-bearing and marriage in order to pursue success in the workplace. Friedan did not want to remove marriage and children from what defined women's worth; she instead wanted a woman's worth not to be limited *only* to her ability to bear children and be a wife. Feminists during the mid-twentieth century sought to broaden the types of jobs open to women and to expand their access. They did not, however, seek to remove natural female vocations from women's lives.

Even as women's roles in non-traditional vocations opened up, tension between natural vocations and new demands of the marketplace forced women to make choices that their male peers might not have to make. Pregnancy and child-bearing placed natural caps on the role women might be able to exert in a male-dominated capitalist workplace. Motherhood in particular became a problem for women's advancement. Women's groups responded not by looking for state protection of pregnant women from termination but by creating a legal paradigm whereby women should be judged as equal individuals to men. Women ceased to be women; they became merely equal individuals in the workplace. Whatever legal successes that might have ensured, it decoupled women's rights from the fundamental markers of womanhood: biological sex and timeless societal function.

The book closes with the author offering a new vision for the rights of women in the twenty-first century. Natural vocations should be seen as just as worthy as work in corporate contexts. What Bachiochi calls the duties of care in particular should be reclaimed by women and celebrated by society for the vital role they play. Despite the variety of forms family takes in the twenty-first century, the embodied realities of human dependency and development remain. Women made important strides in the twentieth century to claim a deserved space in a variety of vocations. In the twenty-first century, however, she should ensure that the natural vocations and fundamental social roles women fill are not lost in the pursuit of mere individual equality. Erika Bachiochi's book gives the reader an excellent history of the development of women's rights in the United States, but more importantly, she offers a worthy blueprint of a way forward for Christian conceptions of women's rights in the twenty-first century.



"...she should ensure that the natural vocations and fundamental social roles women fill are not lost in the pursuit of mere individual equality."

Miles Smith is a Lecturer in History at Hillsdale College.

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